

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

VOLUME 7

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance Collection

Volume 7

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate love, sex and romance between men. They are a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and these anthologies are published as a gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they produce.

Nearly 190 stories were submitted and have now been published as a twelve volume set with two additional bonus volumes, titled *Love Has No Boundaries*; this edition is Volume 7.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letters. If you'd like to view the photos, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

The stories in this collection may contain sexually explicit content and are **intended for adult readers**. They may also 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.

These stories are 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.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating nearly 190 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in eprint involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Nearly two dozen members chipped-in to help; the M/M Romance Group would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

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

The **story titles** link back to the original posts in Goodreads M/M Romance group. The **author names** also link back to their Goodreads author profiles.

The written description that inspired each story, along with the letter that inspired the tale is provided. If you would like to see the actual photo, you can view them at: www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance.

Enjoy.

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APARTMENT 1209

By Elizabeth Lister

Photo Description

A muscular masked man, naked except for multiple leather harnesses and leather jock, sits clutching his crotch and placing his middle finger seductively on his tongue as he stares challengingly at the camera.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am working three jobs to make ends meet, going to college at night and have not had any time for fun. I live one lonely boring life.

My neighbor across the hall has been watching me for some time without my knowledge. He thinks I'm overworked and need some time to relax... with him.

Somehow his version of de-stressing is this:

[PROMPT PHOTO – See photo description]

And calling him Daddy.

Please write my story about how I ended up being his boy.

Thanks! ;P

PS A HEA most definitely!

Sincerely,

SheReadsALot

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, BDSM, fetish toys, first time, age gap, soul mates or bonded

Word count: 12,130

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APARTMENT 1209

By Elizabeth Lister

1209

The brass numbers stared back at me from the door to his apartment, down the hall from mine. I'd already been inside, about a week ago. He'd helped me out in an awkward situation and we'd shared a coffee.

Only now I knew. I knew who he was and what he did. I'm pretty sure I knew what he wanted with me.

I raised my hand very slowly and knocked three times, trying to quell the panic that began to rise. I wanted this. I wanted this so bad and I wouldn't let fear derail me. Not this time.

One week earlier

Where the hell were my keys?

I groped in my pocket frantically for them, not believing they weren't there. They were always there. I needed them to get into the building, out of this cold night. I checked the other pocket, to no avail. I put down my messenger bag and went through every nook and crevice. Nothing.

What the hell did I do with them?

Standing up slowly, my mind whirled over the possibilities. Maybe I'd dropped them in the parking lot when I'd left this morning. I did a quick sweep of the lot, not seeing anything. They could be anywhere between here and the bus station.

They could have fallen from my pocket at any point during the day—at my morning call centre job, the restaurant this afternoon, or at school, from where I'd just returned. Did I drop them when I took the dogs out at lunchtime? God only knew.

I heard footsteps behind me.

“Having some trouble?”

I turned to see an attractive older man with a smile that made my eyes widen and cock twitch. I liked his face. He was tall, so I had to look up slightly, which I also found pleasant.

“I can’t find my keys,” I muttered, blushing with embarrassment. This was so humiliating. What was I, sixteen?

“I’ve seen you before. In fact, I think you live down the hall from me,” he said casually, fishing his own keys from his pocket. He kept his gaze on mine as he reached past me, inserting his key in the door. “Excuse me.”

I seemed locked in place. For a moment, we stared at each other as some silent communication passed between us. We recognized each other in more ways than just acknowledging another tenant. In those few seconds, it became obvious that we knew seemingly private things about each other. My gaydar went off like gangbusters and I felt his interest in me as if he’d spoken it. Or perhaps that was wishful thinking? Out of my peripheral vision I saw someone approaching, which ended the moment. I stepped aside.

The older man pushed the door open and beckoned me to follow.

I did, without question. I really wanted to know his name.

“Thank you. I don’t know what I did with them,” I said lamely. “I can’t get into my apartment.”

“Well, I can feed you and give you a cup of coffee while you figure out what to do,” he said, holding out his hand. “Ryan Holloway. I’m in 1209.”

I shook his hand firmly, enjoying the warmth of his skin and feeling... *something*. “Thanks, that would be great.”

We stepped into the elevator.

“You’re in 1203, aren’t you?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“How do you like it?”

I shrugged. “It’s okay. Small. It’s all I can afford right now.”

“Bachelor?”

Huh? What a weird question. “Um... well, I’m single... yeah.”

He laughed. “No, I mean, do you have a bachelor apartment?”

Oh my God. I blushed, feeling like an idiot. “Yeah.”

“Mine’s a bit larger. A one bedroom. I like it.” He grinned. “You haven’t told me your name.”

The elevator doors opened as I stuttered an apology. “S-sorry.” *What the fuck is wrong with me?* “I’m Henry Crocket.”

He stopped, offering me his hand again in the middle of the hall. “Well, it’s nice to finally meet you, Henry Crocket.”

I shook his hand again, wondering if it was just an excuse for physical contact. I didn’t care.

“Sure.” I didn’t really know what to say because I didn’t remember ever seeing *him* before.

We walked to 1209 and he keyed the door open. “Come on in. Make yourself at home, Henry.”

His apartment, like mine, was on the small side, but he had decorated and furnished it so that this was hardly an issue. Although the walls remained the neutral “apartment white”, modern artwork in vibrant hues of blue and yellow hung on the walls, giving the room a sophisticated, cheerful feel.

I toed off my boots and put down my bag, suddenly feeling exhausted after my long day. Thank God I didn’t have to go to the restaurant tonight. If I could just get into my apartment.

“You okay? You look like you’re gonna fall over,” Ryan said, pulling out a chair from his kitchen table. “Have a seat. Want a coffee?”

I nodded. “Please.”

Ryan moved around his apartment with confidence and ease, at home in the small, organized space. “So what’s your story, Henry?”

“Huh?” I asked.

He grinned. “Are you in school? You look about twenty.”

“Good guess.”

“Thanks.”

“And, yeah, I’m taking classes at Algonquin right now.”

He nodded, getting the coffeemaker set up and placing a couple of mugs on the counter. “Studying what?”

“Home care. It’s sort of like nursing.”

“Good for you. There’s a lot of demand for those services nowadays.” He sat down in a nearby chair. “I don’t know if I could do it.”

I shrugged. “It’s not that bad. I’ve always liked helping people.”

He stared at me intently, his grey eyes shining with intelligence and interest. I noticed the laugh lines at their sides, and the seeming softness of his lips. He had nice eyebrows too. “Do you have a student loan or are you working?”

“I’m getting a bit of money from OSAP but not much.”

“Then you’re working.”

“Yep.”

“Sorry to ask so many questions. It’s just nice to be able to talk to you, finally.” He leaned back in his chair, stretching his long legs out before him. “So, what are we gonna do about your keys?”

“I guess I’d better call the Super. I think I put the number in here.” I said, pulling my phone from my back pocket. I found the number for the building’s superintendent.

A gruff voice answered. “Yeah?”

“Mr. Conway? It’s Henry Crocket from 1203.”

“Yes?”

“Um, I seem to have misplaced my keys. I was wondering if you could let me into my apartment?”

“Sure, sure, but I can’t come right now. I’m trying to fix a toilet.”

“Okay. Well, I’m in 1209 right now.”

He chuckled. “Visiting with Mr. Holloway are you? Why am I not surprised?”

“I beg your pardon?” What the hell did he mean by that?

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

He hung up, not leaving me any time to ask him about his comment.

I looked at Ryan curiously as I pocketed my phone. “He... doesn’t seem surprised that I’m hanging out with you.”

Ryan grinned. “Well, he’s seen me with good-looking young men before.” He winked.

I was thrown by this response because it meant a number of astonishing things. It meant he was popular with young men (no big surprise there). It meant he was likely gay, as I’d supposed (again, not a big surprise). And it meant he found me good looking (major surprise).

He cleared his throat and got up. “How do you take your coffee, Henry?”

“Um, with a bit of... cream.” Our eyes met.

We stared at each other, and I swear my cock went from semi to full hardness in a nanosecond. I gulped, feeling the red flush into my cheeks.

Oh, boy.

“No sugar?” he said with the hint of a smile.

I shook my head slowly from side to side, my eyes still captured. My pulse pounded in my veins. The truth was, I didn’t need coffee. I needed to get laid. Badly.

I was, for all intents and purposes, a virgin. Oh, I’d had intercourse with a girl. Stumbling, blind, groping penetration with the expected result. It had left both of us depressed more than anything else. And the entire time I’d been thinking how hot it’d be to come in another guy’s hand or on his stomach or, Jesus, have *him* come on or in *me*.

I knew after that experience I’d only ever be physical with guys. But the opportunities hadn’t presented themselves. And now, I was too busy to think about anything except work and school, and almost too tired to jack off when I was at home. It was a sad, sad, life.

Ryan came back with our coffees and passed me mine. As we sipped and talked, I wondered at the fact that I felt so comfortable here. Who was this man and why did it feel like he already knew me?

We chatted about inconsequential things while we waited for the superintendent to arrive with a key. It was hard to completely relax in Ryan's presence, but only because I found him so alluring. I almost expected him to make a move on me, and was truly disappointed when he didn't. And I was too chicken to do anything more than stare and stutter and blush. Really, I was pathetic. What man would ever think of me as a suitable object of sexual pursuit? Luckily the coffee perked me up enough to converse on a basic level. I was still pretty tired.

Finally, Mr. Conway showed up with my key. He said I could make one copy of it and bring it back to him by end of day tomorrow.

"I'm sure Mr. Holloway's been keeping you entertained," he said as he looked my savior over with barely concealed contempt.

"Whatever do you mean, Mr. Conway?" Ryan asked, with a look of concern.

"Nothing," the other man mumbled. He glanced at me, then turned and walked away, whispering something under his breath that I couldn't catch.

I looked at Ryan. "That was weird."

He nodded. "He's a strange guy."

"Well, thanks for helping me out, and for the coffee."

"It was great to finally meet you, Henry. Maybe we could go *out* for coffee sometime?"

Was he asking me on a date?

Again, the stuttering: "Well, I... sure, but I don't have a lot of time. I work at a call centre in the morning, walk dogs at lunchtime, and go to school in the afternoon. Usually, I have a shift at Boston Pizza in the evening."

He stared at me. "My, you are a busy fellow. No wonder you're so tired."

As if on cue I had to cover a yawn. "I do want to go out with you, I just don't know when I can," I admitted, honestly. After my previous misinterpretation, I thought I'd better check. "You *are* asking me out, right?"

He smiled. "Oh yes. Well, why don't you contact me when you have a spare hour sometime? You know where I live. If I'm not home, slip a note under the door."

Why did that sound so dirty?

“Okay.” I said. “Thanks again.”

“Please be more careful with your key, Henry. I’d hate to think of you stuck outside again.”

“It was luck that you came along.”

“Very.”

I turned and walked away, hearing the door close behind me. I knew I wouldn’t fall asleep anytime soon, tired though I was.

I didn’t really have time to think about Ryan’s offer for the next several days. My work and school commitments kept me busy and I never seemed to pass him in the building to even say a quick hello.

On Friday, during my shift bussing tables at Boston Pizza, my co-worker, Frank, noticed I was a little distracted when he caught me forgetting to put out cutlery on my just-wiped tables.

“Henry, what the hell has got you all daydream-y anyway?” he asked. “You finally get a boyfriend?”

I blushed, shaking my head. Frank was gay too, but enjoyed the freedom of one-night stands and getting groped in back rooms more than I did. Hell, I didn’t even have time for *that*.

I guess he could tell from my shamefaced denial that something was up, because he didn’t let it go.

“You met someone, though, right?” He regarded me intently as I shrugged. “Someone hot?”

I met his gaze with what must have been an open confession.

“I knew it! Who is he?” he asked, sitting down in the booth I was cleaning.

“Just this guy in my building.”

“Really? That’s convenient. What’s his name? A fellow student or a working stiff?” He grinned at his pun.

I shrugged again. “He’s older. He works, I guess. He said his name was Ryan Holloway.”

Frank stared at me, and I realized quickly it wasn't just shock that I'd actually spoken to a hot guy. His face paled and his mouth dropped open for a moment, then closed.

He coughed. "Did you say Ryan Holloway?"

I nodded, confused and a little anxious all of a sudden. I stopped wiping the table and just stared at Frank's startled expression. He emitted an impressed sigh/whistle as he slowly reached into his back pocket and pulled something out. He unfolded the piece of paper and held it up before me. "Does he look like this?"

My mouth went dry as I examined the full-page ad for some downtown establishment named... Holloway's.

Oh, fuck.

It was my sexy neighbor. But he wasn't wearing jeans and a T-shirt in this picture. He wore a leather harness, leather pants and heavy motorcycle boots.

He looked... even hotter. At his big, booted feet kneeled a young man, about my age, with spiky blond hair and a dog collar, his hands resting reverently on Ryan's hips, cheek pressed against the older man's leathered thigh.

"What is that?"

"Is this *him*? Seriously, is this the Ryan Holloway you're talking about?"

"Yes," I stammered.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed, regarding me with sudden respect. "You little shit."

I looked at him, surprised. He'd never called me anything like that before.

He laughed and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I just can't believe your luck." He waved the flyer before me. "Ryan Holloway is the sexiest fucking leather daddy in this city. He owns *this* place," he said, stabbing the flyer with his index finger. "Obviously."

Since I continued to stare at him, dumfounded, he went on. "Holloway's is the hottest BDSM spot in town. There are back rooms there to beat ALL back rooms. And I should know."

I sat down in the booth, feeling panicky rather than lucky at the moment. The image of the Ryan I'd had coffee with last week didn't mesh with this new

information. “Maybe it’s not the same guy.” I said, taking the flyer from Frank and looking at it more closely.

It was definitely him. There could be no mistake.

Frank laughed again. “You had no idea?”

I shook my head.

“How did you meet him?”

I told him about losing my key and how nice Ryan had been, inviting me in for coffee and later, blatantly asking me out.

“Oh. My. God. Half the fags in this city would piss their pants to get a chance like that! You are one lucky guy, Henry.”

“Henry, can you get Table Six for me, please?” Sarah, the manager, interrupted our chat.

“Sure. I’m almost done here,” I said, stuffing the flyer in my pocket.

“Frank, they need you in the kitchen,” she mentioned, not noticing his military salute when she turned her back on us.

Our eyes met and Frank leaned close. “Don’t worry, Ryan’s a pussycat. Even though he eats boys like you for breakfast.” He winked and left me to my task.

I felt my cock harden as my insides turned to jelly.

When I got home that night I stripped off my clothes and sat down on my bed, laying the flyer out beside me. I could hardly believe I’d sat at this man’s kitchen table and had a cup of coffee with him. He looked even hotter in this photo than he had that day. My dick got hard under my own touch quickly as I stroked it and stared at the image on the recycled paper.

I wished *I* was the boy in the photo. I desperately wanted to be that sexy young man at Ryan’s feet, willing to do whatever he desired, wanting to be told what to do and how to do it. God knows I didn’t have enough guts to take any initiative myself. Maybe this was the answer. I was good at doing as I was told, at school and at work. Why would a sexual relationship be any different?

I realized I would be happy to kneel before him, totally naked if he wished. Maybe he'd make me suck his cock until he came down my throat.

I moaned, stroking my dick faster, using some lube from my bedside table to enhance the process.

Maybe he'd tie me to his bed and fuck me proper, the way I'd wished someone had done years ago. I'd say "Yes, Sir" and "No, Sir" —I'd be so good for him.

I breathed harder, pulling so fast now, imagining him tying me up and picturing that warm smile. In my head I heard him say, "Come for me, Henry," as I climaxed, shooting a massive load across my bed.

And here I stood, outside his door—scared shitless but wanting it so bad there was no turning back.

He didn't answer right away, and I wondered if he was home. It was Sunday afternoon, but maybe he was at the bar already? My nervousness began to subside into disappointment when the door opened.

The Ryan I knew stood there, in bare feet, wearing a faded pair of jeans and an American Eagle T-shirt.

"Henry!" he said, warmth spreading over his features as his eyes lit up.

"Hi." I smiled in response but felt the nerves return. "Sorry to bother you."

He laughed. "Are you kidding? Come in, come in," he said, holding the door wide and backing up. "I worried you'd forgotten about me."

I stepped inside his apartment for the second time, looking around to see if I'd missed any hints about his lifestyle. I noticed most of his furniture was made of leather, but it's not like I'd missed handcuffs draped over the sofa or anything.

"No, Sir," I said, then froze. I glanced at him to see if he'd noticed. He looked at me, surprised, as his smile widened.

"Well, I'm glad. Have a seat. No school today, I take it?"

I shook my head, sitting down on his brown leather sofa. My hand, of its own will, reached out to stroke the soft fabric.

“Would you like something to drink? I’ve got beer, wine, Coke.”

“Um, is it regular Coke?”

He nodded. “I don’t believe in artificial sweeteners. I don’t think they’re very healthy.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll have a Coke then.”

He went into the kitchen and returned with an ice-cold can. He popped the top and handed it to me.

“Thanks.” I took a gulp, delighting in the full, sugary taste of it.

“Not that I think pop itself is all that healthy, but those chemical sweeteners are nasty.” He took a swig of the beer he’d gotten for himself, sitting across from me in a black leather pub chair.

I tried to think of something to say. “I guess you like leather.”

Brilliant, just brilliant, Henry.

He tilted his head, his gaze holding mine as he answered. “Yes. You could call me a devotee.”

I felt my cock thicken and swell as our eyes held. I wanted to tell him I knew. I knew who he was, and what he liked to do to boys like me. Maybe I should. Anything was better than obvious statements about his décor.

“I know who you are.”

He seemed surprised, but not worried. “Who told you?”

“A friend of mine. He’s been to your club.”

He nodded. “But you’re here. You’re not scared.” The corner of his mouth lifted, as if to reassure me that there really wasn’t anything to be afraid of.

“I’m terrified.”

“You don’t look it. You look aroused.”

“I’m... both.” Holy shit. Did I just admit I had a hard-on for this guy? Where was this courage coming from?

We looked at each other for a long moment. Then Ryan stood up and moved away.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll be right back, Henry. I’m just going to get something.”

He was going to get something. What was he getting? A whip? A paddle? My cock hardened while sweat began to accumulate on my palms.

In a few moments, he came back. He tossed something toward me, which I caught by reflex. I looked down at the leather cuffs in my hands. They were beautiful—soft and well made.

“Do you want to play, Henry?”

Do you want to play, Henry?

Why did it seem like I’d been waiting to hear those words from this man for a very long time? Years, even.

I couldn’t speak. My breaths seemed loud in the small space as I nodded twice, looking him in the eyes.

He grinned, the dimple in one cheek making him seem benign and charming. But what did he have planned?

“You’ll have to do better than that. I need your verbal consent to be restrained. Do you give it, Henry?”

I cleared my throat. “Yes, Sir.”

“Then put your hands together in front of you.”

I did, my heart beating wildly. I watched as he fastened the cuffs around my wrists and attached them together.

He looked at me, smiling with utter kindness. “We’ll keep this very basic, Henry. I know you’re inexperienced.”

I felt panic suddenly, remembering just how inexperienced I was. Embarrassed to tell him, I simply nodded.

“Okay. I want you to lie back on the sofa and stretch your arms above your head.”

He told me what to do, just like I’d imagined. He was in total control of this and I loved it. I did as he asked.

He peeled off his T-shirt, revealing the moderately-haired and very muscled chest I’d seen on the brochure. He let the shirt drop to the floor.

“I’m going to take your pants off.”

“Okay,” I said quickly, eagerness and excitement plain in my voice.

He chuckled softly as he undid the fly of my jeans and pulled them off while I lifted my butt to help him. He made sure my black boxer briefs stayed on, although I wouldn’t have protested if he’d taken them too.

He threw my jeans aside and looked down at me. I looked down too. The outline of my erect cock could be seen distinctly beneath the cotton of my briefs. There was even a little wet spot where some pre-cum had leaked out. As we watched, the spot got bigger.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, embarrassed. I hoped he realized it wasn’t piss or anything gross like that.

“Don’t be,” he said simply. He reached out and touched the wet spot, making me gasp as my cock surged. Rubbing it gently, he lifted his finger to his nose and inhaled.

“Oh... fuck.” I whispered, eyes wide.

“Not yet,” he said with a smile as he reached for the waistband of my boxers.

He lifted it, letting the tip of my hard-on peek out. He made a very sexy noise in the back of his throat as he pulled the boxers down, revealing my full, engorged length. “I’m going to take my time with you, Henry.”

Oh, Jesus. But how would I last? I felt like I’d come just from the way he looked at my cock right now, like at a rare delicacy or a treasure.

“I don’t think you get fucked very often, do you, Henry? Although why that is I’m clueless. There should be men lined up at your door.”

I felt like I needed to confess, even though I worried about looking like a kid. I knew the game we played required trust and honesty. “I’ve never actually... been... fucked,” I admitted quietly.

He still held the waistband of my boxers below my straining cock as he admired it. His gaze met mine in surprise. “You’ve only topped?”

“Um.” I shook my head. “I haven’t really... I mean, I haven’t really done anything with a man before.”

He seemed astounded, but not displeased. In fact, his mouth dropped open and his breathing quickened all of a sudden. He covered my cock and stood up, grabbing his beer and taking a long drink.

“What about with girls?”

“Just once. It was awful. I came but... I was thinking about cock when I did.”

He looked at me, smiling in sympathy.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. Why did I feel the need to apologize to him all the time?

“Stop apologizing, Henry. There’s nothing wrong with you.” He took another long drink then put the bottle back down on the side table. He looked at me again, his eyes traveling over my almost naked form slowly.

“You’re not going to stop, are you?” I asked, scared that he would say yes, for whatever reason.

“I don’t think I *could* stop now, even if I thought I should. But I don’t think that.” He sat on the couch again. “I think you need this, Henry.” He slid his fingers under the waistband of my shorts again, this time peeling them all the way down and sliding them off over my naked feet.

“I do. I do need it, Sir,” I panted, so grateful that he still had some respect for me—that he still wanted me, even though I was a loser. I was so desperate for physical contact right now I had no shame. I pumped my cock desperately into the empty air while he watched and didn’t care how it made me look.

Ryan chuckled, running his broad hand through his hair. “Jesus, Henry, you’re not making this easy.”

“Sir?”

“I’m trying to stay calm and take my time. When you look better than a big, fat, juicy steak.”

I made a very unmasculine whimpering noise in my throat. Jesus, would he just get started, dammit? I’d waited for so long and I couldn’t wait anymore.

“Please,” I said. He was killing me.

“Be still,” he said, in a voice so hard-edged that I immediately obeyed. It

was so different from his usual relaxed cadence that it shocked me into stillness. “Stop squirming like a worm on a hook, boy.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said quickly. I would do whatever he asked, as long as he would touch me.

“There are some rules.”

“Okay.”

“You need to tell me when you get close to coming.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“If you need me to stop, tell me to stop. If you want me to take the restraints off, tell me to do so.”

“Okay.”

“We’re not at the club, where things are a little more rigid and there are protocols and safewords and such.”

I nodded. He continued.

“You’re in my living room and things are a little more relaxed.”

“I don’t feel very relaxed.”

“You will in about an hour,” he said, reaching out and wrapping his hand around my straining cock. I closed my eyes at the pleasure of having a hand that wasn’t my own on my dick. “If you last that long.”

My head fell back as he stroked my cock with obvious skill.

Finally! A hot, amazingly interesting man was touching my cock. I opened my eyes to see because I could hardly believe it. I closed them again, a smile on my face I couldn’t hide.

I heard Ryan’s laughter. “This would be highly amusing if it wasn’t so hot,” he said, the arousal in his voice giving it a deeper lilt.

But I couldn’t speak. He pumped my dick a few more times, then raised his hand to his mouth and spat in it, returning it to my aching cock. I struggled against the wrist cuffs because I felt I needed to do something with my arms and hands. This frustration added to the excitement and sense of being controlled. Ryan’s saliva made the sensation of his hand on my cock more intense. My mouth opened, a deep groan issuing forth into the relative silence.

Ryan chuckled again. “Jesus, I can’t believe I’m the first man to ever touch this gorgeous dick.”

I bent one leg and straightened it again, feeling restless, needing to dispel some of the rising tension somehow.

“Be still. Or do you want me to get the ankle cuffs?”

My eyes snapped open as I nodded without hesitation.

“Really?”

“Yes, please.”

He stroked me a couple more times, then stopped and stood up. “All right then.”

In a few minutes he had me trussed up proper, knees bent, hands still in front of me rather than behind, probably so I didn’t feel too helpless. At this point, I didn’t care what he did to the rest of me as long as he kept paying attention to my cock.

He knelt down beside the sofa, running his broad hand along my naked hip and thigh, all the way to my foot, which he tickled briefly. I jerked as a surge of pleasure shot right to my balls.

He slipped his hand between my calves and ran it up the inside of my leg, cupping my testicles when he reached them. Then he leaned over me, making my pulse speed up as he whispered, “You are one delectable piece of fresh meat, young man.” His tongue traced the shell of my ear and pushed inside it for a hot moment. “May I taste you, Henry?”

I knew what he meant. I nodded frantically, my breaths rapid and loud.

Fuck yes.

He pulled away and in a moment had my cock in his hand again. Soon I felt his tongue on my glans, circling and licking the moisture from the small opening.

I groaned loudly, my hands finding the soft cashmere throw pillow above my head and fisting it. He tongued my dick all over and licked my balls too, taking one and then the other in his mouth gently, causing the most unbelievable sensations to move through me.

By the time he actually swallowed my cock I'd lost all sense of time and space. I could barely remember where I was and how I'd gotten here. All I could think about was that wonderful wetness—that hot vacuum around my dick, those skilled fingers delving into places that had never received such attention.

God knows if I even made it close to the hour he'd mentioned when I heard myself saying, "I'm close, I'm close."

I expected him to take his mouth off me at least, but he only sucked harder. His hands squeezed my hips, keeping me still as he moved his expert mouth on me.

"Oh... oh... FUCK," I yelled as I shot a humongous load down his throat, my entire body pulsing with welcome release. "Fuck... fuck... *Jesus*," I swore as the intense, much-needed orgasm carried on for several moments, while Ryan sucked and milked my dick.

When my muscles finally relaxed I sank like jelly against the soft leather cushions and Ryan let me slide out of his mouth. The air felt cool on my wet dick as a couple of remaining tremors surprised me. I kept my eyes closed, enjoying the languid feeling of post-release.

The sound of a zipper being pulled made me open my eyes finally, to stare at Ryan's big, erect cock. Of course, it would be polite to return the favor.

I opened my mouth, eyes glancing up as he pressed the head of his dick gently against my lips.

"Oh my God, Henry," he said shakily. "Can you do it? Can you make me come with your mouth? It won't take long, I promise."

It was a challenge I was more than happy to accept. I opened my mouth wide, letting him push his cock inside and basically fuck my mouth. After a few moments he grunted and came, squeezing his eyes shut as his semen filled my mouth and dripped down over my chin and cheeks. I didn't swallow, only because the angle was wrong and we hadn't talked about his HIV status yet. He knew I was safe, but I couldn't be sure of him. God knows how many men *he'd* fucked in his lifetime.

Watching Ryan come was one of the best damn things I'd ever seen.

“That was pretty fucking hot, Henry,” he said, tucking himself up.

“Thank you?” I didn’t know what else to say.

He laughed. I think I was already addicted to that sound.

“So polite. You’re a very good boy.” He unbuckled the leather cuffs and threw them onto the coffee table.

I sighed, basking in this praise. We stared at each other for a long moment.

“I have...” He looked down at his feet, then back up at me. “I mean, I know so much. I’d like to teach you so many things. I think you’d make a great... student.”

“Sure. I mean I want you to teach me stuff.”

“Stuff?” He grinned. “What *are* your interests, Henry?” He raised the cuffs. “Bondage, obviously. What else?”

“I don’t really know.” I admitted. “I’d like to find out.”

Over the next few weeks I visited apartment 1209 whenever I had the chance and Ryan was home. We found mornings or afternoons on weekends worked well, since I didn’t have classes and he didn’t have to be at the club until eight. During the week we connected most Tuesdays and Thursdays, when my last class ended at two and my restaurant shift didn’t start until six.

Ryan’s leather sofa became very familiar to me over the course of my first visits. I have to say I was a very enthusiastic and responsive student. Since we covered bondage and blowjobs on Visit One, Visit Two involved more bondage and some light ass play, which I LOVED, especially the leisurely rimming demonstration. On Visits Three through Five, he expanded my knowledge concerning direct prostate stimulation and accompanying hand jobs, using even more intricate bondage techniques. On Visit Six, he simply tied me spread-eagled to his bed to tease me with a dildo and a crop. Visits Seven through Ten involved light percussion with paddles and floggers, whilst Visits Eleven through Thirteen introduced me to the joys of nipple and ball torture.

All this time he refused to fuck me with anything but a gentle toy. He said he wanted to make me ready for him. He didn’t want to hurt me and God

knows I was well aware of the size of his dick. But I think he just wanted to make me wait. He wanted me to beg for it before he'd give it to me.

I'd already waited a hell of a long time but was having so much fun learning the things Ryan wanted to teach me that I wouldn't have changed anything.

On Visit Fourteen, after Ryan hogtied and edged me to within an inch of my life and finally made me come like a crazed sex banshee all over his new sheets, I asked him when he would take me to Holloway's.

"I don't want to take you there."

My face must have betrayed my disappointment at this answer because he smiled kindly and raised his eyebrows. "Do you know how many men come to my club every weekend just dying to meet someone like you?"

"What makes me so special?" I still struggled with this, although my confidence had grown immensely over the course of my "education". I still felt awkward and childish in many ways.

He shook his head and just said "Henry" like it was obvious.

"Well, I'm incredibly hot and astoundingly talented at giving head. Or so you've said."

He laughed. "Well, yeah. But you're also young, still very inexperienced even after everything we've done so far and, most of all, intelligent, witty and kind. Those last three traits are the rarest."

"So, let them meet me," I said, secretly eager to be the object of so much attention.

He looked at me. He didn't say anything for a little while, then stood and started to pull on his pants.

"What's wrong?"

He did up his jeans, watching me carefully. I picked some dried bits of jizz out of the hair on my chest where he'd painted me after getting me off first.

"Y'know, I may seem really confident and self-assured most of the time. But... I'm worried if I take you down there you'll see someone you like better than me."

“What?”

He nodded.

I couldn't believe it. “You, Ryan Holloway, are seriously worried I will be distracted from your skillful mastery of my mind and body by some other Dom who attends the club that you *own*? Are you kidding me?”

He nodded. “Could happen.”

I shook my head. “Won't.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do. Anyway, I want to go with you, as your boy. I want you to show me what it's like playing around in one of those rooms.”

He still looked hesitant. “It's like parading a steak around a pack of bloodhounds, Henry.”

“You'll protect me.”

He rolled his eyes, and relented. “Fine. You free Saturday night?”

“I will be.”

“Okay, we'll go. But you will do everything I tell you to do or you might get hurt.”

“Okay.”

“And you'll need a new outfit.”

Did I mention that having a spontaneous affair with a well-known Leather Daddy did wonders for my self-confidence? Unfortunately, it meant that sometimes I became *overconfident* and got myself into scary situations, such as accompanying said Leather Daddy to his BDSM club wearing clothing designed to inflame the desires of lesser pervs than his patrons.

“Don't worry, I won't let anyone near you,” Ryan assured me as we parked in the back lot of his Jarvis St. Club in the owner's designated spot.

“I'd appreciate that. Suddenly I do feel like a piece of meat,” I said, noticing several gruff looking men watching me closely as I exited Ryan's car. “Why did you dress me like this?”

Ryan shrugged, looking me over in my new, extremely tight, red leather pants, Doc Martens, chest harness and not much else. “You said you wanted to blend in.”

Ryan wore a similar outfit to mine, but with black pants, kick-ass steel-toed boots, and a thicker harness, plus his Leatherman’s hat. He looked like a wet dream.

“Hello, boys!” he said, greeting the men gathered outside the back door.

“Ryan. Who’s the sexy boy?”

“This is Henry. He’s mine,” he said in no uncertain terms.

“Hmm, maybe I could borrow him for an hour. When you’re finished with him?” a skinny guy with a thick moustache commented.

Ryan stared at the man, shaking his head quickly. “No. Only me. Make sure everyone knows that, Ricky.”

“Yes, boss,” the hairy, muscular man who stood smoking next to the skinny man, replied, lifting his hat to me. “Hi, Henry.”

“Hi,” I replied, feeling out of my depth. I suddenly yearned for the peace and privacy of Ryan’s apartment.

Ryan took my hand and pulled me into the bar after him.

When my eyes adjusted to the darkness inside the club, I saw Leathermen everywhere. Some stared right at me, leering almost, while others surreptitiously glanced away from their companions and gave me approving once-overs.

I stayed as close to Ryan as possible. He spoke to several people, introducing me and letting them know about his hands-off policy. He asked the man who was tending bar if anyone was using Room One. The man, whom he introduced as Luke, shook his head and handed Ryan a key.

“What’s in Room One?” I asked nervously, as Ryan led me to the back of the bar.

“A few things,” he replied evasively. He led me down a short passage at the back of the bar to a door with a paddle nailed to it. I glanced down the hall to see two other doors, but couldn’t make out the items attached to each one.

Ryan unlocked the door, just as a vibrantly dressed drag queen approached us.

“Ryan, love, where you been?” she said, giving him a big hug and kissing his cheeks.

“Caterina, you’re a sight for sore eyes. You keeping things under control here?”

“You better believe it. And who is this gorgeous creature?”

“This is Henry. He’s the one I was telling you about.”

Caterina gasped with over-the-top astonishment. “Oh, Ryan. The virgin?”

Ryan coughed. “Well.”

I glared at him. “Thanks. Did you tell everyone?”

“Honey, we were all virgins once,” Caterina said, glancing with derision at Ryan. “Some of us longer ago than others.”

The laughter came bubbling out of me, the result of my nervousness.

“Oh, you *are* cute!” she exclaimed. “Tell you what, when he finally fucks you, you come back and tell Caterina how you liked it. I love to hear all that good stuff. Plus, I can give you some pointers on some great techniques.”

“Okay.”

“Honey, you’re gonna love it. I don’t know why he’s making you wait for it.” She glanced at Ryan, this time admiringly. “Oh, wait a minute. Yes I do. Cause once you get it, you ain’t gonna give him any peace. Poor man’ll be worn out in a week.”

“That’s highly unlikely,” Ryan muttered.

Caterina laughed. “Well, you boys have fun in there.” She walked off in her huge polka dot pumps, swishing her hips with exaggeration.

Ryan rolled his eyes and led me into the dark room. He flicked a switch, igniting lamps around the walls of the small room that gave it a soft yellow glow. He shut the door behind us and locked it.

I looked around, my eyes flicking from one thing to the next. There were only three pieces of equipment in this room—a bench with a padded top and

shackles on its four legs (it didn't take much imagination to figure that one out); a mesh swing/sling hanging from the ceiling, and a wooden X against the side wall with bindings at all four stations.

“Well? Does it live up to your expectations?”

“I guess so. I don't know.” To be honest, I'd expected something a little more frightening.

Ryan laughed. “You keep surprising me, Henry. One minute you're a quivering, blushing violet. The next you're a saucy little cunt.”

“I'm sorry, Sir. I don't mean to be saucy.”

“This is the most basic of the three back rooms. The others have more... ah... specific items.”

“Like what?” I asked, very curious.

“Well, one's set up for suspension and electro. Room Three is a bit more industrial for intense scene play. There are... hoses and... some medical equipment.” He said this as if he worried he'd scare me. On the contrary, I felt my cock surge at the thought.

“Jesus.”

He shrugged. “I wanted this club to be a playground of sorts.”

“Uh huh.”

“I thought we'd start with the basics.”

“Okay,” I said quietly, still thinking about the other rooms.

“Strip.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Now. But leave the harness on.”

Our eyes met and my cock throbbed.

I bent to take off my boots, glancing between my legs while I untied the laces to see him looking at my ass while he palmed the bulge in his pants. He winked when he caught me looking. “Hurry up, Henry.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I got the boots and socks off as fast as I could, then pulled down the leather pants—with some difficulty as they were so tight. In a few moments I stood essentially naked before him, my cock jutting out in front of me.

“Jesus, Henry, that prick is gonna be the death of me,” he said, staring at the object in question.

I looked down at my dick, which didn’t seem all that spectacular. Ryan had said it was pretty nice, which I appreciated. I figured he’d seen his share of penises.

“I still don’t understand what’s so special about it,” I murmured, blushing with pleasure at his praise nonetheless.

He reached out and examined it with his fingers, as though it were a strange type of rare animal. It responded to his touch, swelling even more and standing straighter.

“Well, I’ve taught it everything it knows. I like that.” He winked. “Now get over to that wooden cross, boy.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said, my breath quickening with excitement. How would he arrange me? What would he do to me? I knew he probably wouldn’t fuck me here, at the club. He’d said as much. But the possibilities were still pretty endless.

He positioned me facing the wooden beams and fastened my ankles and wrists to the contraption. “It’s called a St. Andrew’s Cross. St. Andrew was murdered on a cross just like this.”

“That’s encouraging,” I said sardonically.

“It’s a pretty common piece of BDSM equipment. Very versatile and efficient for multiple bondage positions.”

“Are you going to flog me?” I asked breathlessly.

He laughed. “Would you like that?”

“Yeah.”

“Quiet. I know you love to be flogged, Henry. You’ve made that pretty obvious, ever since I did it the first time.”

I blushed. “I know. Sorry.”

He referred to the very first time he'd used a flogger on me. I think it was Visit Seven? I had them all written down in my journal at home. He'd plugged me for the first time, a tantalizing procedure in and of itself, and proceeded to flog me. I came in a matter of minutes, much to the surprise of us both.

Ryan backed up to look me over, palming his bulge again and emitting a quiet moan. "Seeing you on that cross is making me so damn horny. It'll be hard to keep from tapping that ass."

I writhed impatiently, wanting nothing more than to have it tapped, and soon. The weeks of teasing were taking their toll. Yes, he'd fucked me with toys and made me come in a myriad of ways, but I wanted his dick inside me now, not a rubber facsimile. He'd turned me into a horny little slut and I wanted it bad.

He moaned again, and I heard him drop to his knees. Suddenly his large hands were on my buttocks, his thumbs digging in and spreading me. I gasped in surprise, not expecting it. I felt his hot tongue slide over me and poke me hungrily.

I groaned as he spread me wider. My legs stiffened as he played me with his tongue, my arms reflexively fighting their confines. Metal rattled against wood as I struggled and gasped.

The first time he'd done this to me I couldn't believe how good it felt and how deliciously perverted it seemed. To have this sexy, motherfucking hunk of a man tonguing my ass was a revelation. He seemed to enjoy it too. Later he told me it was one of his favorite things to do.

I felt his excitement as he breathed heavily and ate at me fervently. I couldn't get away from this torment—I didn't really want to—but it became almost too much, making my cock hard and wet from the excitement. His stubble scraped my sensitive skin, providing a rough counterpoint to his smooth, insistent tongue.

"Dammit... you have to fuck me Ryan. I don't know how much more of this I can take." I panted.

He didn't say anything. Soon I felt his index finger push deep into me.

"Oh... fuck."

For some reason that long, thick finger sliding up my ass felt better than anything. Always.

He laughed. “You like that, huh?”

I moaned as he swiveled it inside me and added a second finger. I grunted as both fingers sank deep and pressed against my prostate. He’d made me come hands free this way a few days ago. After fingering me like this for almost an hour, taking his time—bringing me close, then backing off—until I’d begged him to get me off. His expert touch had done so in a matter of seconds after that plea, with nothing on my dick but cold air and two sets of eyes. Seeing it shoot and convulse on its own was something I’d never forget.

We did more conventional things as well, like finally going out for that coffee and also to a movie together, which proved we could get along well in non-sexual situations. Ryan was funny, charming and kind. It turned out he had room in his personality for both that guy and the intimidating Leather Daddy I was getting to know and liking just as much.

I whimpered in protest as he withdrew his fingers but hoped he would get the flogger now. I was ready.

When I felt cold metal at my anus I realized he wanted to plug me first. Trembling in anticipation as the hard steel pressed against me, I tried to relax as he pushed it gently inside, until the narrow base and flange nestled comfortably between my butt cheeks.

“Thank you, Sir.” If I couldn’t have his cock inside me, I’d settle for this.

He flicked the base of the plug hard with his finger, making me groan as the vibration reverberated through me.

“Good boy.” He slapped my ass a few times with his hand and backed off.

“I changed my mind,” he said after a moment.

Oh oh.

“Sir?”

“This visit to the club is all about new experiences. I don’t want to go back to an old standard with you.”

Old standard? Had we gotten that far already? Everything still seemed so new.

“You may not be ready for those other rooms yet, but I’d like to try a paddle on you.”

I felt my pulse quicken as my body tensed. A paddle. How would that feel? Different from the flogger and crop no doubt, but would I like it? Only one way to find out.

“Yes, Sir,” I said bravely.

Suddenly I felt his body close behind me as he pressed his leather-covered cock against my buttocks and leaned in close to my ear. “Don’t worry. You’ll love it,” he whispered.

I gulped. “Yes, Sir.”

He reached around to grasp my cock with his hand, testing its hardness as he pumped teasingly against me.

“When will you fuck me Sir?” I asked. “I want you to fuck me.”

“I know. Soon. But not yet.”

Dammit.

He moved away, leaving my body zinging from the close contact. I felt pre-cum pool at the top of my dick and slide down over the glans to hover there—waiting, it seemed, just like me. I rattled my wrist restraints again and rubbed my cock against the polished wood of the cross. It felt good but provided little relief.

Suddenly, something cold pressed against my behind.

Ryan rubbed the flat of the rectangular paddle over my sensitive butt cheeks. It felt like rubber.

He gave me a trial swat.

I gasped as it made contact. I’d learned I was tougher than I looked—tougher than I actually felt most days. I could take stuff that I’d never imagined I could tolerate. I’d learned that I liked a bit of pain—craved it, in fact. I told Ryan I felt like a freak. He said if that made me feel like a freak I was in pretty good company.

He hit me with the rubber paddle again. It burned and stung.

“What do you think?”

“It stings.”

“Good.”

“I like it.”

“I figured.”

I grinned, then cried out with the next one. “Ow.”

“Boy, that’s nothing. I’m being gentle right now.”

“I know.”

“I’m warming you up.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“You’re very welcome, Henry.”

He continued to swat my ass with the paddle while I hung onto my restraints for dear life, trying not to sound like a baby. I made lots of noise though because I knew that turned Ryan on more than anything else. But I made sure they were masculine grunts, groans and curses, rather than whimpers and girly cries. At least I tried. Maybe they got kind of girly toward the end...

By the time he’d finished with me, or at least, finished with the paddle, I’m sure my ass glowed bright red. I sweated on that cross from the effort of withstanding that amount of pain, but I’d done it. I felt proud and satisfied and tougher than tough. It felt good to please Ryan. He had some kind of extreme faith in my ability to triumph over adversity and I didn’t want to disappoint him. He was like a trainer of sorts, but instead of yelling at me to finish my reps, he tested my strength and endurance by paddling my ass. Different strokes for different folks, I guess.

I heard Ryan panting from the exertion and excitement. He’d been very forthright with me about the fact that he got off on this sort of thing and held no shame or guilt because of it. He only did it to willing partners, so what was there to feel guilty about? He said that pain and pleasure were all part of the human experience, and sometimes it was difficult to delineate one from the other.

Sometimes, sitting in class or working at my call centre job, I thought about the things I let Ryan do to me and wondered if I were entirely normal. It only lasted for a moment, at which point I decided I didn't give a rat's ass if I was normal or the biggest freak on the planet. I loved what Ryan and I did together in the privacy of Apartment 1209 and now in the back room of his BDSM club. I'd never felt more satisfied and alive. I found that, although I had less time to study, when I *did* sit down to look at my notes, I could do so with undivided attention, not distracted by free-floating sexual tension. Ryan took care of all my sexual tension. He teased it, spanked it, and pulled it out of me in long sessions that left me so sated I wondered how I'd survived for so long on my own hand jobs. I slept so deeply at night now I couldn't remember my dreams.

"I'm going to turn you around," he said, as I felt his hands at my wrist restraints. I let my arms fall as he worked on my ankle bindings, feeling the stretch and pull of sore muscles. I hoped he would give me one of his amazing all-over body massages once we got back to his apartment. He always took care of me and made sure that our games never caused any undue discomfort, although I had to admit that having a sensitive ass for a few days after a good flogging or work-over with the riding crop could be a thrilling little secret.

Ryan turned me around and refastened my wrists and ankles. He pinched my nipples and took my chin in his hand, forcing me to look at him.

"How are you enjoying this so far, my sweet, young thing?"

"Can't you tell?" I said, glancing down at my leaking, erect cock.

He looked at it too, and chuckled. "So pretty."

"It's crying because you won't fuck me."

He stared at me for a long time while I gazed back with raw passion and need.

"Do you know why I've waited so long?" he asked finally.

"To get me ready?"

He smiled. "Henry, you've been ready for a long, long time," he said, sliding his rough hand down my chest, over my belly, until it wrapped around my jutting cock.

I gasped. “Then... why?”

He kissed my cheek gently before he continued. “I was always one of those kids who’d save my chocolate bar for three months because I wanted to look forward to eating it. If I’d eaten it right away, like the other kids, it wouldn’t have given me so much pleasure.”

I groaned as he stroked my cock back and forth with his hand.

Fuck. Me.

“It’s also been wonderful making you wait for something you want so very badly. That’s the sadist in me, I guess.”

“Do you... do you do this to all your boys?” I asked.

He pulled back and looked at me again as if surprised at that question. “I’ve never waited so long to fuck anybody.”

We stared at each other, his hand continuing to move lazily on my dick until I had to close my eyes.

“Ryan... I need you to fuck me now,” I breathed, trying to control the way my chest rose and fell. “Please.”

He made a sound in the back of his throat as his hand squeezed harder suddenly, then released me. “Not here.”

He fell to his knees and took my cock in his mouth.

“Fuck!” I exclaimed as I looked down at the top of his head, and at my cock going in and out of his gorgeous mouth. “Sir... wait.”

Then I couldn’t make any more words. My head fell back as I gave myself up to the wetness and suction. I could tell he wanted me to come because he rocked the steel plug roughly as he sucked me.

My body stiffened as the orgasm coiled in my balls. I couldn’t even warn him it happened so fast. I came with a deep groan, my wrists pulling at the leather cuffs, muscles contracting and releasing as I let go.

As the intense pleasure slowly subsided I looked down, watching him swallow my release eagerly, making his own noises of pleasure.

When he finished, he stood up and embraced my bound form, kissing me

deeply as he pushed his muscled body against me. I felt the hard steel of his dick under his leather pants.

“I’m taking you home now,” he said gently. “So I can fuck you properly. Don’t say anything. Just nod if that’s okay with you.”

I nodded, but couldn’t help smiling.

Thank the freaking Lord. His chocolate bar was in danger of melting all over the goddamn floor at the moment.

He grinned. “I’m leaving the plug in and I don’t want a word out of you until I say you can speak, *capisce?*”

I nodded. Fuck, I loved his games.

He took me down from the cross and dressed me, tying my boots as if I were four years old. Watching him do that was pretty fucking hot.

Then he escorted me out of his club, past the curious eyes of so many men, out the back door and into his car.

He got into the driver’s seat and started the old Toyota, then put the radio on the hard rock station, loud. He glanced at me and when our eyes met I felt the burning of his need. I thought I might combust when he touched me. My cock was already swelling again, the hard steel in my anus a tease for what would come.

“Stand by the sofa, hands behind your back,” he said as soon as he keyed us into Apartment 1209.

I did, watching Ryan move about the space. He was so fucking sexy—the way he walked, the way he looked in those leather pants and boots. Shit, I could watch him for hours.

He took care of a few ordinary things, like starting the dishwasher and putting on some coffee for later. No doubt to delay my satisfaction. He totally ignored me and finally disappeared into the bedroom.

My excited breaths came quicker as I waited, wondering.

Would he fuck me here on the leather sofa, or in the bedroom? Would he put me on all fours or have me on my back? I was so grateful not to have to make any of these decisions. I felt so privileged to be the vessel for this man's lust it was a little insane. I glanced down to see the outline of my hard-on in the red leather pants. I think Ryan appreciated the fact that, at my age, the turnaround time was almost non-existent. Like my dick was aware of everything it had missed for so many years and refused to lose any opportunities.

I closed my eyes, remembering his mouth on it just a short time ago. I'd never been sucked off by a woman and I recoiled from the idea of softness or tentativeness in that situation. I craved a man's mouth on my dick, my balls and ass. To be eaten by another man felt primal and wild. A woman's mouth would never satisfy me. I knew this for a fact.

"Henry. Take off your boots, socks and pants and come here," he called from the bedroom.

Bedroom it is, then.

I hastily undressed, so eager to relinquish my clothes I ended up tripping and falling onto my naked ass, which still smarted from the paddling.

Ryan popped his head out the bedroom door. "Don't hurt yourself, Henry."

"No, Sir." How embarrassing.

I finally got the pants off and walked quickly over to him. "I'm ready now, Sir."

His hand slid behind my head and pulled my face toward his. He kissed me passionately and deeply for several intense moments.

"I know," he said when he finally pulled away. "So am I. I have a question for you though."

"Yeah?"

His hand gently stroked the side of my face. "Do you want a vanilla fucking or a kinky fucking for your first time? I'll do either one."

I thought about it for a minute. I looked around him into the bedroom and saw something on his dresser that intrigued me. "Looks like you've already prepared for a kinky fucking."

He blushed. Mr. Leather Daddy blushed. “Well, I... old habits die hard. But I suddenly thought maybe you’d prefer something softer... for the first time.”

I shrugged. If the past few weeks had taught me anything, it was that I had not a clue about what my body needed or even wanted. Ryan, however, seemed to have a sixth sense about me. I was willing to put myself in his hands.

“Do whatever you want, Sir.”

“Call me Ryan,” he said softly.

“Do whatever you want, Ryan. I trust you.”

He kissed me again, gently. When he pulled away, his eyes seemed to look into my soul. “You’re so strong, Henry.”

I couldn’t help smiling and looking at him strangely. “How can I be strong when I let you dominate me all the time?”

“There are many kinds of strengths, Henry. Now get onto my bed. On all fours and spread your legs.”

“Yes, Sir. Can I call you that again?”

“Of course, pretty boy.”

“Can I call you Daddy?”

There was a moment of silence.

“Not if you don’t want me to come before I’m even inside you,” he finally said in a strained voice.

Interesting.

“Now be quiet and do as you’re told. No talking unless it’s important. Tell me if anything hurts or feels bad, of course. Other than that, silence.”

I nodded, getting into position. He’d taken the comforter and blankets off the bed, so I kneeled on the clean blue sheets and waited.

He took something off the dresser and approached me. “This will keep your knees spread for me.”

He attached the spreader bar to just below my knees with leather cuffs that

he buckled tight. “I’d normally buckle your wrists behind your back but for a first fucking I don’t want to do that.”

“But can we do it another time?”

Again, he chuckled. “Yes, Henry.” He gave my ass a swat. “I told you to be quiet.”

“Sorry, Sir.”

I quieted, focusing on the sensations I felt as Ryan prepared me. He took his time and I wondered how he could stand it. The man was a bastion of control. Finally, I heard the rustling of clothes and turned my head. I couldn’t help groaning when he pushed his leather pants down and his huge cock bounced free.

He got up onto the bed, kneeling so that his cock was level with my mouth. “Open.”

I opened my mouth eagerly, taking his beautiful, thick prick inside it. He gasped, pumping gently. I did the best I could, letting saliva drip from my lips and taking him an inch or so down my throat before gagging. The noises he made as I did so sent waves of pleasure through me. I loved doing this for him.

“Oh, fuck, Henry... you are so... fucking... hot.”

I renewed my efforts, giving him a willing wet mouth and throat to fuck before he got to the other place, still filled with steel and expectations. He played with my short hair, threading his fingers through it, grabbing it to guide me, and stroking it affectionately.

“Enough,” he said finally, pulling out and moving off the bed.

I heard him go around behind me and felt his fingers on the base of the metal plug, which had become so comfortable and necessary.

“Go down on your chest, Henry. Flatten your arms out in front of you.”

I did as he asked, stretching out like a lazy cat as he pulled on the base of the plug. The feeling, as always, made me shudder and moan as my hole stretched open to allow the slick steel to slide out.

“Boy, you look so fucking hot back here,” he whispered.

His hand reached under me to cup my balls and then move along the length

of my arching cock. My ass felt empty and abandoned, but soon the fingers of his other hand were there, pushing inside me, deep and insistent.

“So warm... you *are* ready for me, aren't you?”

I moaned, pushing back on his fingers and pressing my face against the smooth, clean-smelling sheets. I felt so vulnerable with the bar between my knees, but it made things even more exciting.

He fingered me for a long time, manipulating my prostrate until I begged him with whimpers and grunts, if not actual words. But soon I couldn't bear to be silent.

“Ryan, I... I want to talk.”

“Why?”

“Because you need... to know how... desperate I am.”

“Believe me, I can tell,” he said, making me squirm and gasp.

“Then fuck me dammit! Jesus Christ why won't you... just fucking ram me?”

Ryan laughed. “You sweet virgin slut,” he said, with obvious affection. He grabbed my thighs and pulled my bound knees to the edge of the mattress. “You want it? You want it now?”

“Yes!” I moaned.

I felt the tip of his prick press against my hole. He groaned as the head pushed easily into my eager ass, followed quickly by the entire substantial length of his cock. I groaned and grabbed the sheets in my fists, grimacing in pleasure and surprise as he drove deep and stayed deep. I felt his belly and balls against me.

“How does that feel?” he asked, voice shaking.

“Oh... fuck... fuck.” Finally, I had another man's dick inside me. Ryan's dick. It felt as good as I'd imagined.

“That's what I thought. I'm going to fuck you now, Henry. Tell me if it's too hard or fast and I'll slow down.”

“Yes... Sir.” The pitch of my voice had changed, becoming high and emotional. If I'd felt vulnerable before, now that I had his dick to the hilt in

me, there was nothing to do but take it. I felt pierced and thrillingly invaded. My mouth lay open and slack against the sheets, breaths coming in pants, eyes wide open with expectation.

He began to fuck me, slow and deep. He'd pull almost all the way out and slowly push back in, each time eliciting a primal grunt from me. It felt incredible.

For a while I lost myself in the feel of him sliding in and out, in and out. It felt just like I'd always imagined, only better. But I wanted more. I listened to him pant and make the smallest noises of pleasure, but I wanted to hear him yell. I wanted to hear him groan and lose himself in me, so I said what I knew would do it.

“Oh... fuck, Daddy, you feel sooooo goooooood.”

He froze. Then his hands gripped my hips painfully. “Don't... I won't last... stop,” he begged.

“I want you to come, Daddy. I want you to shoot your load in me.”

“Henry!” he cried out. He moved quicker, harder and rougher, fucking me in earnest now, not concerned about the newness of the experience for me as he chased his own orgasm.

That was what I wanted—his pleasure, his uncontrolled need and desire. I grinned against the sheets as he fucked me hard.

“Oh, fuck yes... fuck yes... fuck yes.” he groaned through gritted teeth.

He rammed me deep—once, twice—then stilled as he cried out. His dick erupted, thighs quaking. I could feel him, all of him, through his cock.

“Henry, you fucking sneaky little cunt,” he swore as he finished inside me. “You beautiful, crazy, insatiable boy.”

I gasped and moved my ass over his softening dick, enjoying it before it finally shrank out of me.

“You... are the best... Daddy ever,” I said, still hard and aching to come, but loving the fact that I'd beaten him at his own game.

He raised one eyebrow, wiping the sweat from his forehead. “You are a dirty, dirty boy. I'm glad I've been able to bring that out of you. Now there's something else I want to bring out of you.”

He squeezed some lube into his hand and reached beneath me. He stroked my aching dick with his practiced hand and ate my ass until I came, groaning and cursing, on the blue sheets. Then he unbuckled the spreader bar and gathered me into his arms.

“So. How *did* you go so long without getting that ass fucked by someone else?”

I shrugged. “Didn’t have the nerve to approach anyone, I guess.”

“Good thing you lost your key.”

I nodded, grinning. “Fate.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled. “Actually—” He reached out and pulled open the drawer of his bedside table, soon placing something cold and small in my hand.

I stared down at the worn, brown key for a moment then glanced up at him. “You had it all along.” I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“I saw you drop it in the lobby.” He looked almost bashful, as if ashamed of his deception.

I gulped, all at once feeling the depth of his need for me. “You... kept it safe.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Sir.” I said, gazing into his grey eyes.

“You’re welcome, Henry.”

THE END

Author Bio

Elizabeth Lister lives in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada with her husband and two children. She has been writing M/M erotic romance since 2011. Her novel, Beyond the Edge, a M/M BDSM erotic romance, received an Honorable Mention from the National Leather Association – International in 2012 for excellence in literary works in SM/Leather/Fetish writing.

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SMARTASS

By Lynn Lorenz

Photo Description

The photo is of a young man wearing a T-shirt with the caption “Life is short & so is your penis.”

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm screwed! I never should have done that, but it's not like he didn't deserve it. Please help me get out of this mess I've made!

Thank you!

Natalija

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: smart-ass, brat, hero, hurt/comfort, ex-military

Word count: 10,467

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SMARTASS

By Lynn Lorenz

CHAPTER ONE

“You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

Ricky Vargas stopped, turned and shot the big son-of-a-bitch following him out of the bathroom the finger. Guess he didn't get the message when Ricky told him to fuck off and die after the sloppy drunk tried to grab Ricky's dick at the urinal.

The man lurched forward, reaching for Ricky. *Seriously?* Did this guy not realize he was drunk *and* ugly?

“Come on, mosquito dick! Prove you're a man. Whip it out and let the bar vote,” Ricky called out, loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear. He held his hands apart about twelve inches and then brought them together until only about four inches separated them. The crowd laughed. Someone shouted, “Oh, snap!”

If there was anything Ricky liked better than being the center of attention it was causing trouble. For Ricky, they usually went hand in hand.

As the man glared into Ricky's face, Ricky used his foot to slide a chair in the big man's path.

“Motherfu—” The drunk stumbled over the chair, careened to the side and smashed into another guy at the next table.

The big, bald, and tatted guy's beer arced up out of his glass and splashed all over his date, who blinked fast enough to cause a seizure. Beer dripped down his face and over the front of his clothes. He hit a note only dogs could hear, stood, and furiously wiped the liquid off his skintight black jeggings.

Ricky grinned, and then frowned. Where were the fashion police when you needed them? Jeggings? *Seriously?*

The beer guy cursed, turned, grabbed the drunk and slammed his fist into the dude's belly, doubling him over. Then he grabbed him by the belt and

tossed him onto another table, which splintered and disintegrated under his weight.

The two leather daddies sitting there stood and waded into the melee, as the bartender vaulted over the bar and pushed his way through the crowd, whooping like a B-movie Geronimo.

The rest of bar watched like drivers passing a fatality.

Ricky knew just how this would end; no one would step forward. They never did. It was his cue to leave. As the bar erupted into pandemonium, he sauntered through it, out the door, and onto the street. At the curb, he cocked one hip out, raised his arm, and waved at a passing cab.

For a moment, his self-satisfied smirk slipped.

Where the hell is a hero when you need one?

Ricky needed a hero and damned if it looked like he would never find one.

Dirk McAfee raised an eyebrow at the destruction occurring all around him. Chairs and tables were tossed like confetti as the fights continued. Whoever said gays couldn't fight had never been in the right bars. The bartender had a bald man in a headlock, as everyone else gathered to watch and egg them on.

And the cause of it all had just traipsed his fine, tight ass right out the door, without a look back over his shoulder. In a way, Dirk admired the young man, and not because he looked like sex on two legs.

In Dirk's experience, you don't cause that sort of trouble without knowing what you're doing. The kid had the routine down pat, proving this wasn't the first time he'd started a fight.

And walked away without a scratch.

Damn.

He was a force of nature. But even storms run out of energy and Dirk had a feeling this kid was about to run out of luck.

Not my problem.

He took another sip of his whiskey and leaned back against the bar. His gaze flicked from the action around him to the door. Everyone was moving away, the bartender stood over the drunk, and the other guy sat on a chair, his boyfriend fretting about him.

If the kid wasn't careful, he'd get his ass kicked, or worse.

Still, not Dirk's problem.

Nothing was his problem anymore. Not since he'd left the Marines behind him, fed up with fighting a war he didn't believe in, tired of seeing his friends blown up or shot. Tired of being on constant alert, of sleeping on the ground, of sand in every nook and cranny on his body.

Where had the kid gone?

Why should he care? He made it a point not to care about anyone anymore. A little survival technique he'd picked up pretty damn quick in Iraq, and he couldn't seem to shake it. Couldn't get back to normal.

Whatever the hell *that* was.

Dirk sighed, finished his drink in one toss, slid off the stool, and headed for the door.

On the street, the young man waited as a cab pulled up to the curb. Dirk edged closer. Either the kid was going home or he was moving to the next bar.

Dirk stood just behind him as he leaned into the open rear door.

"Rockaways." Dirk recognized the name of the bar. One of those places leather and motorcycles gathered at. Not good. Lots of ways to get into trouble there.

When the kid got in, Dirk was right behind him, pushing his way into the cab, forcing the guy over into the other side of the bench seat.

"What the fuck are you doing?" The kid pushed back, even as he moved.

"Heard you were going to Rockaways. So am I. Thought we'd share a cab." Dirk shrugged, slammed the door and tapped his finger on the plastic partition. "Let's go, driver."

The dude glared at him, but Dirk didn't miss the once over. He must have liked what he saw because he just crossed his arms and sank back into the seat.

The cab pulled away and into the traffic.

Dirk glanced sideways at the young man next to him. A familiar scent caught his attention—vanilla and baby powder. No wonder the daddies wanted him. Besides the kohl-lined blue eyes and the thick dark lashes and blue eyes. His lips were built for kissing. Dirk looked down between the kid's legs.

Either he was a shower or he was aroused. Either way, he wasn't lacking. And either way, Dirk needed to keep his eyes and hands to himself.

How long had it been since Dirk had had sex in a cab? Whether it was the scent, the sight of the young man, or the outline of his cock in his black leather pants, his dick thickened.

Dirk had no idea what had come over him, other than the basic need to fuck, but he had mastered controlling his needs in the military. And tonight would be no different.

He had to ask himself again what the hell he was doing, and why the hell all he wanted to do was pull this young man down and let him suck his dick.

Dirk didn't like the answers to either of those questions.

CHAPTER TWO

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you are, but usually people ask first before barging into a cab.” Ricky shifted in his seat, spreading his legs apart to get more comfortable. No room to lounge in the backseat with this asshole taking up all the space and oxygen.

“I’m Dirk.” He crossed his hand over his body to offer it for a handshake. A bear paw, if Ricky’d ever seen one. If old Dirk thought he’d get him some of this tonight, he was crazy.

Ricky stared at the hand until the man lowered it.

“And your name is?”

“None of your fucking business.” Ricky looked out the window as the scenery rolled past. Stores, parking lots, a few apartment buildings. Nothing he hadn’t seen before. Same old, same old.

Next to him, the man smiled, like he had a secret.

Ricky hated secrets.

He’d seen all sorts of moves before, and this was no different from the others. The guy would try to strike up a conversation, and when they got to the club, he’d try to stake a claim on Ricky.

But this dude? Now he was something Ricky didn’t come across every day. Ricky couldn’t put his finger on him—tough, quiet spoken, but he oozed danger. As if he were a coiled snake, hiding in the dark, waiting to strike.

Dirk, if that was really his name, wasn’t handsome, not model or movie star good-looking. Not at all. But Ricky found him attractive. Something about the man, his size, his voice, the distance he kept from Ricky, as if afraid to touch him and spook him, all pulled Ricky to him like a comet caught in the gravitational pull of a sun.

Dirk oozed daddy, but not like the others, staked out in leather and nail heads, walking stereotypes from gay porn. No shaved head or thick mustache. No curling chest hair peeking out from a too-tight deep V-necked T-shirt.

This guy had on jeans and a black cotton sweater. The only thing he wore that could point to being a leather daddy was his boots. They looked like tan

military boots, worn and scuffed, like he'd gotten them used from the army surplus store.

Fashion faux pas or fashion fabulous?

Dirk wore them like second nature. Like he'd worn them for years. He was comfortable in his own skin and his boots. That appealed to Ricky, which was scary, because Ricky's taste in men sucked.

Ricky swallowed, not sure if he was in danger or not. Usually his warning bells would be going off, ringing like mad, but right now, nothing. Not even a chime.

Calm oozed off of Dirk and it slipped around Ricky like a warm blanket. For a moment, he thought he'd been drugged. But the man hadn't touched him, other than to muscle him into the cab. And Ricky hadn't had a drink at the bar.

The urge to sink against the man, to let him wrap a strong arm around him and hold him close, had Ricky leaning, ever so slightly, toward Dirk.

Oh, fuck no!

Ricky coughed and hunched against the door, moving as far away from Dirk as he could get. He didn't like losing control. It scared the crap out of him, which is why he didn't drink or do drugs anymore.

When you give up control you're at the mercy of those around you. And that's when you learned who you could trust. And who you couldn't.

And you're fucked if the one person you thought you could trust turned out to be the one you should have been afraid of all along. You were alone, with no one around to help. No one who'd step forward, intervene, keep the pack from tearing you to shreds, like starving wolves on a rabbit.

"Been to Rockaway's before?" Dirk asked.

Ricky nodded, afraid to speak, to keep engaging with this man, despite being drawn to him. He wanted out of the cab, but knew if it just kept driving, he'd be content to sit next to Dirk until daybreak.

Ricky slipped his hand over the door handle and clung to it, like the end of a rope tethering him to freedom. When the cab stopped, he'd get out and ditch Dirk in the darkness of the club.

Rockaway's. He might get lucky there. Like a dozen times before, his heartbeat quickened and his adrenaline shot up.

His dick stiffened.

Now that wasn't what usually happened just going to a bar. It wasn't the bar, the prospect of what might happen inside, or what he might find there. No. It was the fear he'd give up his search for what he needed for who sat next to him.

Temptation on two jean-clad legs.

Short cropped blond hair. Gray eyes. And a honey-tinged whiskey voice that wrapped around Ricky, lulling him into dropping his guard, lowering his defenses.

Ricky depended on those defenses to keep him safe. If he surrendered, he'd be right back where he started—alone and vulnerable to attack.

The cab pulled over. Before it finished rocking to a stop, Ricky opened the door and bolted toward the club, leaving Dirk and the driver behind.

The little shit was fast. Dirk chuckled. "Here." He handed the driver a twenty. "Wait for me. I shouldn't be long." He slid out and stood on the sidewalk.

The red Rockaway's sign blinked off and on over the door through which the kid had disappeared. Dirk didn't rush. The guy could handle himself. He'd proven that already at the other bar.

But Rockaway's had a rep and it wasn't good.

This kid was looking for trouble. But why?

Mysteries intrigued Dirk. And this kid was a mystery Dirk wanted to unravel. Hell yeah, with his hand on the guy's head as he took Dirk down his throat.

The thought of his dark-lined eyes looking up, his mouth open around Dirk's cock, sucking him like a Hoover. Hell, yeah. Dirk rubbed his cock and started toward the bar.

A biker exited and staggered off down the block. A row of motorcycles lined up next to the building on the side parking area.

His kid had bitten off more than he could chew coming to this place and Dirk needed to get in there before all hell broke loose.

He stopped in his tracks. *His kid?*

Dirk exhaled. Yeah, his kid. There was no fighting it and Dirk knew it.

He grabbed the door handle, pulled it open and stepped inside. After pausing to let his eyes adjust to the dark, he moved to the bar to order a beer. The bartender slid a draft to him and Dirk tossed a five on the counter.

Then he turned, leaned his back against the bar and scanned the club for his kid.

All the usual suspects. Loud music you had to shout over to be heard. The stink of stale beer. An underlying smell of sex and aftershave.

Not a hint of vanilla and talc. Or a sign of black spiked up hair.

Where the hell could he have gone to? For a moment, Dirk thought maybe he'd gone out the back. Through the dim light, Dirk made out the sign for the restrooms, down a back hall.

Had to be.

Dirk slammed down the rest of his beer, got off the stool and headed for the men's room. He crossed the bar, skirting tables of men dressed in leather and bad attitudes.

The door to the bathroom burst open, expelling the little smart-ass like a watermelon seed. And right behind him, a huge man stalked.

“Come back here you little fucker!”

This had to be a record, even for the kid. He'd been in the bar less than ten minutes and he'd managed to start shit. Dirk grinned.

Until the kid stumbled, catching himself on the wall with both arms outstretched to keep from diving face first into the floor. His shirt hung open and blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

Dirk's grin faded and something inside him snapped. Flicked on like a light switch. Electricity shot through him, cranking his heart like an old carburetor, bringing him back to life.

CHAPTER THREE

Ricky tasted blood and spit it out as he wobbled on unsteady legs down the hall. The side of his face still stung from a wicked backhand slap. He had to get away, get out of there, before the bastard finished what he'd started.

This time, he'd gone too far.

The hall looked like a tunnel, dark and threatening, and for a moment all light had been blocked.

He wiped his hand over his eyes and looked again.

The figure of a man came toward him, dimly illuminated from behind. Ricky knew there was no going back, only forward. But this man was just as big as the other one, and maybe, just maybe, Ricky had run out of luck.

He was trapped.

Both men advanced. Ricky swallowed blood, and then staggered forward, head down. Maybe he'd just pass the guy up, get to the bar, but if he stood here, the other man would reach him first.

Out of the darkness, the man from the cab appeared. *Dirk*.

Ricky almost cried, until he saw the look in Dirk's eyes. It said death, motherfucker, I'm going to kill you, and don't touch what's mine, all at once.

Ricky flattened against one wall as Dirk passed him like the angel of death or like a god bent on destruction.

"Get the fuck away from him, cocksucker." The menace in Dirk's voice was more than enough to make the man from the bathroom halt, and take a step back as he shook his head.

"Hey, man. I didn't know he belonged to anyone. Pussy comes in here, nothing on him, what was I supposed to do?" He held up his hands to ward off Dirk.

"You don't touch, fucker. You ask permission." He turned and pointed to Ricky. "That blood don't look like permission, it looks like no. Don't you know what the fuck no means?" His voice dropped to a dangerous level, rumbling like bass against the wall of the narrow hallway.

Ricky stared at Dirk's back. The man seemed bigger than he had in the cab. Had he somehow blown up, enlarged, like a cobra, giving the illusion of being larger than he actually was?

No, Dirk was really and truly big. And pissed off.

Over Ricky?

No one had ever—

“Now, I need you to apologize to my friend and then leave.”

The biker frowned. “Leave? Who the hell are you? I'll say I'm sorry if I stepped on toes, but I'm not leaving.” He put his hands on his hips and spread his stance.

“Walk out the front door, or I'll throw you out.”

Ricky edged closer to Dirk. “He can do it, too!” Ricky shouted. “Don't fuck with him; he can whip your ass!” He couldn't help himself; he had to tell that fucker off.

“I don't need your help, honey,” Dirk drawled over his shoulder. “Just stay behind me and keep your smart ass mouth shut. For once.”

Ricky nodded. “Okay. Zipped.” *Honey? Smart ass?*

“Fuck you and your little pussy boy.” The man roared and charged. Ricky backed up, sliding against the wall until he hit the old phone hanging on the wall.

Dirk stepped into the rush, and his fist connected with the guy's jaw, snapping back his head. He staggered backward and Dirk landed another punch, this time in the kidneys.

The guy doubled over, fell to his knees, clutching his belly and groaning. In slow motion, he collapsed to the side against the wall.

“Next time, ask. And remember no means no.” Dirk looked down at the dude, then up at Ricky. “Are you hurt?”

Ricky shook his head.

Dirk nodded. He strode down the hall to Ricky, took him by the elbow, and marched him out of the bar.

“Just keep walking and keep your mouth shut.”

Ricky dragged his heels, as Dirk pulled him along. Who the hell did this guy think he was?

“Hey, let me go!” Ricky struggled against Dirks’s grip, but the man had him in a grip so strong he couldn’t break it.

“No way. You’re done for the night.” Dirk reached the door and kicked it open.

“I’m not going anywhere. You’re not the boss of me.” Ricky twisted away, breaking free at last, only to stumble on the sidewalk. A cab waited at the curb.

“Maybe I should be.” Dirk opened the door of the cab. “Get in.”

“You can’t tell me what to do.” Ricky balked like a stubborn kid. “I’m twenty-three and been on my own since I was sixteen.”

Dirk exhaled, his massive shoulders rising up and then down. He looked as if he were about to lose his patience. Ricky glared at him, but it was an act. Ricky wanted... Dirk. Damn him.

“I don’t need you to tell me what to do or when to leave or where to go.” Ricky jutted out his chin and cocked his hip.

Dirk stepped up to him, wrapped a big paw around the back of his neck and dragged Ricky against his hard body. Ricky gasped as he raised his hands to brace himself against Dirk. Solid muscle.

The big man leaned down and whispered in Ricky’s ear, “You *will* get in the cab. You *will* go home. And you *will* do as I say.”

All the air left Ricky’s lungs in a deep sigh. Dirk’s voice slid through his ear and straight to his balls, where it wrapped around them and gave a loving squeeze.

“Yes, Dirk.” What else could he say? He’d never been so helpless or so willing to be helpless.

Dirk released him and gave him a little push toward the taxi’s open door. Ricky got in, slid across the seat and waited for Dirk to get in.

Dirk stood with one hand on the roof of the cab and one on the door. He took a deep breath to steady himself. God Almighty. This kid was going to be the death of him.

Didn't he ever stop pushing? Didn't his mind ever control what came out of his mouth? Dirk doubted it.

The kid needed a keeper, for damn sure. But not him. Hell, no. He'd left his babysitting days when he kissed the military goodbye and he didn't plan on falling into that trap again. No matter how sexy it looked.

He shook his head, stiffened his resolve and got into the cab. He stayed on his side of the seat, because that last move, pulling the boy against him, nearly killed him.

"Tell the driver your address."

The kid rattled off his street and numbers, and his arms crossed over his chest as if protecting himself. From Dirk?

If anyone needed protection it was Dirk.

"What's your name?" He shouldn't care, but he didn't want to keep calling him "the kid".

The silence stretched as the kid chewed his bottom lip. Dirk stifled a groan and the urge to run his tongue over it.

"Ricky." Like it killed him to say it.

"Okay, Ricky." Figured. He probably spelled it with two "Ks" and an "T". All Dirk needed to do was take Ricky home, deposit him there and be on his way. Job done.

"You've got a real way with words, Dirk." Ricky glared out the window, refusing to look at him.

Dirk refused to rise to the bait. "It's a gift."

"You should return it and get your money back."

Dirk chuckled. "Maybe I will."

"You should." Ricky had to get the last word. He pouted and Dirk almost burst out laughing.

They fell into a mutual silence. The neighborhood changed from businesses to residential, and from nice to questionable. Shady men and trashy women hung on the corners under street lights or in the shadows of abandoned buildings. Unease rippled through Dirk as the area sank deeper into disreputable, moving fast into dangerous.

Ricky lived around here?

The cabbie called out the address as he pulled up in front of a run-down apartment building covered in spray painted gang symbols and pigeon shit. Half the windows were busted out. A man younger than Ricky sold crack to an even younger girl. She slipped him some cash and pocketed the small plastic baggie.

“You live here?” Dirk frowned as he bent forward to look past Ricky. The place had to be abandoned. Probably no running water, no heat, and no electricity.

“Sorry, it’s not the Ritz.” Ricky opened the door. “Oh, yeah. Wait. I don’t give a shit what you think. Fuck off, *Dirk*.”

Oh hell, no. Not on his watch.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dirk could make all the faces he wanted, but it didn't mean a thing to Ricky. This is where he lived and if Mr. High and Mighty didn't like it, well, too fucking bad.

It was cheap.

So what if Ricky had to lock himself in and shove a chair under the doorknob? So what if he had to pay Fazel, the dealer who ran the building, fifty bucks to stay here and another fifty for protection? At least Fazel left him alone. Most of the time.

"Well, it's been a slice." Ricky pushed the taxi's door open and slid to the edge of the seat. He had one leg out the door when Dirk grabbed his arm and pulled him back in.

"What the fuck?" Ricky turned back to glare at where Dirk's hand wrapped around his bicep. "Will you quit grabbing me!"

"Get back in the cab."

Ricky snorted. "Who the hell do you think you are? You can *not* tell me what to do. You must have me confused with someone who gives a shit what you say." He jerked his arm, but Dirk held on tight. The heat from Dirk's fingers singed Ricky, but he refused to succumb to the burn.

"I said, get back in the cab." Dirk's voice dropped two octaves.

Ricky froze. His heart hammered as if it'd break his ribs trying to get out, and the air in his lungs vaporized.

No one had ever given a shit about him. Not his family. Not any so-called boyfriends. No one.

Except this man. This stranger had come to his rescue, not once but twice. And now Dirk was trying to do it again.

Damn.

Ricky slumped back against the seat. He pulled in his leg and shut the door. His throat convulsed as he tried to swallow back what threatened to burst

out of him. Tears burned his eyes, but he turned his head and blinked them away.

“Hey, honey.” Dirk placed his finger under Ricky’s chin and turned his head. “Look at me.”

Ricky looked up into ice-blue eyes filled with something he’d never seen before. If this was what he’d always wanted to see from a man, why the hell did it scare the shit out of him? Why did he want to throw open the door, haul ass up the stairs straight to his room, and lock the door behind him?

He trembled, on the verge of destroying his one and only chance at maybe having his dreams come true.

But for guys like him, dreams never came true. Not when he’d been a kid and his father walked out on him and his mom. Not when his mom took up with a man who liked to touch Ricky where no one should have touched a child. Not even when his mom refused to stop that man from throwing Ricky out of what had been his home for sixteen years.

“Dirk, you don’t know me. You don’t know anything about me. I’m not—”

“Shut up, Ricky. For once in your life, can you just listen?” He looked deep into Ricky’s eyes and Ricky melted.

Ricky nodded, his lips pressed tight together. Maybe...

“I’m not leaving you here. This place is a hell hole. You don’t belong here. I don’t know who convinced you this is all you deserve, but they were wrong.”

Ricky stopped breathing. He couldn’t be hearing right, could he? What was wrong with Dirk? Couldn’t he see what Ricky was?

Maybe he did.

Maybe he didn’t care.

“You might be a smart-ass, but you’re smart. Cocky as hell, but under all that is confidence. And I’ve never seen anyone so determined to cause trouble.” Dirk chuckled. “You’re a force of nature.”

The cabbie turned around. “Hey, you getting out or what?”

“No. He’s not.” Dirk gave the driver his address.

“What are you doing? Where are we going?” Ricky stared out the window as the taxi left his apartment building.

“My place.”

“Why?” Ricky threw his hands up in the air. “Look, Dirk. I’m not some lost puppy you can just pick up and take home. I have a home.”

“That was a home?” Dirk snorted. “That was a hovel. That was a crack house. You’re not safe there. “

“But it was *my* crack house hovel!” Ricky couldn’t believe it. Dirk insulted his home and now was taking him to his place. “Who said I wanted to go with you? And for how long? A day? A week? Forever?” His voice had reached a new octave, but he couldn’t stop. “All my *things* are there.”

Dirk stared at him, and then he ran his hands through his hair. “You’re right. I’m completely out of line. I don’t know you. I don’t know what your place is like. It was a knee-jerk reaction.” He leaned back against the seat and cut his gaze over to Ricky. “I’ll take you home. To your place. If that’s what you want.”

Ricky looked out the window, his pursed lips working left and right. Dirk had no idea what had come over him, but when he’d seen the place, he’d flipped. Protective didn’t begin to explain how he felt, and damned if he understood why.

“Should I take you home, Ricky?”

“No,” Ricky whispered. He rubbed his hands together and wiped them on his leather pants. “I don’t want to go home. I want to go with you.”

“Look. I didn’t think this through. I just reacted.” He shrugged. “Why do you want to come with me?”

Ricky sighed. “Because you cared. Because you stepped in back at the bar.”

“You were about to get your ass kicked.”

“Maybe.” Ricky shrugged

“Definitely.” Dirk grinned. “But it wasn’t the first time you’d done that, was it? Started shit?” The kid was annoying and fucking adorable in a way that twisted Dirk inside out.

“Maybe.”

“Definitely.” Now Dirk laughed. “Jeez, you’re a little smart-ass. When I saw you at the bar...”

“You wanted me?” Ricky leaned closer and put his hand on Dirk’s leg.

“I wanted to keep you safe.”

Ricky edged closer and placed his lips next to Dirk’s ear. “You wanted me bad, didn’t you?” Just the heat from Ricky’s body and what he offered got Dirk’s cock up.

Dirk could turn his head and take Ricky with a kiss. Unzip his jeans and push Ricky’s head down to suck him. He could, but he didn’t.

“I wanted to keep that asshole from killing you. That’s all.”

Ricky laughed. “Liar.” He glanced down. “That’s not what your dick says. It says you want to fuck me.”

Dirk stared at the back of the driver’s head. No way was he going to get into shit with Ricky in the back of this cab. He recognized the neighborhood. They were almost to his place.

“Look. Let’s discuss this later. At my place, okay?”

Ricky fell back to his corner. “Okay.” He rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”

Whatever? Dirk wasn’t sure if getting into anything with Ricky was a good idea. If he was smart, he’d let Ricky spend the night, and send him on his way in the morning.

He’d always been smart about the men in his life, keeping them at a distance. Before he’d gone into the military, while he was there, and now that he was out, he planned on staying smart. Picking up Ricky had been stupid.

For once, he didn’t have a plan of action.

Ever since he’d spotted Ricky, Dirk had been working on gut reactions and instincts. Not always a good combo.

“This is it.” The cab driver pulled the car over in front of Dirk’s apartment. The overhead light over the door shone a wide circle on the sidewalk, then faded into the night on either side.

Dirk paid the outrageous amount for the cab ride, then he leaned over Ricky and opened the door.

“Oh, can I get out now?” Ricky asked, batting thick dark lashes at him.

“Smart-ass. Get out before I toss you out.”

Ricky grinned and got out.

“Hey, are you checking out my ass?” Ricky asked as he stood on the sidewalk.

Dirk groaned. What had he gotten himself into? Dirk slid across the seat and reached the door.

“No, I’m checking out whether I’ve lost my mind bringing you home.”

Ricky’s smile slid into a frown and hurt filled his dark eyes. “I knew you’d regret it. Never mind, Dirk. You don’t have to take care of me. I’m out of here.”

And with that Ricky spun on his heels and headed off down the street before Dirk could get out of the cab.

“Goddamnit!” Dirk shook his head. He took a step, and then stopped.

Maybe he should just let Ricky go.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ricky marched down the street, each step taking him farther from Dirk. He strained, listening for footsteps on the concrete behind him. Nothing.

Please. Please come after me.

If he comes after me, then he cares. Then he's the one I've been waiting for. If he doesn't...

He should have known someone like Dirk wouldn't really want him for anything other than a quick fuck.

And Dirk didn't even want him for that.

Face it. He'd never been good enough. How many times had he started shit in bars hoping someone would show up? Hoping someone would step forward? Hoping for a hero?

In all that time, he'd never thought if he actually found a hero, a good man, that the man wouldn't want him. That he was just being who he was, a hero. A protector of the little guy, savior of the underdog, even if he was a smart-ass like Ricky.

Pleasepleasepleaseplease call my name.

Ricky's chest tightened and he gulped for air. Tears burned his eyes, blurring his vision. He dashed them away with the back of his arm and kept walking, even though every bone in his body wanted him to turn around and run back to Dirk.

What for?

More rejection?

For once he wanted someone to stop *him*, to beg *him* not to go.

Please. Dirk. Just say my name.

He took two more steps and knew Dirk wasn't going to call for him.

"Fuck!" Dirk ran his hand through his hair. If it were longer, he'd have grabbed it and pulled. Ricky was going to drive him nuts, he could see it

already. The younger man was a full-time job, the care and feeding of whom Dirk wasn't sure he should take charge of.

Ricky stalked away down the block, probably without a clue as to where he was heading, other than into more trouble. Damn it. Something about Ricky called out to Dirk, reached deep inside him and triggered all his protective instincts.

“Ricky! Stop right there.”

He did.

Amazing. Ricky listened and obeyed. That probably would never happen again. Dirk snorted as he walked toward his new... whatever the hell Ricky was.

“Ricky.” Dirk called to him as he approached. The stiff spine and clenched fists told Dirk that Ricky might be a bit pissed off.

Dirk came to a halt right behind the young man. Ricky let his head fall forward and his shoulders rose and fell in a huge sigh. Relief? Resignation?

This meant more to Ricky than Dirk realized. *Aw, hell.* How many men had let Ricky walk away? How many never called him back or stopped him?

Ah, shit. Dirk's heart ached for Ricky. He'd pushed everyone away, testing and trying every man he met, no doubt. Was Dirk the only one who'd stepped in? The only one who'd ever stopped him?

Dirk put his hand on Ricky's arm. Ropy muscles tensed. Dirk ran his hand up and cradled Ricky's throat in his hand, moving so close their bodies touched.

“Honey,” Dirk whispered as he wrapped his other arm around Ricky's chest. “Don't go. Stay with me.”

“But you don't know me.” Ricky's sob tore at Dirk's heart. Ricky shook his head, as if denying this to himself, even as he grabbed Dirk's forearms and clung to him.

“Got plenty of time and nothing better to do. Hey, you don't know me either.”

“I got nothing to do too.”

“See? Come home with me. We’ll take it slow.”

“But my stuff is still at my place,” Ricky whispered.

“We’ll pick it up tomorrow, during the day.”

Ricky sighed and leaned his head back against Dirk’s shoulder. “You probably don’t have room for me.”

“You’re small. You won’t take up much space. I just hope you don’t eat much either.”

Ricky chuckled through his tears. “Asshole. I’m not a puppy.”

“No, you’re a *brat*. Come on, honey. I’m tired. It’s late and I have work in the morning.” Dirk softened his voice to coax the man like a skittish colt.

“Work?” Ricky strained to look up at him.

“That’s right. I work in private security.” Dirk unwrapped his arms from Ricky and turned him around to face him.

“Oh. Nice. My job is sort of lame. I work at a printing company making T-shirts.”

“Cool.” At least the kid wasn’t turning tricks or selling dope.

“No, it’s not. It sucks.”

“Ricky?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up.”

Dirk placed both of his hands on either side of Ricky’s face to tilt it upward. He lowered his head to Ricky’s, keeping his eyes open, watching Ricky watch him.

Ricky’s lips parted, his eyes shuttered closed, and his breath caught. That was all Dirk needed to close the gap between them and take Ricky’s mouth in a soft, tender kiss.

Ricky moaned, pressed his body harder against Dirk, and opened to allow Dirk in. Dirk took the hint and deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue in to taste the man he’d been longing to learn since he’d seen him in the bar.

God, Dirk's body reacted, letting his need take over his rational mind. He'd not felt this level of arousal in ages. Familiar cravings, yet new. Dirk wanted Ricky on his knees, ass in the air. That wasn't strange, but Dirk wanted Ricky to be there in the morning and for a lot of mornings to come.

"Finally figured out how to shut you up," Dirk whispered as he broke the kiss.

"All you had to do was ask." Ricky grinned.

"I did. You kept talking."

"Nuh-uh." Ricky shook his head.

Dirk narrowed his eyes. "Are you trying to get me to shut you up again?"

Ricky laughed. "Whatever."

Dirk planted another kiss on Ricky's lips, and then swatted him on the ass. "Let's go. I think we've put on enough of a show." He took Ricky by the elbow and led him back to his building.

CHAPTER SIX

Dirk unlocked the door and stepped aside so Ricky could enter. He edged in, like a frightened puppy, checking out whether it was safe or not. Dirk figured the kid wasn't even aware of what he was doing, he'd done it so many times.

Ricky stood in the center of the living room, turning in a small circle. "Nice place."

"It works." Dirk tossed his keys in the ceramic pot on the table near the door. "You hungry?"

Ricky bit his lip. "Sure." He sauntered toward Dirk. "For you." When he reached Dirk, he curled his fingers into Dirk's belt loops and tugged on them. "How about you?" He licked his lips slow and sexy as if he'd practiced in front of a mirror to get the right look.

"I was talking about dinner." Dirk removed Ricky's hands and headed to the kitchen, skirting the eat-in bar and stools, putting it between them.

He wanted Ricky, no doubt about that, but he was pretty damn sure Ricky needed more than a fast fuck.

Despite coming on to Dirk, Ricky's eyes held a touch of fear. He was unsure he should trust Dirk. And he was right. He'd come to a stranger's apartment, no last names, nothing to protect himself with. Incredibly dangerous and reckless.

Dirk figured that Ricky had "dangerous and reckless" tattooed on his ass.

He pulled out a package of ground meat and an onion. "Spaghetti and meat sauce okay with you?"

Ricky's mouth fell open. "You weren't joking. Sure." He came closer.

"Have a seat at the bar. We can talk while I cook." Dirk grinned and picked up a chef's knife to slice the onion. Ricky froze, then as Dirk put his chopping board on the counter, he relaxed and took a seat.

“No one’s ever cooked for me.” Ricky leaned forward, chin resting on his fist, watching.

“No one cooks for me, either. Can’t count the mess tent.”

“Mess tent. Were you in the marines?” He scowled at Dirk, as if trying to picture him in fatigues.

“Yeah.” Dirk shrugged.

“Where?”

“Iraq.”

“Oh.” Ricky bit his lip again, almost said something, then clamped his mouth shut.

As Dirk cooked, Ricky watched, asking a few questions about what he was doing, commenting on how good it smelled. He even set the table for them to eat at.

He added a huge scoop of meat sauce on his plate. Guess the guy was really hungry.

“This is delicious.” Ricky dug into the food, cutting his spaghetti into small bits, then scooping it up with the big spoon Dirk had given him to twirl with.

“Glad someone likes my cooking.” Dirk grinned.

Once they’d finished, Dirk had picked up the dishes and rinsed them, then loaded the dishwasher.

“So, you ready for dessert?” Ricky stood at the edge of the kitchen, his shirt unbuttoned down to his belt buckle.

Dirk nearly laughed at the blatant attempt; instead, he closed the door and started the machine. Then he wiped his hands on a dish towel and crossed the kitchen to Ricky.

“Look. You need to relax. I didn’t bring you here for sex.”

Ricky’s mouth fell open and for a second fear flashed in his eyes, as if he were afraid to ask what Dirk had brought him here for.

“You need someplace safe. Not the bar, not that crack house you live in. Someplace where no one is demanding something from you.”

Ricky’s eyes brimmed with tears, but he said nothing.

“You take the spare bedroom. It’s all yours. Tomorrow, we’ll go get your stuff if you still want to stay with me. No pressure.”

Ricky shook his head. “Well, this is new. I’ve never heard this line before.”

“It’s not a line.” Dirk opened the door to his spare room. A single bed, with pillows and a blanket, sat against one wall. On the other side of the room was a four-drawer dresser with a mirror attached. “If you stay, you can put your stuff here. That’s a small closet. We share the bath.”

Ricky sidled up to the door and peered in. “It’s nice.” He glanced up at Dirk, then back to his room. “Thanks.”

Dirk nodded and headed to his room. “I’m going to bed. Gotta get up for work early. If you’re not up, I’ll leave you a key, okay?”

Ricky nodded.

“Don’t bring anyone here, got it?” Dirk cocked an eyebrow at his new roommate.

“Got it.”

“Good. ’Night.” And with that, Dirk went to his bedroom and shut the door. He exhaled and leaned against it, straining to hear if Ricky said anything. Silence.

He glanced at his watch. After two A.M. He undressed and got into bed in just his briefs. Morning would come fast enough, especially with the hard-on he sported reminding him about the sexy little smart-ass in the other bedroom.

Man, he wanted to tap that ass.

“In time, Sarge. All in good time,” Dirk muttered, then rolled over and thought of breaking down his weapon, piece by piece.

Ricky stared at the door as Dirk disappeared behind it. He waited, sure the big man would come back out, announce he was just joking, and demand Ricky get on his knees.

The idea of that both excited and frightened him. Part of him wanted to be with Dirk, wanted his hero to give him the fairy tale. Part of him just wanted Dirk, period. And another part of him whispered that sex was all Dirk would ever or could ever want from him.

The slit of light under the door went out.

Ricky looked at it, then at his bedroom, then over his shoulder at the kitchen. He was alone. In a strange man's apartment. He could leave or stay. Go back to his place or hang around and see what happened.

Hanging around was cool. He could leave in the morning. Was Dirk *really* going to give him a key to his place? The man was loco to trust a complete stranger.

Ricky shrugged, and went into the bathroom. He rooted around in the drawers, found a brand new toothbrush and used it. He pissed, washed his face to clean off his eyeliner, or as much as he could get off, then left, turning out the light.

He padded to the guest room and shut the door.

This place was so much nicer than his hovel. He checked the doorknob. There was a lock on it. Silently, he turned it. Look, Ma. No chair needed! Turning, he gazed at the bed with a longing he hadn't felt in years.

Clean sheets.

He'd died and gone to heaven. He undressed, putting his clothing on the dresser, went to the bed and pulled down the covers. Naked, he climbed in, wiggling around in the coolness of the cotton sheets.

With a contented sigh, Ricky folded his arms behind his head and stared up at the ceiling.

“A boy could get used to this.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ricky woke the next morning, sunlight filtering through gauzy curtains. He lay in bed, listening to hear any sound of Dirk. Silence. There was no clock in the room, but since it was Saturday, he didn't have to be at work, unlike his new roomie.

He rose, dressed in his skimpy briefs and headed to the bathroom. The living room was empty, but the scent of coffee filled the air.

“Dirk?”

Nothing. Ricky shrugged, closed the bathroom door and locked it. Then he pissed, showered, and slipped back into his briefs. When he came out, the living area and kitchen were empty.

He went back to the room and dressed, then padded back to the kitchen. Dirk had left a cup for him, so he poured coffee, added some sugar and hunted in the fridge for the milk.

As he stirred his coffee, he spotted a chalkboard on the wall.

“Gone to work. Help yourself to breakfast. The key is on the counter. See you after five. Dirk.

PS- don't bring anyone home.”

Ricky grinned. Dirk had really left him the key. He'd trusted Ricky not to rob him blind, trash his place, or eat all his food.

Wow.

The man was either a fool or a good judge of character. Ricky would never have done any of those things. He'd struggled hard to stay away from a life of crime, no matter how bad his situation got—he'd always found a legitimate way to earn money, even if at times he'd relied on his sugar daddies to pay a few bills.

He ran his hand through his hair as he looked around for the key. It lay on the counter, attached to a little rainbow key ring. Ricky scooped it up and shoved it in his pocket.

The kitchen, like the rest of the apartment, was neat and tidy. He found a box of cereal, a bowl and got the milk back out. Then he sat down on a stool to eat at the counter.

After breakfast, he washed his dish and spoon, poured another cup of coffee, and wandered around, looking at Dirk's stuff, inching toward his bedroom.

At the doorway, he pushed the door open farther with his foot. "Oops." It swung wide and he leaned in.

Dirk had made the queen sized bed. Precision corners and everything. Man, he hadn't been kidding about being in the military. A place for everything and everything in its place.

Rules Ricky did not live by. He was more of a this-looks-like-a-good-place-to-drop-this-shirt kind of guy.

Mr. Clean meet Mr. Slob.

Ricky shook his head. This didn't bode well. He gave these living arrangements about three days before Dirk booted him out on his ass.

Maybe sooner if Ricky played hard to get.

But Dirk wasn't pressuring him for sex. Why not?

Again the thought of Dirk not really wanting him popped into Ricky's mind. *People*, Ricky's mama used to say, *are complicated*.

Ricky didn't think he was very complicated, but Dirk sure seemed like the poster child for complicated. Dark, brooding, commanding. He had everything that pushed Ricky's buttons.

Unfortunately, Ricky didn't seem to have what pushed Dirk's buttons.

Sure, he'd kissed him, but that was just to shut him up, right?

Ricky rolled his back across the door frame and out of the room. He went to the couch, sat down and picked up the remote from the coffee table. Sitting back, he turned on the flat screen TV and scrolled through the morning's offerings, wondering what he'd do all day.

Hot damn! Dirk had cable porn.

Dirk walked in at half past five in the afternoon. He half expected Ricky to have bolted, but there he was, stretched out on the couch, napping. The remote lay on the floor next to the sofa and the TV was on, spouting the early news.

He shut the door and Ricky woke, sat up, and rubbed his eyes like a kid.

“Hey, you’re back.”

“Yep. Ready to go get your stuff?” Dirk wanted to get there before it got dark. Dark was dangerous and he’d rather accomplish this mission in the daylight.

“Sure. If you’re sure you still want me here.” Ricky scratched his chin.

“It’s against my better judgment, but yeah. You’re welcome here.” Dirk chuckled.

Ricky frowned. “If you don’t want me here, I’ll go. I don’t want you to feel like you have to let me stay, or you’re obligated to, or something. I’m not a stray.”

“Look. We’ve been over this. I want you here.” Dirk went to his bedroom, stalked over to the dresser, opened it, and found his SIG. He stuffed it in the back of his jeans and pulled his shirt over it. Then he went to the closet and pulled out two duffel bags for Ricky’s stuff.

When he came out, Ricky stood. “Why? I don’t get it. I’m cute and all that, but wasn’t getting me out of the mess at the bar enough?”

“You’re cute as hell. But you need a keeper.” He tossed one of the bags at Ricky, who caught it.

“And you think that’s you?” He slung the empty bag over his shoulder.

“Yep. Any more questions?” Dirk walked to the front door and put his hand on the doorknob.

Ricky shook his head.

“Daylight’s burning. Let’s move out.” Dirk opened the door and Ricky raced across the room to join him.

The cab pulled up outside the crack house Ricky called home. In the light of day, somehow, it looked worse than at night. For the first time in a long

time, embarrassment filled Ricky as they got out. Dirk was right. It was a hovel. But it was the only thing he could afford at the time.

“Wait for us. We’ll be about fifteen minutes,” Dirk told the driver. The man nodded, glancing up and down the street, clearly not happy about sitting here, even in broad daylight.

“We’ll go in, grab your stuff, and get back down here. Fifteen minutes. Not a minute more, got it?”

Ricky nodded, and headed for the building. “I’m on three.” They trotted up the stairs; the elevator hadn’t worked since he’d moved in. On three, he took a left and went down two doors, one of them open and hanging off the frame, busted in months ago by the cops.

“Here’s my place.” He dug in his pocket for the key, unlocked the door, and opened it.

Dirk followed him in. The place was one room. On the floor in a corner was a mattress, a small pillow and a blanket. The tiny kitchen was in another corner, with a single cabinet over the sink. A doorway, minus a door, showed the minuscule bathroom. Sink. Shower stall. Toilet. The only thing to sit on was a worn loveseat. No TV. No computer. No stereo system.

Ricky went to a beat-up, three-drawer dresser next to the bed and opened it. He knelt, plopped the duffel bag on the floor and started to shove clothing into it. Dirk headed to the bathroom and threw all the stuff there into the other bag. Typical guy stuff, plastic razors, deodorant, lube, toothpaste, toothbrush, comb and brush stuck together, and some makeup.

Dirk snorted at the last, but he added it to the bag. The whole time, he shook his head, wondering how the hell someone lived like this, but he knew people did. Ricky barely got by, for whatever reason; lack of education, lack of opportunity, training, whatever. Inside Dirk, a voice whispered, *not on my watch*.

He grabbed the towels off the rack and folded them neatly to fit in his bag. That was everything worth bringing. He came out and went to the kitchen.

“Anything here you want?” he called out.

Ricky zipped up the bag, stood and walked over. He opened a few drawers,

but there wasn't much in them. "No. Nothing worth keeping." He slammed the drawers shut.

Dirk opened the mini fridge. The light had burned out, and it held only a few cans of beer and a pack of curling bologna.

"Leave it." Ricky turned away, color staining his cheeks.

Dirk closed the door and made a last sweep of the room. "Got everything?"

"Yeah." Ricky headed for the door, with Dirk following. He opened it and let Dirk pass him, then he turned and tossed the key into the middle of the room and closed the door behind him.

"Let's go." Dirk led the way down the stairs and out. The cab had waited. They got in, and without a look back, they left.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dirk stood in the doorway with a strange mixture of emotions churning his gut as he watched Ricky unpack. Ricky placed his clothing in the drawers, folded and neat. After he closed the last drawer and hung up his last shirt, he turned and faced Dirk.

“Thanks. For letting me crash here. When you need me out, just say the word.” Ricky rubbed one foot with the other.

Dirk read him like a book. The man begged for reassurance. The desire to give Ricky whatever he needed filled Dirk.

“Okay. But that’s not going to happen.” Dirk pushed off the door. “Get over here.”

Ricky advanced, eyes down at the floor. “Why? Why do you want to be my keeper?”

Dirk chuckled. “We went over that, didn’t we?”

“No. Yeah. What do you see in me? I guess that’s what I’m really asking.” Ricky looked up into Dirk’s face, and the expression he wore gutted Dirk like a knife. Hope. Fear. Confusion. Longing.

Man, this guy *needed*. He needed Dirk *so* bad. And it became clear—Dirk needed Ricky to need him. He had to stop fighting his own nature, like he had back in Iraq. He had to open up now. Here was the perfect opportunity to get normal. To care for someone. To let himself be vulnerable and risk being hurt again.

Dirk took Ricky by the back of the neck and pulled him to him. Ricky came, without resistance.

He brushed his lips against Ricky’s forehead. “It’s what I see in me. Because I need *you*. Because it’s my nature. Because I can’t walk away from you. You call to me, deep inside. Fuck, I don’t know, I’m drawn to you. Hope you feel the same.”

Ricky’s breath caught, and he dug his hands into Dirk’s shirt. “No one’s ever said... No one’s needed me. Ever.”

“I do.” Dirk tilted Ricky’s head up. Ricky’s lips parted and Dirk took his mouth with a deep, hungry kiss.

Ricky groaned and wrapped his arms around Dirk’s neck and clung to him, kissing him back like a starving man. They fed from each other for a moment, then Ricky broke the kiss.

He pushed Dirk back against the door and dropped to his knees. “Let me...”

Oh, God. Dirk had wanted this since the first time he’d seen the little smart-ass saunter across the bar. And he’d been fighting it.

Now it was time to give in. To surrender.

Dirk worked open his buckle as Ricky unbuttoned his jeans. The sound of the zipper added to the excitement filling Dirk’s dick. Ricky rubbed the bulge, enticing it to grow even harder.

The cool air hit Dirk’s cock and he looked down at the top of Ricky’s head. Ricky wrapped his hand around the thick shaft and pulled it forward. He stuck out his tongue and licked the tip of the swollen, red head.

Dirk groaned as he watched, turned on and needing this so bad. “Don’t tease. Suck me.”

Ricky looked up, caught Dirk’s gaze, and grinned, cheeky and fucking sexy. He licked again, all the while maintaining eye contact, and it drove Dirk wild. He wanted his dick in Ricky’s mouth. Now.

Dirk spread his legs as much as he could, bent his knees and braced his body against the wall. He’d be lucky to keep on his feet if Ricky looked at him again like that.

Ricky swallowed him. “Fuck.” Dirk groaned the word, letting it drag out, the sound of it mixing with his pleasure.

This was good. Worth waiting for. Ricky sucked him hard, easy, long and slow, fast and light, working his hand on the base of Dirk’s cock, twisting and pumping. Blowing him, blowing the top of his head off, blowing his mind completely.

Ricky never let up, just kept dragging Dirk to the edge of the cliff, then letting him hang there, almost... almost... there.

Dirk shouted as he came, spilling down Ricky's eager throat, filling Ricky's mouth with so much cum it trickled from his lips, down his chin.

Dirk grabbed Ricky by the hair, yanked him off the softening cock, and dragged him up so he could taste his cum in Ricky's mouth, on his lips, lick it off the man's chin and neck.

Ricky threw his head back and met Dirk's mouth with his, partly open, ready to be plundered, ready to share part of the load he'd kept. They kissed, sharing spit and cum and something unnamed between them.

Dirk broke off to lick Ricky's face, catch the last of the streaks of cum trailing down his neck. Tasting himself on Ricky's skin.

Ricky quivered as Dirk licked and kissed his neck, clutching Dirk's shirt again, head thrown back and eyes closed.

Dirk pulled Ricky closer, felt the hardness pressing against his thigh, and grabbed Ricky's ass, kneading it with both hands.

"Bed?" Ricky asked.

"Whoa." Dirk stilled his hands. "You don't have to do this. You didn't have to blow me, either."

"What?" Ricky blinked up at Dirk. "You don't want me?"

"I want you. I want you safe and secure. I want you to know you're not here because I want to fuck you."

"I don't get it. First you want me, now you don't!" Ricky's brows knotted.

"I don't want you to be someone who feels obligated to fuck me because I took you in. If you don't want to have sex with me, that's okay. I get it. Maybe you've had to do things you didn't really want to do with guys you didn't want to be with." He gazed into Ricky's eyes.

Ricky gave the slightest nod as his cheeks flushed red.

"I thought so. What I want is to take it slow. To build on what we have. I need you, Ricky, but I don't want any of it, if you're not happy here. With me. And the only way you'll find that out is to give us time."

Ricky swallowed and nodded. He looked around the bedroom. "Is that why you put me in this room?"

“Yeah. To give you your own space. If you don’t want to sleep with me, you can sleep here. I won’t pressure you. Ever.”

Ricky closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Wow. You’re... my hero.” He opened his eyes and gazed up into Dirk’s face.

Dirk shrugged. “I’m no one’s hero.”

“Of course you are. You’re mine. I’ve been waiting for you. I’ve been looking for you for what feels like ages.” He laughed and grabbed Dirk’s hands. “And now I’ve found you!”

“If you say so.” Dirk couldn’t deny the pleasure racing through his heart at Ricky’s words. He needed to be someone’s hero.

Ricky leaned in and whispered, “Can we sleep together tonight? Just sleep?”

“Sure, baby. You call the shots.” Dirk kissed Ricky. “Now, how about some dinner?”

“Can I cook?” Ricky led the way to the kitchen.

“I don’t know. Can you?”

Ricky smacked Dirk on the ass. “Now who’s being a smart-ass?”

Dirk laughed. “You didn’t think you were the only one, did you?”

Ricky rolled his eyes. “Maybe not, but I’m the best!”

“Yeah, and you’re my smart-ass, so don’t forget it.” Dirk wrapped his hand around Ricky’s neck and pulled him into a deep, searching kiss. Before he let Ricky go, he swatted him on the ass.

This might have turned out to be a rescue mission for Dirk, but in the end, he was the one who got rescued.

THE END

Author Bio

Lynn Lorenz lives in Texas, where she's a fan of all things Texan, like long horns, big hair, and cowboys in tight jeans. She's never met a comma she didn't like, and enjoys editing and brainstorming with other writers. Lynn spends most of her time writing about hot sex with even hotter heroes, plot twists, werewolves, and medieval swashbucklers. She's currently at work on her latest book, making herself giggle and blush, and avoiding all the housework.

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WHEN KARMA COMES KNOCKING

By Jinjur Louis

Photo Description

A well-built young man with longish brown hair stares sideways at the viewer. His hair is wet and hanging over his eyes. His face and naked chest are splattered with mud. He does not look happy, in fact he looks furious.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“I cannot believe how badly my day has gone what with the rain and the mud. To top off this craptastic day, my roommate invited some friends over. The guy I have been crushing on took one look at me and laughed his pretty ass off. I really want this day to be over.”

This poor boy. Do you think you can make his day better? I am hoping for a HFN or maybe even a HEA.

Just a note: I like all stories that end well for the MCs. Contemporary, mystery, paranormal, shifter, D/s, taboo, sweet stories, BDSM, thrillers, plain vanilla, fantasy, other worlds, non-con/dub-con, really anything goes!

Sincerely,

Peggy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: superhero wannabe, weird nicknames, mild PTSD, hurt/comfort, arts/crafts

Content warnings: mentions of rape and past abuse

Word count: 16,256

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WHEN KARMA COMES KNOCKING

By Jinjur Louis

What is that old saying? The one that says to enjoy the good times because Ms. Karma is going to come over and bite you in the ass. Okay. Maybe there is no saying that says that, but there should be. A few months ago, Ms. Karma decided that she had been treating me too nicely. Me. Mr. Raymond Mark Hanson. I was firmly established in my dream job. My bosses were a pleasure to work for. My work was appealing and kept me challenged. The pay was agreeable, more than agreeable. With my best friend as my roommate, I lived in a large warehouse style loft. Life was good.

Did I mention that my life was great? The all-American dream. All it needed was the wife, the two-point-five kids, and the dog running around in the backyard with the white picket fence. There was just a slight problem with this. I didn't want the wife or the two-point-five kids. I did want the dog. The white picket fence was up for debate. I'd be one happy camper if you replaced the wife with the hot husband. Oh, did I mention that I'm gay? Hope that isn't a problem for you. It's not a problem in my life. My parents and family didn't even bat an eyelash when I told them. My boss and co-workers teased me about the lack of a boyfriend, the same as they teased each other about the lack of a boyfriend. A few of my co-workers had even offered to introduce me to their kid's teacher's spouse's single brother, or a cousin that was coming to visit for the weekend. I refused each time. I didn't want to mix business with pleasure, and even if the person was their third cousin twice removed, it could become awkward if things didn't work out. I'd tell them that I had to take my mother to her martial arts class the exact weekend that their male relative was showing up. They'd smile and tell me that I was a good son, and my mother should be proud of me.

Strangely enough, it was those lies that got both my mother and I black belts. I told her about the potential hookups, and since she believes in total honesty, she started making me take her to lessons. So we got the black belts. It keeps me in shape.

Tom, my roommate, told everybody that I was his personal bodyguard so that they had better be nice to him or else I'd beat them up. Don't believe him. I won't beat up anybody. Well, if somebody were bashing a gay teenager, I'd come flying in with hands of steel. I'd be the superhero, protecting our gay youth from all forms of homophobia, earning the respect of the gay community. Wear the tights. Win the attentions of that cute guy who works in the artsy store on the corner. You know the store, the one with all the trendy scarves and bags. Mom told me the trendy scarves were shawls and that I was failing the gay stereotype of being a fashion snob by not knowing what they were. I couldn't care less. I was more interested in the man who worked the counter there. He was prettier than the shawls that Mom had, even if they were all handcrafted, and the owner was a world famous weaver.

He was tall, about my height if I was guessing right. Medium length hair, dark with a slight wave to it. Broad shoulders and trim waist. A great ass. Once, I spent an entire lunch hour pretending to read my book while he paced back and forth in the shop. He was waving his arms around, tossing those shawl things to another person. It looked like some crazy circus act. He would jump on a chair, stretch to grab an item off the wall, and bend over to show me that perfect ass. I took cold showers for a week after that display. I know. I was so crushing on this guy. Sue me if you haven't done the same thing yourself.

Karla, Tom's girlfriend, told me I needed to stop dreaming and walk into that shop. Tell him that I wanted to buy something for my mom and flirt a little. See if my superhero gaydar was working, and ask him out. If he slugged me, then I could be a dark, brooding superhero out saving our gay youth. If he said yes, then I would... shit, I didn't know what I would do.

Sorry, I was talking about Ms. Karma biting me in the ass. One Monday morning, my boss was standing by my office with that "Timmy is in the well again, and we can't find Lassie" look. The project that I was working on, and had almost finished, ran into a little glitch. The customer neglected to tell us some information. Critical information. I was going to have to trash my work and start over. Would I mind working a little overtime so that we could finish the project on time? No problem. Since I was currently between boyfriends, I

didn't mind working overtime. That little overtime turned into thirteen hour days. Weekends? Gone. Chances of asking my mystery man out? Zilch. Opportunities to stalk him during my lunchtime also zilch. I'm sure that he was moping around his store, wondering where his stalker had gone.

At least Tom came through for me. He made sure that I was watered and fed. He took care of the chores around the loft. He made sure that I had clean clothes for work. I asked him if he would marry me, but he laughed and mentioned something about a current girlfriend that might object at the wedding. Tom also mumbled something about going to her folk's place for the weekend. If the weekend went badly, then he would reconsider my marriage proposal.

Being the gay superhero who had just had his marriage proposal rejected, I did the only thing sensible. I went into my office and signed off on the project paperwork. The customer was happy with the result, which made my boss happy. I was still employed, so I was happy, and I decided to take the afternoon off.

During my free afternoon, I purchased a couple of bottles of red wine to give to Tom as a thank you. I grabbed a lovely bottle of wine for myself and checked out some books from my local library. Hey! After the last couple of weeks of work, I deserved a break.

Until it started raining. Fine. I like the rain. A warm summer rain lightly misting the air is pleasant, but not the frigging downpour that soaked my suit within 0.5 seconds of standing outside. In addition, who in their right mind puts wine bottles in a paper bag? The bag was useless, and I was not going to let a one hundred dollar bottle of wine drop to the sidewalk because a five-cent paper bag was soaked. Since I was almost home, I took my jacket off and wrapped the wine bottles in it. That left the library books exposed, so I took off my shirt and covered those. It worked.

Until Mrs. Kimble decided to start weeding her flowerpots at the same time I was walking underneath her balcony.

Ms. Karma is a real bitch sometimes. Or is that Ms. Fate? Never could keep those two girls straight. Hmm, I wonder if they are straight.

At least the wine and the library books were safe from the rain, and the dirt. Plus Tom wouldn't be home so nobody would be witness to my miserable state.

Image my surprise when I walked inside my apartment and saw Tom standing there with an open bottle of wine. He had said that he was going to be gone this weekend. Gone. As in not there at the apartment. Did I mess up the dates? Nope, he had said this weekend. Great.

"I had a slight mishap with Ms. Karma again." I explained as I set my wine and books on the floor. Tom flicked at the mud splattered across my chest as I stood up.

"I can see that, and you're dripping the mishap all over the floor. Why don't you go take a quick shower, and join us? I ordered Chinese for everybody. There's enough for you."

Everybody?

EVERYBODY?

Who the hell is everybody?

I heard a burst of laughter from inside the loft. Turning around slowly, I swore loudly. "Everybody" included Karla, a few women from her office, the renter from downstairs, and last but not least, my guy from the artsy store. He was the one laughing his pretty little ass off. *Great. I finally get to see him face to face, and he's laughing at me. He turns out to be a jerk.* "Glad I could provide a source of entertainment for you. I'm going to go take a shower now." To his credit, he clapped his hands over his mouth and stopped laughing.

With as much dignity as I could muster, I grabbed my jacket and headed towards my bathroom, forgetting about the wine wrapped in it. The jacket was heavier than I expected. It slipped out of my hand and dropped to the floor. I heard the glass break as the wine hit the tile. Swearing some more, I reached over to open up my suit jacket to determine the damage. I could see wine leaking onto the floor, but I was unsure of how many bottles had been broken. I didn't think about the floor being wet from me dripping on it, and I slipped. I also don't remember what I said when I heard the bone in my arm snapping.

“Winston says that he’s sorry.”

I heard my roommate speaking to me, but the drugs that they had given me were quite enjoyable. The pain in my arm, well, it didn’t hurt anymore. In fact, nothing in my body hurt anymore. I was quite happy.

“He’s really shy and uncomfortable in social situations. Karla thought it would be nice to invite him tonight, to get him to meet more people. We felt that a small party here would be a non-threatening way to help him.”

The drugs were better than I thought. Tom was talking but not making any sense. Who was Winston and what did he have to do with Tom’s girlfriend?

“Anyway, Winston is sorry that he laughed at you. He didn’t mean to.”

“Who the hell is Winston and what kind of name is that?” I decided that I wanted to know. Drugs or no drugs, I wanted to know who would name their kid “Winston”. Poor kid probably was beaten up a lot. Maybe I needed to get my gay superhero outfit out and go save him.

“He’s the one who laughed at you. He also drove us here since he hadn’t been drinking. He’d like to apologize to you if that’s okay.”

“Nah, I don’t have my superhero tights on. I can’t protect him from the bad guys.”

“Huh? Man, they must have given you the good drugs. Can you save a few for me?”

My brain was still a little fuzzy about what happened after I slipped and broke my arm. From what Karla told me, they heard the glass breaking and a lot of cursing. Tom got to me first and got me upright. My suit jacket had held the broken wine bottles together, so there was no danger of being cut by the glass. Since Winston was the only one who hadn’t been drinking, he offered to drive us to the hospital, and they bundled me up into his car. Karla stayed at the loft with the rest of the party. Apparently, I swore the entire time until we got to the hospital and the doctor gave me some drugs. I smiled a lot after that. The last thing I remembered was being tucked into my bed at home and giggling when Tom kissed my forehead good night. He’d never done that before.

It was the afternoon by the time I woke up. Starving didn't even cover what I felt. I grunted a few words at Tom and Karla as I passed by. Knowing how much I depend upon my coffee to wake me up, they were used to my grunting. Ms. Karma must have decided that she had played enough games with me the day before, as there was a fresh pot of coffee waiting for me. Heaven. My first cup. Yum.

I tried to avoid having to look at my broken arm until after I had drunk my first cup of coffee, but I felt I needed to take a closer look at my latest fashion accessory.

There was a bright neon orange cast covering my hand and up to my elbow. Bright, neon-flashing, glaring, crayon-colored orange. That bitch, Karma, and her sister, Fate.

“Oh Ray, honey. I'm so sorry, but it was the only color that they had left. Winston said that he had an idea to fix it. Winston is so good at these types of things. I'm sure he'll come up with a brilliant idea.” Karla patted my good hand gently, while Tom was smart enough to stand at least twenty feet away from me.

“WINSTON AGAIN! WHO THE HELL IS THIS GUY WINSTON? He was the one who was laughing at me, right? The only sober one at the party who—by the way, didn't you tell me that you were going to be gone this weekend? What the hell were you doing home? He fucking laughed at me and now Winston is going to fix the fucking neon orange cast for me?” Yeah, I knew that I was throwing a temper tantrum. Not one of my better moments. I'm blaming the lack of coffee and food in my system.

“Karla's parents had to cancel, so our plans were changed to next weekend. Winston works with one of Karla's friends, and they have been trying to get him away from his work for months. He's a terrific guy but gets these panic attacks on occasion. Karla and Daisy thought a small get-together here would be fun and something he could handle.”

“Next thing you'll be telling me is that Winston still lives with his parents. Never had a girlfriend, either. A great guy. A real catch.” A little voice inside my head pointed out to me that I had never had a girlfriend, either. Maybe Winston was gay. Maybe, if I could get over his jerk behavior of the previous night, he might be somebody worth asking out.

“You’re behaving like an asshole, Ray. He was upset about laughing and you getting hurt. He refused to leave until you were safe in your bed and comfortable. Real mother hen. Karla said that he even gave you a good night kiss.” Dropping my coffee cup, I glared at Tom. He sputtered and backed another ten feet away from me. I don’t blame him. My before-coffee face can be scary.

“Let me get this straight. Winston, the guy from the artsy store, was here last night. The one time that I look like Shrek on a bad day, I come home to find that the most gorgeous guy I’ve seen in a long time is here. He takes one look at me and laughs his ass off. I then happen to break my arm, and he stops laughing to read me bedtime stories?”

“Silly, he didn’t read you any bedtime stories. It was just a little kiss. Wait! Did you say that you liked him? Oh my God! This is perfect. The two of you would be so cute together.”

I groaned as Karla apparently forgot that she was a vice-president of a company and reverted to grade school. We’d be passing notes back and forth soon, with little hearts drawn around Winston’s and my name.

“I’m going back to bed. I have some nice drugs calling.”

I’m not going to bore you with the details of my co-workers’ reaction to my neon orange cast on Monday morning. Even the HR person laughed, and she hadn’t cracked a smile since 1942. Tuesday wasn’t much better, when my boss suggested that I might want to sit out the next customer meeting. Wednesday, I hid in my office until I managed to escape for lunch. It was sunny out, and I settled into my favorite lunch spot. Quiet. Peace. Oh, shit. Right across from Mr. Laughing Winston’s place of employment, and he was coming in my direction.

I ignored him until he sat down next to me.

“Hi. I’m sorry.” His voice was softer than I remembered.

“Apology accepted.” My voice was harsher than I would have liked.

“Is your arm feeling better?” Damn. Was that actual concern I heard in his voice? My resolve to stay mad at him was fading fast.

“A bit. Thanks for asking.” I was being polite. I was not starting a conversation with him. *I don't care how pretty his ass is, or how soft his voice is. I'm being polite. I'm not noticing how green his eyes are. That can't possibly be their real color.*

“That orange doesn't suit your coloring. I hope you don't mind, but I made something that might look better.” He held out a piece of fabric that shimmered in the sunlight. It was a silver-gray cover with a geometric type of pattern woven into it. It was stunning. Gently taking a hold of my cast, he slid the tube-shaped fabric over my fingers and up the cast. I watched as his long, slender fingers smoothed it around my cast, covering the neon orange. A delicate cord, that I could tug on with one hand to tighten the fabric around me, completed the look. I was speechless. My opinion of him being a jerk was changing. He might actually be a likeable guy.

“If it gets too dirty, you can either give it a quick rinse in the sink or bring it over to my shop. If I'm not available, any one of my employees will be more than glad to wash it for you. I gave them specific instructions about this. Or if you have any issues or problems, please let me help.”

He stood up and was half way back to the shop before my brain began to engage. Did he say that it was his shop? Was he the owner? He made this piece of art. For me? Who was the jerk now?

“Winston. WINSTON! Wait!”

He stopped but didn't turn around. His shoulders seemed to straighten up a little. Maybe he was bracing himself for a nasty comment from me.

“Winston. Thank you. This is beautiful. I will let you know if I need any help with it. On one condition.” I took a deep breath. He took a chance on coming out here. I could take a chance also. “Let me take you out for a coffee. After work?”

He turned around, and the smile on his face... wow. I thought his ass was pretty. Nothing compared to that smile.

“I'd like that.”

I made sure that my suit jacket sleeve covered my new custom-made cast cover when I got back to my office. Having my shirt sleeve rolled up and the loose-fitting jacket design made for a tight fit, but it worked. For some reason, I wanted to keep this to myself. Unfortunately, my secret was discovered during the last part of the day. The thermostat had broken, and the temperature in the office had risen. Everybody had stripped down to their shirt-sleeves and was giving me strange looks. Finally, I took my jacket off, and that's when the comments started.

I smiled and asked if we could get back to work instead of discussing my wardrobe.

Karla didn't let me off the hook as easily, though, when I got home. She guessed right away that Winston had made it for me. Even Tom was excited when he heard that Winston had agreed to go out for a coffee with me. When were we going? Where were we going? More questions that I didn't want to try to answer. Especially one question. When were we going out? We didn't actually set a date. In fact, I didn't even have his contact information, but I did know where he worked. Maybe a little Internet research would be a good idea.

Winston Arthur Sherman IV, owner and proprietor of Community Weavers, a local shop where one could purchase locally hand-woven items, supplies for weaving your own item, or learn to weave. The owner was an award-winning weaver/artist himself, with several celebrities and royals on his clientele list.

Shit again.

I was lucky if I could sew a button on a shirt, and here Winston was making fabric for famous people. The shimmer of the cloth covering my cast caught my eye and I remembered what he said. He said that he made this, as in he made the fabric. For me. The hell with coffee. I was taking him out to dinner.

Winston Arthur Sherman IV. With a name like that, I'd be having panic attacks, too. The poor guy. Isn't there a law against giving your kids horrible names? There should be.

He was bouncing around the shop. I watched him for a good ten minutes while he bounced from one corner to the other. Maybe he was part Tigger. *Bouncy Bouncy Fun Fun Fun*. Okay, a bouncing Winston is an image that I didn't want to have in my head, at least not during work hours. My co-workers would notice something else that was hard besides my cast. Even now, I could feel myself growing harder, watching him move.

One of his employees saw me watching and waved at me to come in. Winston stopped bouncing. I wanted to cry. Tiggers are supposed to bounce. Not bouncing makes them unhappy, and I didn't want Winston to be sad. I needed to get this Winston-Tigger image out of my head, and stop talking to myself like I was a five-year-old child. I was starting to believe that Tom was right when he told me I needed to get laid soon.

“Hello there! You must be Ray. Winston has told us nothing about you! So please be warned that you will be questioned, prodded, and made totally uncomfortable while we determine if you will be allowed to take our Winston out for coffee.” The tallest, meanest, *just released from prison where she made the prison warden her bitch*, woman greeted me at the door.

“I've changed my mind. I'm not taking him out for coffee. I'm taking him out to dinner. That is, if it's okay with him.” *Speak fast, Ray. Keep a clear path to the door so you can make a run for it. Above all, do not show fear.*

“Ah! Not so fast, mister. We need contact information, your place of employment, and the names of three close friends, so we know where to send the police if Winston is not home by curfew. My name is Daisy. I manage the store here.”

“Daisy, as in I'll be pushing up daisies if I don't treat your Winston like the true gentleman he is.” I tried to give her my best boy-next-door smile, but I remembered that most of your serial killers were described as being “the sweet boy next door. We never knew there were fifty-four bodies buried in his backyard.” Running for the hills was fast becoming an option for me here.

“Here's my card with my contact information on it. Place of employment is listed. Since I already know your boss's name, my boss's name is George. He's the only George who works there. I live with my best friend, Tom, at a

location that will not be disclosed until I am convinced that you haven't lured me into this shop so that you can sell me on the open slave market."

"Oh, I like him." Another woman spoke up, and Daisy glared at her for almost five seconds before bursting into laughter.

"Definitely likeable. Okay, Stick. You've passed the first test. You can go now." Daisy made shooing motions towards me. Winston had both hands covering his mouth, laughing like a hyena. The shithead. Fine. No dessert for him. Good thing that he had a pretty ass, and had shown symptoms of niceness before. Otherwise, it would have been home for me with a trashy movie for company.

Someday, I'm going to ask him what he finds so funny.

"I was at an arts and crafts show. A woman was selling hand-woven place mats, and I was fascinated. They were so simple, yet very elegant. I purchased a set and did research on weaving. Got a part time job at a local yarn shop, and learned about fiber." Winston was telling me how he got started in weaving. His green eyes sparkled as he talked about weaving, and I was swept up in his story. The terms he used were unfamiliar to me, but each hobby had its own language. Even my own hobby had its own language, and it took me a while to get used to the terms.

"You made this for me. Right? As in wove it?" I pointed towards my cast cover. I'd received several compliments on it, and I was keeping it after my cast came off. Maybe I could have it remade into a pillow for my bed.

"Busted. I felt so bad for you. With everything that had happened to you, and then being stuck with a neon orange cast, it was the least I could do."

"I have several co-workers that think it's wasted on my cast. It's too beautiful."

"It's a piece of cloth. The beauty of it comes from the wearer and the purpose."

"Okay, you just earned yourself a dessert of your choosing. It was a tough call there for a while, but the verdict is in. You get dessert."

“On one condition. You tell me about yourself during it.”

We ate hot fudge sundaes while I thrilled him with stories about my life as a marketing analyst. I was sure that I had him hooked when I told him about the survey I once did about pink and blue pencils. He didn't yawn once. A company wanted to know if their customers thought the colors were sexist, or if the company should go with a rainbow of colors instead. My colleagues and I had kept it strictly professional while dealing with our client, but downright lost it behind closed doors. Even my boss got into the fun when he made jokes about asking a gay man if he preferred the pink, blue, or rainbow colors. Winston wanted to know which colors won, and almost fell over laughing when I told him that the rainbows had won. My boss even gave the company their very own rainbow pencil flag to celebrate their decision. Two months later, they showed up on our doorstep again to help them market more rainbow colors and gay-friendly products. It had taken them that long to figure out why their new product was drawing a new customer base of gays and lesbians. They were excited, and my company was excited to sign an exclusive contract with them.

Our waiter came over with our dinner bill. They were closing, and we were still tucked away in our corner. I didn't want the night to end. Forget about the way that we met. Winston was pretty. He was smart and funny. Talented and sexy. Slim body but with a hint of softness, not muscle-bound like some men I knew. Don't get me wrong. I like muscles, but I like a little padding too. I wanted to know what his hair felt like. I wanted to know what his skin smelled like. I wanted to know what he tasted like. Did he laugh during sex? Was he shy like Karla had told me he was? Nothing about this date tonight suggested that Winston was shy. He was bubbling over, but he did seem to shrink back into his chair when the waiter came by. Maybe he was okay in small groups but shy in large groups. Maybe I needed to ask him out for another date. Maybe I needed to take a deep breath, and not have my own panic attack in front of his shop. He had an apartment right above his shop. Said that it cut down on his commute time. Maybe I needed to sneak in a breath mint so that when I kissed him, I would have minty fresh breath.

Would he let me kiss him?

Does he want me to kiss him?

Why am I acting like a teenage girl with her first crush? Just tell him that you had a good time. You would like to take him out again, and kiss him.

My mind was racing around these questions as I paid the bill for our dinner. We wandered outside and headed towards his shop. The day had been hot, so we had walked to the restaurant. It was still warm out, but a slight breeze was in the air. Winston shivered a little, so I took the opportunity to wrap my arm around his waist. His arm went around mine, and we struggled a little with our footing. His body felt tense against mine at first, but he slowly relaxed. Karla had described him as being shy, but nothing in his actions tonight had suggested to me that he was. It felt more as if he was scared of large groups. His demeanor was so different when it was just the two of us. I wanted to ask him what had happened in the past that made him so wary of other people. Instead, I halted our progress and turned towards him.

I wanted to kiss him so much.

Too late. He beat me to it. His right hand moved across my jaw, brushing my hair away from my face. He was the same height as me, so it was easy enough for him to lean in a little and press his lips against mine. A faint pressure, as if he was unsure of himself or of us. Or shy. Damn, he *was* shy. The bright chatter was nerves. His body language was telling me a different story, that of someone who was putting himself on the line for another person.

It was the sexiest thing that I could imagine.

I kissed him back, wrapping my arms slowly and loosely around him so that he could back away if needed. I opened my mouth and let my tongue flick at his moist lips. He groaned, and the Tigger in him came out. He bounced tightly against me, grabbing the back of my head to pull me closer. His tongue met mine and dived right into my mouth. I thought I was going to come right then and there.

Before I could embarrass myself, Winston jumped away from me, and began apologizing. Mumbling about being sorry and that he didn't mean to attack me. That it wouldn't happen again and how much he enjoyed tonight. How he hoped he hadn't ruined what he hoped to be a good friendship.

Seriously? After a kiss like that, he thought I would want to be just friends? Oh hell no. I crossed my arms in front of my chest and waited for him to wind down.

“Winston. You need to stop.”

“What?”

“You’re bouncing again. You know, like Tigger. Bouncy Bouncy Bouncy. I liked your kiss. Hell, I loved your kiss and would love to kiss you again. Preferably for the next few hours.”

“Did you just call me Tigger? As in Winnie-the-Pooh Tigger? I think I should be insulted.”

“Hey, your employee called me Stick, so I get to call you Tigger.”

“Stick? Oh yeah. Stick. Well, that actually came from me.”

“Should I be insulted?”

“Um, nope. Stick as in Sex-on-a-Stick stick.”

I moved closer to Winston, backing him against the nearest tree. I kissed him again. This time his arms wound around my shoulders, and my hands found a resting spot on that pretty ass of his. I’m not sure how long we stood there, tasting each other, breathing in each other’s air, enjoying the pure pleasure of kissing. I could feel his hardness against mine and wasn’t sure how far to push him. I knew that I wanted him, and had definite proof that he wanted me, but something warned me that I needed to take it slow. If I wanted the relationship to last more than one night with him, I needed to stop now.

He curled around me and began to make a rocking motion with his hips. I had to make a choice. Stop now or drag him to the nearest bed.

“Winston. Stop. We need to stop.” I pushed myself away, cursing myself, Karma, Fate, the tooth fairy, and the sandman for good measure.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to push.”

“No, and stop saying you’re sorry. You don’t need to. My God, Winston! I’ve been dreaming about you for the last couple of weeks, since I first saw you in your shop. One week of actually knowing you, and I don’t know what to feel. I was so pissed when you laughed at me, then you show up with this

work of art. Dinner tonight was the most fun I've had in months. Kissing you is heaven, and there is nothing that I want more than to drag you to the nearest bed. But I don't want just one night with you, and I have a feeling that if we did this, I'd never see you again."

Winston's eyes went wide as he took in my speech and nodded his head. "I have classes tomorrow, but I'm free on Sunday. If you're interested."

"Oh, I'm interested. Believe me, I'm interested."

Cold showers are your friends. Every time I thought about Winston, I got hard. After my second cold shower of the day, I decided to distract myself and clean the loft. I started sweeping floors and mopping them. Window washing was next since I had a plastic bag over my cast to protect it. Winston's cover was safely stored in my bedroom, far from the cleaning supplies. The kitchen needed cleaning, including the stove, the fridge, and the freezer. I finished by loading my laundry into the machines, and for good measure, added Tom's and Karla's. It was a lot harder with one hand than I thought it was going to be, but it was getting done. I was dusting the last bookcase when Tom came over to me and placed his hand on my forehead.

"No temperature. Pupils look fine, so it's not some kind of strange drug that you're on. Breath smells minty fresh, so I'm guessing that you haven't been smoking any weed. That leaves only one possibility. Your date with Winston went well last night, and you're going to see him again. Judging from your walk, you didn't get any last night, but the total number of showers you've taken today suggests you're going to get some soon."

I smacked him over the head with my dusting rag. "It went very nicely. He's teaching some classes today, so we're getting together again tomorrow." I sighed as I thought about Winston bending over his student's looms, showing them the correct way to hold the stick to weave with. I remembered what his co-worker had called me, Sex-on-a-Stick, and I felt myself responding again.

"Jeesh, you've got it bad. Can't believe it. You were so mad at him for laughing at you a few days ago, and now you're acting all moony over him."

"He had his reasons for laughing. Did you know that he wove the fabric for

my cast sleeve? Just for me. He's a master weaver. One of the best and has won awards for it."

"You're talking fabric here. Fabric, man. Machines can do that. I'm not seeing you swoon over any machines."

"That's different. It's an art. He's an artist. Combining textures and color to create masterpieces."

The dust rag smacked me in the face. I was swooning. I was turning into a main character in a smutty romance novel. I needed to get out my gay superhero attitude and do something manly. Like challenging my worthless roommate to a game of Frisbee golf. I could throw with one hand.

Both of us spend too much time inside. Me at my computer. Winston at his looms. Granted I have a laptop, and he has this thing called a "rigid heddle loom" he can pack up, but the truth is both of us spend too much time inside. Sunday afternoon was sunny, so we headed over to a local state park, wearing our hiking boots and carrying water bottles. He offered to carry my water bottle for me since I was the injured one. *Such a gentleman.* I told him that and batted my eyelashes at him. He made me carry my own water plus half the snacks he had packed in case we got hungry.

He pointed out various plants that could be used in dyeing fabrics. I pointed out that he had a button nose that was adorable. He pointed out that I had a mouth that was begging to be kissed. I pointed out that he blushed quite prettily when I complimented him. He reminded me that I was the one who had the nickname of Sex-on-a-Stick while his nickname was Tigger. We talked about things that didn't matter. *What is your favorite color?* The things you ask a person when you want to get to know them. The day was spending time together. I did reach out for his hand during a flat stretch of the path, and we walked for a while, holding hands. I'm not sure if I'd ever done that with anybody, except for my parents when I was a toddler. Holding tight to one of their hands was required. This was different. His hold was strong, but gentle. Each finger had its own callus, and one finger had a deep groove in it. It was from spinning his own yarn.

I shook my head over this piece of information.

We found a spot of sunshine for our lunch, and Winston turned those pretty green eyes towards me.

“Why a market analyst? What made you pick that career?”

“I’m a gossip at heart. I love hearing what people think about their neighbor’s new dress or the new flavors at the local ice cream stand. Don’t tell me the plot of the book you’re reading, but tell me what you thought about it. I want the full details. I got into a bit of trouble over it in high school. Told one of my teachers what the principal thought about her, and it wasn’t flattering.”

“Principal thought she was a lousy teacher? Why did that get you into trouble?”

“I may have overheard the principal telling somebody that the teacher was lousy in bed. I may have opened my mouth in a classroom full of students. Believe me; I’ve learned my lesson on when to keep my mouth shut after that. My boss says that I’m the best at keeping secrets. In fact, I know the results of a major survey right now, and there is nothing that you can do to me that will make me reveal that secret.”

Winston grinned at me. He leaned over, pushed me flat on the ground, and kissed me. Hard. His tongue demanded entry into my mouth, and I opened willingly. One hand slid underneath my T-shirt and went searching for my chest. I did not whimper. It was a manly expression of appreciation for his actions. This manly expression grew louder as he straddled my body and pressed close to me. Lips leaving mine, he nipped at my ear lobe and whispered, “Tell me the results of the survey.”

“Sixty-five percent of people can’t tell the difference between Pepsi and Coke and don’t care.”

He pulled away from me and laughed. I called him various nasty names and he laughed even louder. Strange how different this laugh sounded from his previous laughs. It sounded carefree, like music to my ears. The other times I’d heard his laughter, it sounded harsh and strained. My brain thought about it for a nanosecond before my body took over and pulled him back down on top of me. He stopped laughing when I kissed him.

We kept kissing until we heard a bunch of kids coming up the path. The dad and kids didn’t notice our slightly rumpled state, but the mom did and she

gave us a wink. We ended up talking with the kids about the different items that they had picked up along the trail. Winston was able to name most of them, and one particular plant he told the kids that they should leave alone. I pulled their mom aside, and told her about a home remedy for poison ivy that my mother had used. It worked for me and should work for them. I accused Winston of making up half the names of the plants after they left. He shrugged his shoulders. *Maybe, maybe not*, he said.

Monday morning came too early. I wanted to go back to the weekend. I wanted to finish what Winston and I had started.

I was thinking about that in the morning meeting and missed part of the conversation around me. My co-workers were talking about a company that had approached our PR department the week before and asked for help in dealing with a certain public relations situation they found themselves in. Our president heard their story, showed them the door, and told them where to shove their request. She wasn't polite about it, either. Their story? Some of their male employees had cornered a female temp in a copy room. They raped her. The temp went to the hospital, and to the police. According to the men, it was all in good fun, and the company claimed that the men were all outstanding executives with promising careers. The woman was a nobody, and the news was starting to report on how she was going to ruin these men's careers with her accusations. My co-workers were planning on a small celebration for our president, thanking her for her actions.

“We could cater lunch in. Give her a gift card to her favorite store.”

“I think dinner out and skip the gift card.”

“Or how about we take the money we would spend on the dinner and give it to the woman to help pay her medical bills?” My mouth opened by accident. For some reason, I was tired of the reports of criminals being rewarded and bullies being given a slap on their hands while their victims were left with nothing but a ruined life. The room fell silent for at least five minutes. That's a record in this office.

“We could get our PR office to help fight the negative stories about her. Remind folks of what the truth is about her.”

“Maybe we could find her a place here to work. I know that we could use the help, and she might feel safe here. She won’t at her old job.”

“HR has given me the approval to hire a part-time filing clerk. I know it’s not much, but it would be something, and the hours would be flexible.”

“Ray has a black belt, and we could tell anybody giving her a hard time that Ray would be paying them a visit.”

I left the meeting feeling a little pride about what my accidental comment had managed to achieve. I pulled up the news on my computer and read more about her case. Single, young, going to school, and working temp jobs to help her father raise her younger siblings. Her income was helping her family to keep a roof over their heads, while the bastards that raped her were high-powered wealthy men looking for a bit of fun. Sometimes, I actually hated my gender. Her lawyer’s name popped out at me. I knew the lawyer and the firm. A quick check on my vacation savings account showed a healthy amount. I called my friend and made arrangements to have money wired to the family for expenses. Or a vacation. They needed it more than I did.

What I needed was a small dose of Winston.

Daisy waved me in and handed me a bunch of yarn. “He’s in the back and needing these skeins. You’re saving me a trip back there. Hurry now. Don’t keep the man waiting.” She dismissed me as easily as she commanded me to do her bidding. I wondered if she had a military background.

Skeins? Is that what they are called? I would need a cheat sheet if I was going to continue to come here. I walked towards the back where I knew the larger looms were housed and spotted Winston. I paused to enjoy the view. He was bent over at the waist, hands moving a mass of yarn around on the floor. Legs slightly apart with his ass high in the air. The pale gray sweater was falling forward, showing pale skin. Worn jeans sliding down showing off the dark blue plaid of his boxers. Bare feet worked with bare hands in the mountain of colors displayed underneath him.

Every single brain cell that existed in my head disappeared at the sight.

“Daisy! About time, I need that magenta.” He reached his hand out, not even looking at me, but expecting the magenta to magically appear in his hand.

“Um, which one is the magenta? I have four reds and two purples here.”

His head popped up as he twisted around to see me. His stance was all wrong, well, wrong for him; I could have watched him for hours in that pose. He slipped on the yarn and tumbled to the floor. Dropping all the yarn, I rushed to help.

Laurel and Hardy could not have come up with a routine that was as funny as what happened next. I slipped on one of the red yarns that I had dropped, fell to my knees, and planted my face right into his groin. He yelped. Daisy and another employee rushed in. Daisy slipped on the purple yarn and fell on her ass. We struggled to right ourselves or at least get my face off his crotch, and managed to get tangled in the yarn spread out on the floor.

Screaming for us to stop struggling, the other woman ordered us to lie still. She was going to try to untangle the warp. I knew that the warp had something to do with the weaving, but couldn't remember. Not with my face so close to Winston's groin. I couldn't even remember the woman's name. I was going to ask Winston, but he was whispering something while trying not to move. His voice grew a little louder. "...to your left." I'd know that line anywhere. It was the words to a cult classic, "The Time Warp".

Forget about the first time that I met him. Forget about his strange laughter. Forget about my initial anger at him. Forget everything I knew before. I joined in on his song, singing off-key with him. I was in love with him. My crush on his pretty ass had turned into love.

“Warp, up and down. Weft, right to left.”

“Do you think I'm going to remember that? Please check off one the following: Yes. No. No opinion.”

“Smart ass.”

“Probably. Seriously, I'm sorry that I screwed up your warp. Is there any way that I can help to save it? Untangle it maybe? Replace it?”

“See! I knew it. I knew that you knew the difference between warp and weft. I knew it. I knew it. I knew it.”

Winston jumped up from his seat and did what looked like a victory dance around the table. I considered tripping him as he made his second pass around me, but one broken arm in this relationship was enough. Strange how I was thinking about this as a relationship.

“Ray. You’re incredible. After the shitty way that I laughed at you, you gave me a chance to get to know you. For us. I know it hasn’t been that long, but I feel as if I’ve known you longer. I used to watch you eat your lunch by the shop each day. So perfect in your suit. So precise. Never a flaw. When I saw you on Friday, covered with mud and dripping, it was as if you were one of us. Messy and so fucking gorgeous. I wanted to introduce myself before, but I couldn’t force myself to walk the ten feet outside my door to your bench. Daisy was getting so frustrated with me that she threatened to cut my warp. Then Karla invited me, well told me, that I had to come to her party. A simple evening with her boyfriend and some friends. No pressure on me. Nothing. I had no idea you lived there, otherwise I would have cut the warp myself before going. Oh God, I’m rambling.”

I was stunned. The man was scared of me. He thought I was gorgeous. He was watching me when I was watching him. My God, this man created artwork for rock stars and celebrities. He spoke with them, but he was too scared to speak to me? I was nothing. For crying out loud, I was a market analyst who created surveys asking strangers if they liked Product A better than Product B. I was boring, and he wanted me.

“Sit down, Winston. You’re making me dizzy.”

He sat down. On my lap. He straddled my chair and planted himself right on top of my lap. Where he could see and feel the large bulge in the front of my jeans.

“Um, that’s not helping.”

“I think it is.”

“You’re going to end up on the floor again.”

“Can we get naked first?”

“Definitely not helping.”

“I think it’s about time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time for bed.”

“Not helping.”

“Ray?”

“Hmm.” I was busy nuzzling his neck, and I didn’t want to stop to answer his question. Either he had forgotten to shave this morning or he was going for the scruffy look. I liked it.

“Ray?”

“What?”

“Let’s go find a bed.”

Winston’s bed was closer, and it was a king-size bed. The man had a serious bed for playing in. It was one of those pillow top mattresses, soft yet firm enough to hold the weight of two grown men. I pushed him across its width and settled myself between his legs, relishing the small groans that he made. I tried to lower myself on top of him, but my cast got in the way. With strength that surprised me, Winston rolled me onto my back and solved the problem.

“You’re beautiful. My God, you’re so beautiful.” Winston whispered against my ear. His lips moved down my neck and across my collarbone. I responded with whimpers. So suave of me. His fingers tickled down my side with his lips following close behind. I grasped at his forearm and tugged him upwards.

“Liar. I’ve seen beautiful, and it’s not me. Beauty is you. Your smile, your strength, your spirit.” I was begging. Begging for this wonder of a man to kiss me, to touch me, to do anything he wanted to me. I didn’t care. I knew what it was like to kiss Winston. His lips against mine, tongues meeting, and sharing our breath. I’d tasted the slight coconut-chocolate flavor from his favorite treat. Felt the heat of his mouth. Now, I wanted to know what it was like to wrap my arms around him, and stay with him for the night. I wanted him. All of him.

Running my one good hand around his waist, I pulled him tight to me. He laughed lightly, and again I was stunned at the difference in his laughter from the first time I heard it.

“Blah, blah, blah. Enough talking.” He brought his mouth back towards mine and kissed me. Gentle, caressing, and hot. God that man could kiss. I spread my thighs wide, hoping that he would take the hint. He took the hint. I felt him grow harder against my hip.

Taking off my jeans with one hand in normal circumstances was difficult. Taking off my jeans with one hand, one hard-on, and one seriously impatient Winston was impossible. We were giggling with our attempts to get undressed quickly. I forgot the basics of taking off my shoes before taking off my jeans. He had forgotten that unbuckling belts makes it easier to unzip zippers. Frustrated, I shoved him off of me and kicked off my shoes. With those obstacles removed, I was able to get rid of my jeans and the rest of my clothes. The only thing I did not remove was his covering for my cast. There was no way I was going to ruin this moment by showing off that ugly neon orange monster.

Pausing in his actions, Winston watched me strip. His green eyes darkened with lust while the tip of his tongue slipped out of his mouth. He dropped to his knees, running his hands up my calves. Concentrating on the feel of his hands on my legs, I groaned loudly. I hoped that there was nobody in his shop underneath; otherwise, they would have known exactly what was taking place at that moment. I decided to worry about that later, especially since a certain pair of lips was moving closer to a certain part of my body. Briefly, I thought I needed to do something, show him that I wasn't a selfish lover. That I took an interest in my partner's enjoyment. But from the sounds he was making, he was enjoying himself as much as I was.

“May I?” His voice had gotten husky. I wasn't sure what he was asking for but decided that I didn't care. Whatever he wanted, I was willing to go along.

“Anything. Anything you want.”

“I want to fuck you. Is that okay?”

My brain went on permanent vacation. Spreading my thighs wider, showing him my answer, my brain had one cell left with a little responsibility.

“I’m clean. Tested recently but condom required.” I was surprised that came out in full sentences.

The sound of a drawer opening reached my ears, and my body responded like Pavlov’s dogs. My legs went wide, my hips went up, and my cock went hard. I’d make a pun about giving that dog a bone right now, but I won’t.

“I tested clean also. Haven’t been with anybody since, but I’ll get tested again. Make sure you’re safe. Until then, condoms.”

“Me too.” With that bit of business taken care of, I felt a finger nudging at my entrance. Not sure if my pleas to hurry up and fuck me were silent ones or if I actually said them out loud, but I didn’t care. He pressed inward, and I sighed happily. A second finger joined in, and I groaned. I was babbling when he finally entered me. If I remember correctly, so was he. We were loud, encouraging each other for harder, faster, and more. Suddenly, Winston went still and sobbed out my name, and I watched as he came. Watching his beautiful face as he came sent me over the edge.

Our new employee, Sally, showed up for her first day of work the next day. We didn’t hold a formal meeting, but all the men were quietly told that they were not allowed to be in the same room with her unless another woman was present. It was not that the company didn’t trust the men working in the office; it was because of the circumstances of her attack. Our president wanted Sally to feel safe, and when she did, the rule would be relaxed. Sally was assigned to my department since it had been discovered that while gay men may have fashion sense, they do not have filing-paperwork-correctly sense. They thought that by being gay, I was also a way for her to become comfortable around men again. I was nonthreatening. I tried to act offended but was secretly relieved that I had somebody who was willing to clean up my filing act.

HR came around with Sally, and I made sure that I was in an open area, in view of several women. Sally was extremely professional when told that she would be working for me on my filing, but I could see the fear in her eyes.

“Sally. It’s nice to meet you. Please sit down. Can I get you a glass of water or coffee?” I tried to be as professional as she was, but I wanted to hug

her and tell her that everything was going to be okay. *You see, you're working for a gay superhero now.*

“No, thank you. I'm fine.” Good solid voice.

“Good call. The coffee is terrible here, but I have a nice selection of teas in my office. Please feel free to help yourself. Just ask any of the women where I hide my stash. They've found all of my hiding spots.” I smiled, thinking that she would be more receptive to approaching a woman. “I was reading your resume, and I must admit that you're overqualified for the job. But if you're willing, then I would be an idiot to turn down the opportunity.”

“A good filing system can either make or break an office. Even if a company has the most creative minds working for them, they won't be successful if they can't find their clients' contracts or invoices.” Oh, I was going to like her. We talked a little more about her job duties and her hours. I did notice a strange habit of hers that matched one of Winston's. When a large group of people came close to her, she flinched. Winston's habit was more subtle, but it was the same. I wondered if she was shy as he was. Thinking of him, I noticed the scarf she was wearing.

“That's a lovely scarf. My boyfriend is a weaver, and he'd be jumping all over your scarf, examining the structure of it.” Yes, I threw the “gay card” out there. Maybe, if she knew, she would be less nervous around me. The gay card helped. She visibly relaxed.

“Thank you. It's a Winston original. Your boyfriend might have heard of him,” she said. I smiled at her as I made the connection between her scarf and my Winston.

“Yeah, I've heard about Winston.” I brushed my fingers gently across my Winston original, marveling on how lucky I was to have the man himself, and not just a piece of his talent.

Survey question number four: did the product meet your expectations?

Yes, No, No opinion.

Survey question number five: did Winston meet your expectations?

Oh, hell, yes. All three times. My ass is still feeling it, and he was also walking a little funny this morning. I wonder if he's available tonight? I could take him out to a movie or something. Dinner and a movie. Cliché type of date. Are we dating? Does he think we're dating? He didn't think it was a one-night stand, did he? He's interested in more. I know I'm interested in more than a single night. Oh God. What if he was disappointed in me last night?

Maybe I'd better stop acting like a kid with their first crush and get back to work.

Survey question number six: did he like action flicks or drama flicks?

Personally, I liked horror flicks the best, but there weren't any decent horror flicks playing right then. Just a bunch of lifeless paranormal ones that pretended to be real. Boring. Boring would be good. We could make out in the back of the theater and ignore the movie. Rent a movie and stay at home. Make out on the couch.

The ring of my cell startled me out of my daydreams. Chuckling, I recognized the number that popped up. It was Winston's.

"Hey. How're you doing?"

"Distracted as all hell but doing great. I was wondering what your plans were for tonight?"

"I was hoping on doing you tonight. That or taking you to a movie."

"How about I make you dinner and you can do me afterward?"

"I can leave work early."

"Can you leave now? No, don't do that. I can't ask you to skip work because I'm, well, I've been distracted all morning. Thinking of you. About last night."

"Leaving work right now."

I hung up on Winston and sent a quick email to my boss. Minor emergency at home and I was taking the afternoon off. She emailed me back and told me to say hi to Winston.

Busted.

The sunlight was dancing over our bare skin. I could get used to this, skipping out on work early to give my boyfriend a blowjob. Judging from the noises that he was making earlier, I was sure that he wouldn't mind it either.

His body was similar to mine, but it had its subtle differences. He was equal in height to me. His hair was shorter, dark, and curly compared to my longer dirty blonde. Shoulders broader than my own, from all that weaving, I suppose. Slender with just a bit of softness around the edges. I know that gay men are supposed to be all about the hard abs and chiseled features, but I liked a little softness. Hard abs will fade with time. Softness will comfort the stresses of daily life and serve as a living pillow. Personality will last longer, and his green eyes and smile will stay with me.

I ran my hand across his chest, enjoying the slight fuzziness of it. My chest was smooth and his chest hairs rubbing against my skin were like a hundred tiny caresses. I noticed something new on his hip. They were faded, but I could feel the slight pucker of several small scars. Tracing a finger gently against the scars on his right hip, I spotted a written tattoo, "the wise forgive but do not forget." It was in simple script done with light ink. Unless you happened to be studying his skin closely, it was not noticeable. Briefly, I thought about asking him about it, but it felt like an invasion of his privacy. Tattoos can be a very personal item, and I wanted Winston to tell me about it when he was ready. Liar, I'd be on the Internet searching for the quote five minutes after leaving his side.

"Hey."

Damn, he was awake and caught me staring. It was his own fault. I wouldn't be staring at him, if he weren't so pretty. My hand ran over his hip and settled on his ass.

"Hey back." I removed my hand from his ass and settled it around his waist. The damn cast got in the way of a good snuggle and I was looking forward to getting it removed. Winston didn't seem to mind it as he curled up against me. The man was a cuddler. Secretly, I was thrilled and intended to take full advantage of this discovery.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go to a party this weekend. A casual affair. I know it's a bit late to be asking, but it's an annual event that my

family throws. I'd understand if you said no. My family can be a handful at times."

"Oh, inviting me to meet the parents already. You must like me. Yes. No. No opinion."

"I'm taking the invite back. I'll tell them that you were a figment of my imagination and don't really exist."

"Too late, you extended the invite already. I'm getting the party hats out. Wait! You told your parents about me already?" I pulled back from him and tried to give him my best evil villain glare. He laughed. Maybe I'd better stick to being a superhero, if my villain face was going to get laughed at.

"And my two brothers and sister. Oh, their spouses and various offspring. I was having dinner with them, and Andrew asked if I was inviting anybody this year. I think I shocked them when I mentioned that I might."

"Shit. How big is your family and who is Andrew?" I was nervous now. Meeting the parents of one's partner for the first time was bad enough, but this sounded like I was going to be meeting the entire Sherman clan. Least it sounded as though a homophobic family was not going to be an issue.

"I have three siblings, their spouses, and six nieces and nephews. They're dying to meet you. Andrew is my older brother. I'm the youngest."

"You're making me nervous, Winston." Forget about meeting the family making me nervous, the idea of Winston wanting me to meet his family was scaring me to death. It sounded as though he was serious about this relationship of ours. I was still on the first chapter, amazed that he was in my bed. Well, technically it was his bed. I hadn't even thought about us becoming serious, that we might become serious. My history with relationships was disastrous. I'd meet somebody. We'd jump into bed and have a great time. Go out for drinks. After a few months, the sex would become okay, and both of us would move on to the next hot man.

With Winston, it felt different. The sex was fantastic. He was gorgeous, but there was something about him that made me want to hold him close. I wasn't sure if it was his shyness in large groups, if you could call it that. He was fine in a small group of people, witty, engaging, and normal. Get a handful of folks

in the same room with him, and the change was remarkable. He acted as if he was scared of people. Like Sally at my office; she was recovering, but her actions spoke volumes. Running my hand over Winston's hip, I brushed over his tattoo. A thought popped into my head, but I dismissed it immediately.

"Ray? You don't have to go. It's okay." He kissed me lightly, barely a kiss at all. I flipped him on his back and straddled him.

"Oh, I'm going, but you are going to owe me big time for this. You're going to be invited over to my parents' house, and meet my family. I don't have as many siblings as you do, but my mom is a total terror. Word of warning. Don't eat any of her baked items. They are lethal."

He nodded his head and pulled me down on top of him. As I entered him, we forgot about both sides of the family and concentrated on each other.

"Holy shit, Ray. You're going to the barbecue. As in the Sherman Annual Barbecue?"

My roommate was staring at me, his jaw dropping to the floor. I think I saw drool.

"Winston invited me to his family's place this weekend for a party. It's a casual event, and I'm going to meet his family."

"Holy shit again. I can't believe that you're taking this so lightly. You're going to the Sherman Annual Barbecue. Man, this year's guest list is supposed to be insane. Rumor says Jules Austin, the singer, is coming. The president had to decline, but other presidents have been known to come." Tom was ranting. My Winston shared the same last name as the Sherman family, but he wasn't one of them. The Shermans were a high-class super-rich family, billionaires, or multi-billionaire type of family. Winston cut coupons and shopped at the "Gently Loved" store for his wardrobe. He did not belong to a family that had world famous singers coming over for dinner. Or presidents.

"Winston is not that Sherman. He's an owner of a weaving shop, and my boyfriend. He lives over his shop, not in a mansion with servants. For God's sake, he does his own cleaning."

"Ray. The Winston that we had over for the party is Winston Arthur Sherman the fourth, youngest son of Winston Arthur Sherman the third. Of the

fucking Sherman Annual Barbecue family. Did you not know who you were fucking?” Tom was yelling now. He started pacing the floor, shaking his head. “Idiot. You idiot. You didn’t know.”

“He’s not that Sherman. He can’t be. He’s normal, not a rich kid. And don’t be so crude about him.” I shook my head in disbelief. It was a strange coincidence that there were two men with the same name in the same town. He couldn’t be.

“Ray. Google him. There are a few pictures of last year’s barbecue on the net. Take a look and get your head out of your ass. Your boyfriend is one of the super-rich.” Tom flipped open his laptop and started the search for me. I watched as he found and selected a few pictures. I slumped down in the chair next to him as a familiar face appeared in the photos. He was in the background, hiding behind two men and one woman who bore a close resemblance to him. His brothers and sister. He said he had two brothers and one sister. The next picture showed an older man and woman with her arm around Winston’s waist. His parents?

Shit. I was an idiot.

How could I have fooled myself?

What was he doing? He could have anybody, and he was dating me? Was this some sort of game to him? Was it a joke?

My chest hurt. He couldn’t be interested in me. I was nothing but a nice looking body in a decent suit. My job was something that most people yawned over. I was nothing compared to him. The pain in my chest was spreading. It had to be some kind of a joke. What did he want from me?

“See, Ray. That is your Winston in these pictures.” Tom pointed at Winston, and I read the small blurb underneath it. The Annual Barbecue was an event to raise funds for various charities. Each guest was encouraged to raise support for their favorite charity, with some outrageous results. Contests and a silent auction were held during the event, with one local group receiving a huge portion of the receipts. It was a support group for the victims of violent/hate crimes and their families. The fund-raising would help pay the legal fees, the medical bills, or in some cases, funeral costs for the victim. The

volunteers helped the victims with whatever was needed. The charity was formed almost a decade ago, when a brutal attack against a local teen made national news. Nicknamed the Closet Boy, his attackers had beaten him badly and then locked him in a closet. The police had ignored the parents' pleas for help in finding their missing teenager. The media jumped on the story when the kid showed up the next day, half dead from his attack and from kicking down the cheap closet door. It was the same group where my lawyer friend worked and was currently helping Sally.

I ran my finger across Winston's picture. I couldn't imagine what he was doing with me, and it didn't feel right. We came from two different worlds. I couldn't let this relationship go any further. I'd have to stop it. I'd go to the party. I wouldn't embarrass him. He and his family could have their laugh at my expense. I'd get to see him one more time. At least it would be a good story to tell in my old age. About the time I had a fling with a rich man's son.

Why did my chest hurt so much?

I was in over my head. Think of every cliché and I was it. I did my research and kicked myself into next week for being a blind idiot. He was of the Sherman family. I thought he was a normal guy like me. I thought that maybe I would have a chance with him. Make a life with him. I realized that I had fallen in love, but he was slumming. After he'd had his fun, he'd go on to the next gullible guy and turn on the charm.

I snagged a cold beer from one of the passing servers and gulped it down. I was getting drunk. There were gardens in the back, and I could get lost in there. Let Winston party with his friends and let the loser hide in the gardens.

A tap on my shoulder startled me, and I turned quickly. Winston was holding out a plate of food for me.

"Ray, I think you should eat something. It's really good."

"Why did you invite me? Was it all some kind of a joke for you?" I wanted another beer. I wanted to go home. I wanted to curl up in my bed and cry. I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to hear Winston tell me that he never wanted me.

“I invited you here because I wanted you to meet my family. I guess my timing was off a bit.” I saw a server and flagged him down for another beer. Winston intercepted the beer and handed the server the plate of food meant for me.

“What the hell, Winston. What the hell were you thinking? Forget that. I don’t want to know what you were thinking. It was fun while it lasted, and I’ll go home now. That singer guy seemed pretty interested in you. He was flirting pretty heavily with you.” My chest was hurting again, and I was finding it hard to breathe. I needed to get out of there.

“You mean Jules? He forgot his mother-in-law’s birthday again. He was begging me to find something in my shop for her as a present. Each year, the women change their birthday dates on his schedule. He comes to me in a panic and I find something in my shop that suits that person perfectly. Thing is, I have all their birthdays on my schedule and have something for Jules when he comes begging.” Winston took a gulp of my beer, and I looked for another server. I needed that beer.

“He was offering to blow you.”

“Last year, he offered his ass to me. Ray. Listen to me. He’d never go through with it, even if I accepted his offer. Jules is in love with his husband. Besides, I’m not interested in him. I’m interested in you.”

“Why? You’re rich. I’m not. You’re talented. I’m not. You get hit on by superstars. I don’t even get an upgrade to my coffee from the local coffee shop.”

“Because you see me, not my family’s pocketbook. Because after my asshole behavior, you still looked at me and gave me a chance. Because I love you.”

I stared at him, not believing his words. He couldn’t love me.

“There you are, Winston. Can I tear you away from Ray for a second and talk?” Winston’s dad was waving at us. With all the Winstons in the family, how did they keep them straight? “It won’t take long. Hey, Ray. Enjoying yourself? There’s a ton of food up front. Make sure that you stuff yourself. Get some of the honey mead that John brought. God, I love that stuff. Your mother

won't let me have it any other time. Says that all that honey is not good for me."

Oh my God. Tigger's dad was Winnie the Pooh. I was going mad.

"Dad. Later. Please, can it wait?" My Winston turned away from his dad and towards me.

"Won't take a second. Your mother wanted to make sure that you were comfortable with your announcement later this evening. After all these years, she worries about you. She knows that the boys are still in jail and can't hurt you, but she worries." Dad Winston continued on talking, but I didn't hear a word he said. All I could see was my Winston's face go pale. The words "jail" and "attackers" reached my ears, but I couldn't make sense out of any of it.

"Dad! Shut up now. I haven't had a chance to talk to Ray yet. Please be quiet."

"Oh shit. I'm sorry. I thought Ray knew already. Your mother is going to kill me if I messed up anything between the two of you. She fell in love with Ray at first sight, and your sister thinks he's adorable."

"Excuse me, but I'm standing right here." I would need another beer if I was going to keep listening to these men. No server was in sight, and I debated about leaving both Winstons to search for one.

"Ray. I wanted to talk to you before, but I was scared. Scared of what you would think."

"Of what I would think? Why would it matter what I thought? You're the rich one. I'm the poor schmuck that fell for your lines." The hell with it. I grabbed Dad Winston's mead and took a healthy swig. Sweet honey slipped down my throat, and I groaned at the flavor. It was good. Maybe I could find a case or two of this to drown out the pain in my chest.

"Fuck the goddamn money! Ray, I already told you that I thought you knew. Dad is talking about something else, and I've changed my mind. I'm not making any announcement tonight." He tried to knock the mead out of my hand, forcing me to take a step back. Even his Dad took a step back. I will admit that an angry Winston was hot, and I wanted to push him a little to see how far it would go. The other part of me wanted him to shove me and nail me to the ground.

“Son. Calm down. Ray, I apologize, but sometimes my son forgets that he needs to verbalize his words. Let me guess, you didn’t know who our family was. Don’t be too harsh on him for that. All the kids have had trouble with dates wanting them for the money, and not for themselves. As for the other part, well, we have never had to deal with it before, but he must think you’re worth it. He’s ready to talk about it now.”

The second sip of the honey mead was even better than the first. “Fuck you, Winston, and all of your secrets. I didn’t know about your money. You live in a small apartment over your shop and cut coupons. You laugh at the strangest things. You hint at this big announcement that you’re making tonight. What the hell am I supposed to think?”

Both Winston’s faces went pale at my outburst. I was shocked at it myself. I considered myself to be an easygoing guy, but this man riled me up in more ways than I could count. The silence around us grew as I continued to sip on the mead. Quietly, my Winston cleared his throat. “Remember a few years back when an attack on a gay teenager made the headlines?”

“You need to be more specific. I can name a half dozen cases right now.” It was horrifying the number of gay bashings that made the headlines on a normal basis. More people were becoming outraged about the attacks, so progress was being made.

“A local one. His classmates stabbed him and locked him in a closet. I was going to talk about that,” he whispered.

“Yeah, the Closet Boy. A friend of mine is one of the lawyers who worked on that case. She never mentioned the details, but the newspapers said the kid was stabbed and raped repeatedly. She still works for that organization, and I donate to the cause on occasion.” Suddenly, I remembered a tattoo on Winston’s skin. It was above some old scars. Stab wounds. They were scars from stab wounds. I dropped the mead, rushed over to the nearest bush, and emptied out my stomach.

It was too much for me to handle. I couldn’t deal with this, so I ran.

The place was huge. You needed a map, a GPS unit, and a Sherpa to help guide you around the gardens. It was perfect for me to get lost in.

My head was spinning. Winston Arthur Sherman IV was a member of one of the country's richest families. How did I miss that connection? The number after his name should have given me a clue. He was also the infamous Closet Boy from a few years ago. Thing was, I wasn't thinking about money and family. I was thinking about his ass, his strange laugh, his shyness, his kiss. I was thinking about him.

They were so ordinary. His family was like mine. Siblings teasing each other about events that happened years ago. Mom fussing over how tired he looked, and if he was eating enough. Dad drinking home-brewed beer. They were so fucking normal for the amount of money they had. Other wealthy families had TV shows filmed around them, and here's this family who barely makes its way into the local newspaper. Except for once a year when they throw this major party, a fundraiser for several charities including legal aid for victims of abuse.

I discovered several benches and picked one to sit on while I settled my thoughts. My memory gave me little information on what I knew about the family from the news. The only thing I could remember was the "boy in the closet" headlines. The newspapers never gave the name of the victim because of his age, but the local gossip had filled in the name of the school where the attack took place. The Closet Boy case, as it became known, sparked a controversy over the school's hostile attitude towards their gay youth.

His classmates, a bunch of thugs, grabbed him because he was talking to their girlfriends. They dragged him to an empty classroom, beat him up, raped him, and locked him in a closet. When he didn't show up at home that night, their friends started searching after the police refused to help. He was found the next morning when a teacher discovered him half dead from the attack. He had kicked the cheap door apart to escape. The monsters claimed that he begged them for it. The school said that the monsters were promising students, and shouldn't have their academic careers ruined because of one gay boy crying wolf. The media and the activists went crazy for a couple months. Marches protesting the slap on the hands his attackers got because they were juveniles. The school and the families of his attackers were sued when the criminal courts failed to provide any justice. The Closet Boy disappeared into the background, never to be heard from again after his testimony in court.

No wonder he was shy around people. I'd be terrified. Yet, he was brave enough to let me into his life, and what did I do? I stranded him after figuring out who his family was, and hearing his story. Face it. I was pure scum. No, that would be an insult to the scum. I needed to get my act together and go beg him to forgive me. Groveling would be a good start.

I went back to where I left both Winstons. Neither one of them was there. I searched the nearby gardens. I debated about calling him on my cell, but I was chicken. Besides, I had left my cell phone inside. Finally, I saw the older Winston talking to a server. Jogging towards them, I thought that if I started the groveling with his dad, that maybe Winston would be more receptive in talking to me.

“Mr. Sherman! Wait up. Please.”

“Ray. I'm busy. Go inside.” He made a shooing motion with his hand, and my heart sank. I had screwed up badly if he was treating me like this.

“Please. I need to apologize.”

“No. You need to go inside.” The server tugged at Mr. Sherman's sleeve, moving both of them away from me.

“I behaved like an asshole. I want to apologize to you and Winston. If he's still speaking to me.”

“He's inside with his mother. Now, please go.” I was close enough now that I could see the fear on Mr. Sherman's face. There was something wrong, and he was trying to warn me off.

“I would take Mr. Sherman's advice and walk away.” The server moved his hand and showed me his gun. Oh, shit. This was bad. Really bad. I took a few steps back and held both my hands up.

“Okay. Walking away.” Several options ran through my head. Option one, run and get help; but they would be gone by then. Option two, try to talk the server into letting Mr. Sherman go; but my talking skills were failing me at the moment. I had a third option, but it was risky; and since when do I listen to what other people say? Looking for an opening, I spotted one. I could do this. I had to do this. For crying out loud, I have a black belt, I should be able to take down one armed idiot who was threatening Winston's dad.

The gun dropped away from Mr. Sherman's side. I moved my body. My one hand smashed over his arm with the gun while my other hand slammed into his nose. I heard bone breaking and hoped it was his and not mine. I saw Mr. Sherman scrambling free, and I took another swing. My cast connected with the server's head and I heard popping sounds. The server dropped. It was almost too easy.

I fell to my knees, adrenaline rushing through me, and then I tipped over. Mr. Sherman was taking off his jacket and pressing it against my chest. He was shouting something, but I couldn't hear him.

Everything went dark.

My hand hurt. I had hit it on something. No, somebody, not something. Somebody. A server was going to hurt Pooh Bear. I had to stop him.

Pain. My stomach hurt.

I could hear somebody screaming. I struggled to wake up.

I could hear Winston calling my name. I needed to wake up.

Then the pain went away, and the dark claimed me again.

I heard whispering this time. There was no pain.

"You need to eat something. You're not going to be any good for him if you're exhausted yourself."

"I can't leave him, Mom. I can't."

I managed to open my eyes this time and saw Winston's tear-streaked face. He was so beautiful. I didn't want to see him crying. I needed to see him happy and bouncing.

"Listen to your mother, Tigger." My voice cracked. My throat hurt. I wanted some water.

The smiles on their faces. On my Tigger's face. Fresh tears rolled down his cheeks as he leaned over to kiss me. It was a gentle kiss, almost fearful. I wanted more and grabbed him to pull him closer.

“Ouch. Damn it. What the hell happened? Is Pooh Bear, no, your dad, is he safe? Is he okay?” God, I needed to stop calling these people by these crazy nicknames. Maybe I could blame the drugs. A sharp pain stabbed me in my side, and I tried to grab at it.

“Stop! You’re injured. Pooh Bear is fine. Mom, get the doctor, please.”

I heard a male voice calling for the doctor; Andrew, I think. It got confusing. A couple of doctors came rushing in and shoved Winston away from me. I wanted him back and reached for him. One of the nurses took pity on me. She made room for Winston, and he held tightly onto my fingers. The brief contact calmed me as the doctors poked at me. I barely understood what they were telling me, but apparently I had stopped Dad Winston from being kidnapped. Except for some bruises and minor cuts, he was fine. His kidnapper had a broken nose and arm thanks to me. I had broken my cast, but my arm was unharmed. The bad news was he had a gun. Fortunately, he missed my vital organs, and the bullets had gone straight through me.

I had been shot.

By a gun.

Shot.

Bang.

I squeezed Winston’s hand tightly. I wanted the doctors to leave. I wanted Winston to curl up next to me and tell me that we were going to be okay. I wanted to apologize to him for being an idiot earlier. I wanted him to forgive me for being an asshole. I looked down at our joined hands and saw a fresh white cast around my arm. No neon orange cast. No Winston original enclosing it.

“Where is it?” I got a blank look from Winston, and then he smiled at me again.

“You broke the cast on the guy’s head. They replaced your cast with a new one. “

“My Winston original. The fabric you made for me. Where is it?” I was starting to panic.

“It was ruined. They tossed it. I’ll make you a new one. I’ll make you several new ones.”

“I want my old one back. It’s the only thing that I have left of you. I want it back. To remember you by.”

“Ray. Sweetie. I’ll make you a new one. I’ll make you anything you want. And you have me. I’m not leaving you.” Winston shoved a doctor aside to get closer to me. I loved that about him. He’d sit in the background, happy to be there, but get in the way of something that he wanted and watch out. “Ray, I love you. Why would I leave you?”

He loved me. He said that he loved me. He wasn’t going to leave me. The pain in my chest went away. I lifted my free hand to his face and wiped a tear from his cheek.

“Forget that I said that. I love you too, Winston Arthur Sherman the fourth.”

I got a proper kiss from him this time, deep and delicious. He pulled back and grinned wickedly. “That’s Tigger, if you don’t mind.”

My Tigger was bouncing again.

The doctors demanded that Winston step back and let them do their jobs. As he moved away from me, I noticed the wall next to me for the first time. I stared at it in shock, not quite believing what I was seeing. T-shirts covered the entire wall, each one with a different superhero logo on it. There was Superman, Batman, Captain Marvel, even a Mighty Mouse one.

Winston’s mom saw me staring at the wall in confusion and answered my unspoken question. “We weren’t sure who your favorite superhero was, so we got them all.” She reached around Winston and brushed the hair from my forehead. “I know who mine is.”

My arm looked strange. After being in a cast for so long, it was pale white and stood out against my tan. I carefully folded the several cast covers that Winston had woven for me. I didn’t need them anymore, but I refused to give them up.

“Hey handsome. You ready to go?” Winston walked into our bedroom with my car keys in one hand.

“I think so. Are you sure about this?” I grabbed him and pulled him into a tight hug. It felt good. I could hold him with both arms now.

“I’m positive.” He kissed me gently.

We had talked for days while I recuperated from my gunshot wounds. He told me about his attack. I talked about my insecurities about our relationship. We held hands while both our families sat in the courtroom and watched as the kidnappers were sentenced to prison.

We made love. A lot. Lots and lots of great sex.

His laugh changed from a nervous one to a glorious one. I found myself loosening up and dressing in a casual manner. I could see myself losing the suits forever. Even my job was changing. In one hour, my job title was going to change from Market Analyst to Partner and Co-Owner of a weaving shop. My boss was pretty upset about me leaving until Winston promised her that she could have her pick of any shawl in the shop. Winston’s employees were excited since the new shop was three times larger than the old one. My former roommate, Tom, was not as excited as the rest of us. His new roommate, Karla, was a bit more high-maintenance than I was.

A slight tap on my shoulder brought me back to the present.

“Hey. It’s time to go. You got everything?” He waved the car keys in front of my face, and I snatched them away.

“I have to grab one more thing. Meet you by the car?” He nodded and left the room. I palmed the keys and put two matching rings inside my front pocket. “I have everything now.”

“On the count of three. One. Two. Three!” Winston shouted and dropped his stick in the water. I dropped mine at the same time and raced him to the other side of the bridge. “Wait. Wait. Wait. There! That’s mine! I won again!”

He raised his arms in the air and did a victory dance. I grabbed him by his T-shirt and pulled him close. “Okay, Tigger. I know you’re cheating. I’m not sure how but you are cheating.”

“How about one more game of Pooh Sticks, then I’ll take you to dinner. Where you can pay since the loser is buying dinner tonight!”

Laughing, I grabbed another stick from the pile we had gathered and stepped to the side of the bridge again. Two kids from a family joined us, and the four of us dropped our sticks into the water and watched as they floated past. I pretended to pout as my stick came in last again.

“Dinner it is. I guess I’m buying dinner for my husband.” I couldn’t help but grin as I called Winston my husband. We’d been married for two weeks now, and the novelty of married life hadn’t worn off yet. Of course, we were still on our honeymoon, but I had a feeling the warm fuzzy feeling that I got from that title was never going to wear off. Especially if he was going to continue to wear the Tigger T-shirt that I got him as part of his wedding present. It fitted with the trip to Christopher Robin’s Woods we had planned for our honeymoon.

He reached for my hand and held on to it tight. “On one condition. You let me choose the dessert. Hint, it’s covered in honey and is married to a superhero.”

He winked at me.

I winked back.

As we raced back towards our suite, I sent a silent thank you to Ms. Karma and to all of her sisters for that crappy day when I first met Winston.

THE END

Author Bio

Jinjur Louis lives surrounded by her own collection of yarn and weaving tools. When not spinning her own yarn to weave with, she makes up stories to amuse her friends. Currently she is trying to write a novel but is easily distracted by the voices in her head, telling her their stories.

Contact & Media Info

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SIGN OF SPRING

By Kate Lowell

Photo Description

Two dark haired young men lying in a poppy field. The longer haired one looks pensively into the camera. The other, his head pillowed on his lover's shoulder, looks at his lover. Red flower tattoos can be seen on the bicep of the second man, where his arm curls around the head of the man looking at the camera.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I never thought I'd say this, but I'm in love. No, not schmoopy "love at first sight love", but real, honest to god, "you're my missing puzzle piece" love. Who would've thought I'd find it on my road trip across the States? I mean, he's not even really my type. I don't usually go for the tattooed, carefree, "go wherever the wind takes me" type, but he sure charmed the hell out of me in the diner where we first met. He kind of has that way with people. Hell, next thing I knew he was in my car and we were on our way.

We became fast friends, had a lot in common, and the UST between us was palpable

And the sex? Smoking hot. Especially the makeup sex when we've pissed each other off after being confined to a car for hours on end. There was that one time in the poppy field...

Sincerely,

Brittany

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: road-trip, PTSD, outdoor sex, car sex, male nurse, breath play

Word count: 14,490

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Dedication

To Brittany, who posted such a lovely picture I couldn't resist. To the ladies and gents of my critique group, The House of Manlove—dudes, you rock! And to everyone who loves to see men in love—nice to know I'm in such good company.

SIGN OF SPRING

By Kate Lowell

“We’re lost, Justin!”

“No, we’re not. We’re just taking the scenic route. See? Look where the sun is. We’re still heading north. Sort of.”

I crumpled the crappy map between my hands and stuffed it into the footwell, where I stomped on it for good measure. Cheap, giveaway tourist garbage.

Justin chuckled. “Well, now we’re really lost.” He guided the car around a curve with the same negligent attitude that had been so attractive yesterday, but he was going to end up with my hands around his throat today.

“I’m going to check my phone, see if we have service again. GPS will get us out of this.” I pulled my phone out, only to have Justin snatch it out of my hands and toss it carelessly over his shoulder. “Justin! This is a convertible!”

“Robin! I heard it hit the floor in the backseat,” he mocked, but gently, his smile taking the edge off the words. His hand landed on my thigh with a reassuring squeeze, and then started to creep up.

I pushed it away peevisly. “It’ll be dark before we get there, at this rate.”

“So? Relax. You’re on stress leave. Start de-stressing.”

I tried. I really did. But the vision of my phone tumbling down the road behind us wouldn’t leave me. I’d just bought that phone. I started to undo my seatbelt, until Justin shot me an “Are you really going to do that?” look. I sighed and gazed out over the countryside. Rolling hills, green grass, trees and a few horses scattered around for variety’s sake. Pretty, but not near as interesting as Justin. Propping my elbow on the car door, I watched him as he negotiated the curves of the back road he’d gotten us lost on.

Who would have thought I’d end up here from where I’d started? When the other nurses found me sobbing uncontrollably in the quiet room of the Palliative Care Unit, I seemed to be the only one who was surprised by it all. Even the doctor they called to sedate me hadn’t been surprised. It had seemed

like such a good idea, moving from Oncology, where everyone had praised my connection with patients and families. I'd thought transferring to Palliative, giving my support to those facing their final moments, was a way to make even more of a difference.

It only took me fifteen months to burn out—a new record. I felt like a tree constantly poised on the border between autumn and winter, with no chance ever of spring. Sure, there were bad days in Oncology, but there were miracles too. My only miracle in Palliative was that I'd lasted as long as I did.

“What?” he snapped.

“I didn't say anything!”

“You're sitting there, staring at me with a puss on your face like you've been sucking a lemon.”

“I am not. You're subconsciously transferring your own emotions.”

He rolled his eyes and shook his finger in my direction. “There you go with that medical shit. Can't you just leave it behind? Isn't that why you're out on this road trip?”

I huffed and looked back out at the rolling green hills of wherever we were on the road to Nowhere I Wanted To Be.

With no warning, Justin hit the brakes, sending the car skewing over the pavement like a fish trying to flop back into the water. The seatbelt caught me hard across my breastbone, and I couldn't help myself, but I braced myself against the dash.

“Ow!” I yelled. It didn't really hurt. I was just pissed off, though I wasn't sure about what. Maybe just about being stuck in the car since six this morning. Maybe about not knowing if we were actually heading somewhere we could get something better to eat than potato chips and greasy burgers. Or maybe I was just pissed off. At everything. And everyone. And myself, mostly.

Yeah, that was it.

The car jolted to a stop at the side of this stupid, nowhere road.

“What the hell did you do that for?” I snarled.

Justin turned off the ignition with a vicious snap of his wrist and jumped out of the car. “I’m going for a walk.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m sick of being trapped in this damn car with someone who acts like a hungover porcupine. Go walk it off, or whatever it is that you need to do to get your head screwed back on straight.”

I watched him stalk up the road, his back straight, the edges of his tattoos peeking out around the sleeves of his T-shirt. It felt like watching my life walk away from me.

Two weeks after they’d hauled me off to recover in the medical ward, I’d pulled out my credit card, rented a huge old convertible and hit the road. I still had six weeks left in my mandatory stress leave—I was going to spend it on life, not death. So, I ate in fast-food joints and greasy spoons, had breakfast for supper and dessert for breakfast, and I decided where I was going to drive that day while I packed the car.

The other thing I did was fall in love.

Crazy, right? You don’t go out on a road trip and expect to lose your heart. Especially me. I didn’t have enough left to lose—or so I’d thought.

I was sitting in a diner, eating Belgian waffles covered in ice cream and chocolate syrup for breakfast, when he walked in. I noticed him right away, but I didn’t realize he’d noticed me as well until he slid onto the bench across the table from me.

“Celebrating something?” he asked.

I shrugged and forced my eyes back to my breakfast. “Not really. Just felt like it.”

He laughed and suddenly I couldn’t breathe. My eyes flew up to stare at him, and my brain stuttered to a halt as my heart and body took over the operation. We ended up sharing my breakfast, and the next thing I knew, he’d called in sick to tour me around the area.

We spent that night together, in the room he rented in one of the cheap roadside motels that dotted the landscape. The sagging mattress kept me rolling into him all night long and I would wake, half suffocating and laughing

at the same time. Not that we slept much. If we weren't screwing like a couple of mink, we were talking. He could talk about anything. We had so much fun; I didn't want to see it end.

Apparently he didn't want it to end either. The next morning, he was in my car and we were heading north across Wyoming.

That was a week into my trip. We were at five weeks now, and I couldn't imagine my life without him. Which I needed to be able to do, because I was due back to talk to the hospital administrators tomorrow and—well—my old life wasn't this one, and it certainly wouldn't suit Justin's freewheeling personality.

Automatically, my hand went to my pocket, searching for the phone and the e-mail that had been the bane of my existence for the past two days. "Damn!" I muttered, remembering Justin tossing it merrily over his shoulder. I unlocked the seat belt and squeezed myself between the seats to rummage behind them. Mostly what I found was garbage, including my half-empty water bottle from yesterday, but some determined searching finally located it underneath a McDonald's bag that still held a few cold, ketchup-covered fries. The rental company was going to charge me through the nose for the mess we were making of the car, but I didn't care. I had the phone in my hands and, like one of those bad dreams where you knew the monster was waiting but you couldn't stop walking forward, I watched my fingers tap the e-mail icon.

I took my time, reading through the e-mails that had arrived today, as if that could make the other one disappear. Friends checking on me, letting me know how patients were doing. A newsletter from the nurse's union, another one from a cancer group that I'd joined before I made the switch to Palliative. The last one was a receipt for the flowers I'd sent to Ida's funeral yesterday. I smiled sadly. She'd known the breakdown was coming. She'd warned me, as well as she was able to, with the MS taking everything it could from her, to the point where she could barely speak. And I hadn't listened, so caught up in doing my job that I didn't see anything but the charts, the bracelets, and the labels on the meds.

A flick of my thumb scrolled the screen back four days. There it was, the e-mail from Neeraj in Human Resources—*Robin, you have an appointment to speak with Dr. Ogilvie on Monday, June 24th at nine o'clock.* That was all it

said. But that short sentence seemed full of doom to me. Was I going to lose my job for unprofessional conduct? Were they going to shuffle me off into some corner to stare at paperwork all day?

I didn't want to stop being a nurse. Hence the frantic drive back cross-country—sixteen and eighteen hour days stuck in the car while I worried and fretted and Justin tolerated my moods.

Justin. I sighed and thumped my head against the headrest. I'd better go apologize.

Just as I swung my legs out of the car to go looking for him, Justin reappeared over the curve of the hill. He still took my breath away, with his cropped hair and hard, manual-labor muscles. The tail of the dragon that curled over his shoulder crawled out of his sleeve to wrap around his left bicep, glowing in the afternoon sun in luminescent greens and blues. At two in the afternoon, he had a scruff of beard that made things low in my belly shiver with excitement. Memories of him dragging those bristles over the tender skin below my navel and up to play them over my nipples brought a whimper to my lips.

“I'm sorry.”

“You need to come see this!”

We spoke at the same time, and then broke off awkwardly. I stared up at him, looking at the solid lines of his face and the sensual curve of his lips. How could I be so totally head over heels for someone in this short a time? It wasn't even that I wanted to jump him all the time, though that was certainly a factor. I hardly understood it myself—he woke up parts of me that I'd forgotten about, or that I never knew I had. He made me more myself, somehow. When I was with him, the man who lived by the clock and triple checked everything faded away.

To Justin, the glass wasn't half full. It was completely full—half water and half air—both absolutely necessary for living, he told me once.

I got out of the car and walked up to him, placing my hands flat on his chest. This close, I could see the red flowers tattooed on his right bicep. I still wasn't convinced they were poppies, though that's what he said they were.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ve been an ass all day. You deserve better than that.”

“Well, if you’re going to be an ass, at least it’s a mighty fine one.” He reached behind me and squeezed one side of my butt, pulling me a step closer so I was pressed against his chest. “Yep,” he continued. “Love that ass.” His lips met mine, stealing the laugh he always seemed to coax out of me.

Oh, God, I was going to miss him.

He pulled me closer and deepened the kiss. I felt his tongue skate along my lower lip before it slid inside to toy with mine. I moaned and opened my mouth wider, sliding my hands up to grip his shoulders.

Justin pulled his mouth away and slid it over to my ear. “Get in the car.”

What? Oh, car sex. Yeah! “I like the way your mind works.”

He laughed, deep and sexy. My breath caught as shocks of desire electrified my skin. I’d never been with someone who could do things like that to me with only his voice. He knew it too and it only seemed to make his own pleasure more real. With a final kiss, he drew me to the car, opened the door, and gently pushed me into the seat. He closed the door and walked around to the other side.

“Isn’t the steering wheel going to get in the way?” I asked him as he fell into the driver’s seat and pulled his door shut.

He grinned at me and started the car.

“Justin?”

But we were already bowling down the road, turning off the pavement and onto an unpaved country lane. Dust plumed up behind us, a giant billowing cloud blocking out the past as we sped into whatever adventure Justin had found while we were apart. His right hand left the wheel and insinuated itself between my thighs, his fingers playing against the swell of my cock. I spread my legs slightly to make it easier for him, and laid my head back against the headrest, closing my eyes so I could pay attention to the sensations he created.

He petted me through my jeans until I was squirming. I felt the car turn, and Justin cupped his hand over my cock as the convertible lurched over a series of bumps, the unpredictable swaying forcing me into his palm over and over again until I arched away from the seat to rub myself against him.

Justin laughed. “Naughty Birdie. You’re supposed to stay in your seat when the car’s moving.”

“You make that kind of hard.”

He stopped the car and gave me a quick squeeze before removing his hand. “It’s not kind of hard, it’s very hard. Unless you’re packing a gun.”

I opened my eyes and smiled at him. “Wanna see it go off?”

“I wanna see it, anyway.”

I undid the button of my jeans and pulled the zipper down, watching him the whole time. His lips parted and, from the look on his face, you’d think it was Christmas. I don’t know what kind of rose-colored contacts he had in, but somehow he always made me feel handsome, desirable, instead of the just-this-side-of-average I knew I was.

Wiggling out of my jeans was tough while crammed in the car, but watching him react to every twitch and roll of my hips was entertaining. And amazingly hot. By the time my jeans had taken up residence in the footwell, Justin had his own pants open and a hand inside them. It felt dirty, in an erotic way, sitting on the leather seats in an open convertible, wearing nothing but my T-shirt and watching my lover stroke himself beside me.

“Come here,” I whispered.

He pulled his hand out of his jeans and reached down between his legs to slide the seat back.

Good idea. I copied him, but instead of just sitting back up, I made a show of slowly running my hand up the inside of my thigh as I sat back. Smiling lazily at him, I moved my legs as far apart as the console and the door would let me, and trailed my fingers over my balls, stroking them softly and letting the spiral of desire build.

“Holy shit, Robin, what you do to me.” He reached across the car and cupped the back of my head, swallowing my moans as he kissed me. I abandoned my balls and reached for his, dragging at his hips until he grunted and crawled across the car to straddle my legs, knees bracketing my thighs on the seat. His jeans were in my way, so I dug my fingers in behind the waistband and pulled them down until they wouldn’t go any farther.

“Take your shirt off for me?” I begged, lifting the hem so I could press my mouth to the curve of his ribs.

He stripped it off in two seconds flat, tossing it into the back seat of the car and lacing his fingers together behind my head. “Don’t stop.”

“No,” I answered and made a noise that was half-laugh, half-moan. Not like I ever could stop, with his bare skin right there in front of me.

I couldn’t decide where to start. The flat planes of his belly called to me, but I could see his nipples standing out sharply just above my head, and his cock teased at the notch of my sternum. I could smell him, bitter salt and sweat and just a hint of sweetness. My breath shuddered out of me and I leaned forward to slide my lips and tongue down the groove in the center of his abs. I bit him, carefully, when I reached his bellybutton, and circled my tongue around it. His cock rubbed damp lines over my neck and my shoulders as I moved.

He took a long, ragged breath. “Robin,” he whispered and stroked my hair. It had grown out since I left home, and he could wrap it ‘round his fingers now. Holding me close against him, Justin guided my head down until my mouth met the head of his cock. “Suck me, darlin’. I want to feel your throat around me.”

Yessss. I whimpered as he slipped inside. At least once every time we fucked, I needed to have him in my mouth, to slide my lips down his shaft until I could lick the top of his ball-sac while my throat spasmed around him. It drove him wild and made me hotter than hell. I was getting damn good at holding my breath by this point.

He moved his hands to the headrest behind me, giving me the freedom to slip up and down his length as I pleased. I often teased him about his enlightened self-interest, but in truth, he was just that thoughtful.

A slow start wasn’t in the cards for us today, not with my mood. I wrapped my fingers around the muscles of his ass, gripping so hard I could feel the flesh bulge up between them. With the tip of my tongue, I started the process of licking every inch of him, angling my head in order to cover every part. I kept the licks small, but quick, because I was already swallowing in anticipation of driving myself down on him.

He took one of his hands away from the seat and feathered his fingers gently through my hair, dragging the tips across my scalp and down my neck until he could get a firm grip on my shoulder.

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

I pulled back. “I won’t.” He knew me so well already, knew I was capable of choking myself half-faint on his cock, for the sheer pleasure of the oxygen-deprivation buzz and the taste of him on my tongue. It was the only time we ever changed roles, where I became the wild one and he the responsible partner.

Stay with me forever.

I tightened my fingers a bit more and leaned in to bite gently on the tendon at the top of his inner thigh. Justin squirmed vainly to escape. He’s delightfully ticklish there, but he was trapped between his jeans and my thighs, which bound his legs in place more effectively than any shackle. I grinned and continued the torment, licking along the tender skin at the top of his thigh and then sucking on his hip.

“Robin, don’t be such a shit.”

I sucked harder and left a small round hickey as a sort of *I was here* marker. “Don’t, don’t, don’t,” I chided, and smiled suggestively at him, “All you ever say is don’t.” Before he could reply, I put my mouth on his balls and sucked on them as well, though I was careful not to hurt him.

I heard his groan above me and then the rapid panting of his breath. And when I pulled away, he said, “Don’t stop.”

“Another don’t.” I kissed my way across the tops of his thighs and licked my way down to his jeans in long, steady strokes. “You’re just never happy, are you?”

“I’d be a lot happier with my cock in your mouth.”

I glanced up at him through my eyelashes and traced the side of his cock with the tip of my tongue, until I could play it around his slit and watch the tendons stand out in his neck. He was breathing like a runner after a fast quarter-mile and, whether it was the warmth of the sun or me, sweat coated his skin in a fine, shining layer. It made him look like an ancient Greek athlete, oiled and ready for the games.

With a chuckle, I opened my mouth and let him glide inside, tapping my tongue against the underside as I rocked my head forward and back. Small strokes at first, but then I tilted my head down so he scraped over my tongue and pushed myself farther down on him. Not quite to the bottom—that was still to come—but close enough that Justin started to swear in whispers and the headrest creaked under the force of his hands.

I could tell he was getting close. He felt the tiniest bit bigger in my mouth and the words tumbling from him had degenerated into some crazy form of pig-Esperanto. Time to set up for my happy ending.

A long, slow breath out emptied my lungs completely, so the rush would happen sooner. I could imagine the red blood cells, darkening from scarlet to maroon as they gave up the last of their oxygen to the cells in my body. When the first urges to breathe hit me, I pressed myself down over Justin's cock. My lips touched the skin of his belly and I drove myself further down, even as my throat panicked and tried to force him back out. Justin groaned and the sounds he made changed to high, plaintive gasps. But I was where I wanted to be and I stretched my tongue out to rub it over the skin just under the root of his cock, where his scrotum began.

The first prickling darkness swirled at the edges of my sight as I continued to hold my breath. I fumbled one hand down to my own cock, and frantically stroked it. Bright pinwheels sparkled across the center of my vision, which was getting narrower with each passing second. I worked my hand faster and faster as my head began to spin. Justin twitched and I felt him spill down my throat, just as I reached my limit. I threw myself back against the seat, sucked in a huge lungful of air and came so hard I thought my balls had come out too.

Justin's hands found my head, tangled themselves in my hair and pulled me up to rest against his stomach. I let him hold me there while I gasped for breath and waited for my head to stop spinning.

“Fuck, Robin.” Justin turned my face up so I could see his eyes. “You scare the shit out of me sometimes.”

I laughed and kissed his belly, just under his sternal notch, where the curve of his ribs draped across his torso like Broadway curtains. “Only with you, Jus.” I looked back up at him. “I know I can trust you.”

“You crazy, blue eyed—how much porn do you watch, anyway?”

“What?” *Where did that come from?*

“*That* is a move straight out of a porn movie. You know that, right?”

I laughed and rubbed my nose in embarrassment. “Oh. No, actually, I learned that at work.”

“Bullshit. No way you learned that in nursing school.”

“No, seriously. Part of the degree is you go out and work in different departments to get practical experience with someone who keeps an eye on you. One of my placements was in the Emergency Department. And one night, the EMT’s brought in this guy and they were all rolling their eyes and joking. I guess he had a habit of doing it, but he used a belt around his neck and sometimes it got stuck.”

Justin interrupted me, his fingers tight in my hair. “Don’t you ever do that. Never, ever, Robin. Promise me.” He looked truly frightened, which frightened me in turn.

“I wouldn’t... Jus, really. I never even thought about doing something like that before. Not until you.”

“So sleeping with me makes you want to risk your life?”

Oh, okay. I patted his not quite soft cock. “This would never hurt me. And you like it, right?”

“I do, but if you’re getting into that choking stuff...”

“Justin, the thought of putting a belt around my neck scares the hell out of me. But sucking you into my throat and holding you there long enough to make you lose your mind? Yeah, that’s addictive. If it wasn’t your cock, I wouldn’t want to do it.”

He cupped the sides of my face firmly, so I couldn’t look away from him. “Promise me, Robin. If I’d known that was where you were coming from, I’d never have let you do it. I thought you were just being—I don’t know, generous. Or greedy.”

I snorted with laughter. “Mm, yeah. Well, if you want to think of it that way, I won’t object. It felt pretty selfish to me.” I looked down at my legs and

my hand, covered in come. The bottom of my T-shirt, too, hadn't escaped the wrath of the one-eyed monster. I giggled at the thought and started cleaning my hand with the bottom of my T-shirt. After all, it was already dirty, right?

“What’s so funny?” Justin asked, but he was smiling as he did it.

I shook my head. “Nothing.” That seemed sort of dismissive, so I added, “Just happy.”

Justin smiled back at me. “Me too. But I’m also getting a charley horse.” He shoved open the car door and we began the awkward process of getting his jeans pulled up far enough that he could maneuver his legs past mine and climb out of the car.

He tripped getting out and fell laughing onto the grass. I stripped off my shirt and threw it in the back seat before I tumbled out of the car myself and leapt on top of him.

“Hi,” he murmured, a contented smile on his lips.

I grinned and kissed the end of his nose. “Thanks for letting me apologize to you properly.”

The smile broadened. “We should fight more often.”

I frowned at him. “I’d rather not, thanks anyway.”

He chuckled and let his head fall back onto the rough grass beneath him. Here, in the shelter of the trees, the sun could still reach us, but only the faintest of breezes moved the blades of grass. I laid my head on his chest and let my eyes close, soaking up the heat.

The breeze picked up and whispered cool across my skin. I shivered.

Justin lifted his head. “There’s a spot past the trees where it’s a bit more sheltered. Why don’t we move in there?”

I was about to say, “I’m comfortable here,” when that darn breeze came back and snuck up between my thighs to tickle my balls. I changed it to, “Yeah, let’s do that.”

“I’ll get the blanket out of the trunk. Wouldn’t want to mark up your pretty skin.”

I flopped ungracefully off Justin’s chest and watched as he kicked off his jeans and strolled over to the rear of the car. It was an impressive sight, even

for someone used to bodies in various states of undress. I rolled onto my side and propped my head on my hand. Justin worked a lot of jobs that kept him moving and it showed in the lean bulk of his body. With every step, a hollow appeared and disappeared in the sides of his thighs, as the muscles bunched and glided under the skin. He leaned over the passenger door to hit the button for the trunk, giving me an unimpeded view of the back of his balls and the dark hair that covered them.

I couldn't help the contented stretch of my lips as I watched. *Yum*. And even more eye candy as he moved to the back of the car and lifted the trunk lid. The muscles in his arms and chest flexed, the red flowers tattooed around his right bicep blazing in the sunshine.

“What’s the smile for?” He closed the trunk and walked back to me.

I grinned at him as he dropped onto the grass. “Just admiring your vastus lateralis and your biceps femoris. Not to mention your gluteus maximus.”

He bit me gently, just above my nipple. “Ooh, I love it when you talk dirty medical talk. What else would you like to admire?”

“Hmm.” I sat up and pushed him onto his back so I could straddle him. My own set of gluteus maximi fit perfectly within the curve of his pelvis. The root of his cock nestled against my crack and my pelvic muscles twitched in hopeful anticipation.

I drew my finger down his cheek and across his lower lip. “There’s the zygomaticus major, for your wonderful smile.” Thinking hard—years had passed since my anatomy class—I traced the side of his neck. “You have a lovely trapezius. Perfect for sinking my teeth into.” With a small snort of laughter, I did just that, dragging my teeth over the bulge of muscle just above his collarbone.

“All the better to eat you with?” He laughed as he said the words.

“There has been a bit of riding going on in the last month.” I licked across the front of his shoulder and down his arm to the crook of his elbow. The veins showed blue under the thin skin, and I played my tongue across the tender hollow, tracing them up and down his arm.

“Which muscle are you admiring now?”

“Mm, anterior deltoid and biceps brachii.”

“What are they for?” His voice sounded strained now, as if he was distracted, or trying to be distracted. I grinned against the hollow under his collarbone. “Holding me tightly.” When I said that, he raised his arms and pulled me fully against him. One of his hands cupped the back of my head and then I was being kissed like I’d never been kissed before, even by Justin. I could breathe, but only barely and my head spun with it. He nipped at my lips and my tongue, using his mouth to direct me wherever he wanted. I wasn’t hard yet—it was too soon for that—but I *wanted*.

He rolled us over so I was underneath him and braced his arms above my head. The sun shone through his hair like a halo and cast shadows where his muscles stood out above me. I spread my thighs wider in invitation and lifted my mouth to beg for more of his kisses. He obliged, sealing his mouth over mine and I let him take me.

I moaned when he left my mouth to bury his face in the side of my neck. He let out a long breath, flexed his hips momentarily against me and lifted his head.

“You’re like human Viagra, you know that?” He crawled farther down my body to tease at my chest. I gasped and ripped out handfuls of grass, before giving up and clasping my hands behind his head. His cock, hard once more, pushed against the inside of my thigh.

At almost five years younger than me, he often beat me to the punch when it came to recovering. Not that I minded. The feel of him inside was more than enough to get me off, even if I couldn’t manage another erection quite as quickly as he did. So, I squirmed beneath him to encourage some more action on his part.

He chuckled and the vibration against my stiff nipples wrenched a whimper from my throat. “Oh, I like that.” He licked around the areola and then blew on it, laughing as my hips jerked and my cock finally filled in response to his teasing.

That fickle breeze came up again and Justin winced. “Yikes. That’s cold.”

I grinned and wiggled against him. “I’m comfortable.”

He laughed and let his weight rest on me. “Yes, you *are* a comfortable spot to relax, but my balls are talking about crawling up inside me to visit my bellybutton. Let’s go someplace the wind can’t find us.”

I was disappointed that we weren’t going to go another round, but I didn’t want him to freeze, so I nodded and waited for him to let me up. Justin kissed the center of my chest and then, just before he stood up, he blew a raspberry against the side of my waist.

“Justin!” I swatted at him, laughing, but he was ready for me and I missed.

He jumped up. “Get up then, Birdie, and I’ll show you what spring is all about.”

I rolled to my feet and headed for the car.

“Where are you going?” I heard him say behind me.

“Get some clothes out of the trunk. We made a mess of the ones I was wearing.” I turned to see him halfway to the edge of the copse of trees.

“Don’t bother.”

“We’re going to walk around in the buff?”

“You won’t need them.”

My knees almost buckled. I reached out and steadied myself on the car door. He says these things to me and I can’t think any more. All I can do is react and he knows it.

Justin walked back to me, blanket and lube in hand. “You’re beautiful when you do that.”

“Do what?” I mumbled.

“Look at me like you’ve never seen anything you wanted more.”

That’s because it’s true. I plastered myself against him, careless of the whisker burn I knew I was getting as I sucked on his lips and traced his mouth with my tongue. He shoved me against the car door, one hand hooked under my thigh as I tried to climb his body and wrap myself around him.

“Shit, I didn’t plan to do this here,” he gasped in my ear.

“Fuck me, Justin,” I moaned and rubbed my cock over his. “Fuck me now, I don’t care where.”

With a growl, he picked me up and walked the few steps to the front of the car. He laid me down on the hood, the blanket half underneath me, and my legs still locked around his hips. He picked me up again, a harsh, almost violent movement that made me cry out and run my hands frantically over his back. I wanted him so badly.

When he put me down this time, it was much gentler, and the blanket was spread over the car to protect my skin. I tried to sit up, to run my hands over the planes of his chest and abs, but he pushed me back.

“Let me look at you.”

I did as he asked. How could I not, with those eyes caressing me like phantom hands? I swear, I could feel them, running the length of my body, like butterfly feet on my skin. The sun shone on him, highlighting the strong bones and the lean, well-worked muscles. I curled my toes and clenched my ass to control my impatience, but it didn't help. “Justin,” I begged, reaching up for him.

He reached for the lube, never taking his eyes off me. I heard the cap click, and then his hand was between my legs, his fingers pushing inside me. I squeezed, wishing his fingers were his cock, and did my best to ride them. Justin laughed and added another. I saw the bottle fly off to the side and then he shifted in front of me, his knee up on the hood of the car, capturing one of my legs in the hollow between his thigh and his waist. He leaned across my body and used his free hand to push my other leg away to open me up completely to him. I was helpless, immobilized in the hot sun while Justin played with me and made me beg.

“Justin, no more, please!” He buried his fingers inside me, pressing deep while his thumb massaged my taint. I pushed at his knee without any real desire to escape. It was a pro forma protest; I didn't have any real desire for him to stop, but it felt like the thing to do. Of course, Justin was well aware of that.

“I'll stop when I think you've really had enough, Birdie.” He added a third finger and spread my legs a little farther apart.

I let my head fall back against the hood of the car and concentrated on just riding the waves of pleasure he coaxed out of my prostate. He had me pinned

down so tight, I couldn't move anything except my arms, so I crossed them over my face and moaned.

Justin laughed, deep and sexy, and I was free.

“Jus?” I lifted my arms away from my face, as he seized my hips and pulled, positioning me at the edge of the hood. He grabbed my ankles and wrapped my legs around his waist. As I watched, he reached down toward the front of the car, coming back with a condom.

“I don't remember ordering an in-car condom dispenser,” I remarked.

He grinned at me. “I stuck it in the grill so it wouldn't get lost.” He tore the package open and rolled it on with eager speed. “Sing for me, Birdie. Spring's coming.” With his hands clasping the curve of my hips, he set the head of his cock against me and pushed inside.

I gasped and locked my ankles behind his back. Those first moments were always the most intense for me, the feeling of giving myself up to him, of letting go of my need to control everything. As he pushed steadily in, I concentrated on that, submerging myself in the warmth of the sun, the feel of his hands on my hips and the heat of Justin as he filled the empty spots inside me. I watched his face as he eased inside me. He'd closed his eyes and, when I could finally feel the weight of his balls against me, his lips parted on a long sigh.

“Damn, you feel better every time, Robin.” He shifted his hips and my entire existence narrowed down to that point of connection between our two bodies.

“Fuck me, Jus,” I begged in a low voice. I cupped his face in my hands and curled up to kiss him. “Make me yell. I know you can do it.”

“Ah, a challenge,” he whispered against my lips. “Well, sir, I accept.”

Justin began his attack with a long slow glide out and in, delicious friction that made my breath hitch before I bit my lip and let my head fall back against the car. I moved my hands down to rest on his shoulders, enjoying the flex and shift of the muscles as he levered his lower body back and forth. He sped up gradually, rocking his hips as he penetrated me so my sense of him changed with each second. And always, always, as he pulled back, he dragged the head

of his cock across my prostate. I think he liked the way it made me whimper and took my words from me, so that I became nothing more than a mindless creature, pawing at him in frenzied greed.

Justin grasped my shoulders, plunging forward with even greater speed. A high, rhythmic whine began in my throat, timed to the beat of his thrusts. The muscles in my legs tensed and my hips left the surface of the car as I arched into the pleasure, lights flashing behind my eyes to outstrip even the sun's glow. I hung there, poised in that moment of uncertainty for a period of time that felt infinite, and then I came, all my tension and fears rushing out of me in a surge of bliss and a roar of satisfaction. My hips and legs jerked, fighting for control over Justin as he chased his own rapture inside me.

I only had moments to enjoy watching him without the distraction of my own need when he tensed, opened his mouth on a choked yell and crushed himself against me. Once, twice, maybe a third time—I'm not sure. I was so lost in watching him, in knowing that I had made him look like that, cry out in that manner, that even my own body ceased to matter.

Justin panted for a minute, long heavy expulsions of air, and then moved his hands from my shoulders to the hood of the car. He collapsed then, like a balloon with a slow leak, a gradual descent toward me until he could tuck his head under my chin. I stroked a quiet path up his sides and feathered my hands over his back, for the pure joy of touching him in this state. He was beautiful, sweaty and exhausted, the wild stallion brought to his knees by ecstasy.

I'm not sure how long we stayed there. Long enough that he went mostly soft inside me. Long enough that the alternating warm and cool of his breath against my nipple was starting to reawaken my own interest. I tried to think about other things but, really, all I wanted was to feel his weight on me, the sun shining warm upon us.

Justin shifted above me. "Am I too heavy for you?"

I smiled, though he couldn't see it. "No. I like the way you feel."

"Oh, good. I like it here, too." His voice was gravelly, like he was well on his way to going to sleep. The muscles in his arms flexed as he settled himself more comfortably against me.

I traced one of the flowers on the curve of his bicep. “You know, I still think these are poinsettias.”

He snorted, but didn’t open his eyes. “Tell you what. Pick one, and that can be your poinsettia. Robin’s poinsettia. I’ll have your name tattooed around it.”

I laughed.

He lifted his head and opened his eyes. “I think I need to lie down.”

I glanced down at our bodies, still joined, and his chest, brushing against mine. “I think you are.”

He laughed and bit me. “I mean, properly lying down. I still haven’t shown you what I brought you here to see.” He slid out of me, and I sighed in disappointment. I wasn’t entirely ready to be two separate entities yet.

“Come on.” He clasped my hands with his and dragged me, protesting the whole time, into a sitting position. “You’ll love this, I promise.”

I slithered awkwardly off the hood of the car. He caught me when I wobbled, my legs not quite ready to support my weight, or even to come back together again. We were both sticky with my come, so I staggered away to grab my T-shirt out of the back seat of the car. Justin laughed behind me.

“What’s so funny?” I asked him, as I dug out my half-empty water bottle and used it to wet the cloth. Justin walked up beside me while I dabbed at the streaks and smears that covered my chest and belly.

“You walk like you’ve been riding a horse all day.”

I glanced down at his cock and grinned. “Or someone who’s hung like one, anyway.”

He stole the T-shirt from me and laughed as he cleaned himself up. “Not really, but thanks anyway.” He wiped himself down and threw the shirt back into the car. “Grab the camera, will ya?”

“Sure.” I leaned over the door and popped the glove compartment. Justin’s camera was expensive; not professional photographer expensive, but it was quality. And he knew how to use it.

I was about to hand it to him, when I had a thought. “You’re not planning to take *my* picture, are you?” I normally didn’t mind—and we had some spectacular ones on there—but today I wasn’t in the mood.

“Trust me, Birdie.” He grinned, took the camera from me and then captured my hand to lead me around a small clump of trees. A modest house crouched in the tall grass, wildflowers waving gently around its walls.

“Justin...”

He chuckled and pulled me forward. “No one’s here. Trust me.”

I looked at the windows, dark and staring like the eyes of a coma patient. The thought made me shudder, and I curled myself into Justin for comfort.

“You okay?” He stroked my hair, ran a gentle hand down the length of my back.

I nodded into the curve of his neck. “Just a bad thought.”

He hugged me tighter. “No thinking, Robin. Not today. Just be.”

“I’m trying.”

“I know.” He kissed me. “You’re so strong. Let someone else carry the world for a while.”

We stayed like that for several minutes, until I could shut the image of those eyes away. Justin’s arms were a safe haven, a shelter I counted on. *What am I thinking, taking him home with me? When he sees what I’m really like, how long will he stay? Or will he choose to stay, and lose himself in the process?*

Neither option was one I wanted to consider.

His lips brushed against my ear. “You ready to see your surprise?”

I looked up at the house again and, this time, the windows were just windows. *He makes me so brave.*

“You’re sure there’s no one still living here?”

He grinned and wrapped his arm around my waist, the bare skin of his hip warm against mine. “I peeked in the windows. Unless they’re sleeping on the floor, there’s no one here.”

“Oh.”

“Follow me.” He led me around the side of the house, to a garden that hadn’t seen a human touch in a couple of years, I guessed. A few ragged flowers still clung to the lilac bushes that edged the space, while the sweet

scent of apple blossoms filled the air. Wildflowers romped underneath the branches, brilliant patches of colour dabbed here and there, like a drunken painter had passed by on his way to a bacchanal.

“Wow,” I said. Not very original, but I was blown away by the feral loveliness of it.

He pressed his chest to my back, and spread the hand not holding the camera across my stomach. “I thought you’d like it. As soon as I saw it, I wanted to take your picture here. Youth, surrounded by wild beauty.”

“You’re nuts, you know that?”

He laughed and kissed the side of my neck. “Go climb that apple tree.”

I looked down at my current state of undress. “Not a chance.”

“It’ll be fine. Look, the branches are low on this one.”

He shoved me gently toward the tree and, with the help of his shoulder under my butt and a few off-color remarks, I made it up to the branch he wanted. “Now what?” I asked.

“Just sit there and peek down at me, like a wood sprite or something.”

I did my best to follow his instructions, peering down at him between the flowers, reaching out toward clumps of blossoms or lying along a branch. Once he was satisfied, I climbed gingerly down and he dragged me around the yard to smell flowers and kneel beside statuary.

A patch of poppies spreading out into the neighboring field caught his eye. “Come over here, the color will be perfect for you.” He stood me with my back to the open field and the late afternoon sun shining toward me. “Just stand there and hold these.” He plucked a couple of poppies and gave them to me, cupping my hands around the stems. “Put your hands like this and hold them in front of your chest.” He stepped back a few paces and put the camera up to his eye. “Yeah, like that. Hold that.” The camera clicked and he stepped back again, tipping it on its side to take a few more pictures. “Damn, you’re stunning.”

“Oh, bullshit, Justin.”

He pulled the camera away from his face and stared at me. “What is your problem today?”

I shrugged and tossed the flowers away. “I don’t know.” I flopped down on the grass, the crimson petals of the poppies swaying above me. One in particular seemed to be nodding derisively at me, so I grabbed it and ripped it violently off its roots.

He stretched himself out beside me and dropped the camera gently on the grass before he propped his chin in his hands and fixed me with his gaze. “You lying to me, or to yourself?”

Goddammit! I stared up at the clouds. He was too damn sharp for my own good. The minutes stretched out and I blessed his infinite patience with me, while I tried to order my thoughts and work up the courage to confess my worries to him.

In the end, I decided I’d better just tell him the truth. After all, he’d figure it out sooner or later. Better he left me now, before he became as much a part of me as my arm or my leg. To be honest, I was pretty sure he was already, but I might still survive the amputation if it happened soon.

I rolled up on my side, but I couldn’t bring myself to look directly at him. Instead, I wound some of the long blades of grass around my forefinger, tugging with ever-increasing force until the stems broke off, and then did it again.

After the third time I did this, Justin put his hand over mine, ending my unnecessary torture of the local flora. I glanced up at him and knew I couldn’t put this off any more.

“You know, this has been an incredible four weeks.” I fixed my eyes on my fingers, where they combed through the broken stems in front of me.

Justin laughed and tilted his head to one side. “You sound like you’re breaking up with me.”

The corners of my mouth turned down and I focused even harder on the grass in front of me.

“Robin?”

I started pulling out the plants by the roots, creating a neat circle of bare earth between us.

He tipped my chin up and forced me to look at him. “You’re thinking again. I thought you were going to stop doing that.”

He sounded worried. I felt like an asshole. But like ripping off a Band-Aid, it had to be done and was something that was better done quickly.

“I mean, we had a lot of fun, right?” I was doing this all wrong, I could see it on his face, but the words pouring out of my mouth had a mind and an agenda of their own. “It’s just that, my life at home—it’s different. There’s no adventures, I go to work every day—assuming I even have a job now—I come home, I do housework, watch TV and go to bed. It’s not like—” His hand over my mouth stopped the torrent of words.

“Silly Birdie. Adventures are where you find them. Yes, I like to wander. I like to stay still sometimes, too. Depends on the company.”

I flopped onto my back again. “You say that now.”

He crawled closer to me. “I’ve said it before, too. This is how I am. I like you. I know that there’s an uptight control freak in there. He’s fun to pick on.”

I squinted up at him. “Is that why you squeeze the toothpaste in the middle?”

His grin was answer enough.

“You bastard,” I said, but then I had to laugh. “All right, I’ll stop trying to guess what’s going on in your head.”

“Finally!” He kissed me, slow and easy. When the kiss ended, though, it was his turn to look uncertain. “Are you sure you’re not going to get tired of me?”

My mind boggled. The idea of ever getting tired of Justin was so far outside my thoughts I simply couldn’t comprehend it. “Why would you ask that?”

He shrugged and laid his head on my shoulder. “You’re this high-powered, successful nurse. You have all these plans. I mean, you’ve got money saved, for crying out loud. Me, I live from day to day. If I don’t have money, I do without. If I do, I spend it. That’s not going to drive you crazy?”

I thought about that. We’d been living pretty much off my sick-leave benefits. I’d never thought about it before, just assumed that Justin’s lack of money was because he was travelling with me. “Have you ever had any money to save?”

He opened his mouth to reply and froze. A strange expression crossed his face. “I dunno. Maybe. A little.”

“So you’ve never really had a chance to save any money?”

“Never really thought about it. And moving around all the time, stuff kinda gets used up.”

I could see that. I had a good job—maybe, still—no debts, and not an expensive life, except for the apartment. “Could you stand being tied to one place? Because I can’t roam all over with my job. Assuming I still have one.”

“I never found anyplace I wanted to be tied down to. Not until now.”

My heart froze. Which of the small and large towns we’d wandered through had caught his fancy? I forced myself to ask, “Where is that?” and held my breath for the response.

He lifted his head and smiled at me before pressing a kiss right over my heart. “Right here, Birdie.”

I closed my eyes as some huge emotion welled up in my chest. I didn’t know if it was relief, or terror or pure joy. All I knew was that it was so overwhelming; my only choice was to try to ride the wave and not go under.

“Birdie?” Justin’s voice was worried.

I opened my eyes. How did I tell him what I was thinking without making a complete idiot of myself? “You’re serious about that?”

“Of course!” He looked surprised. “Have I ever lied to you in any way?”

No, he never had. He was the most open book I’d ever met. “Oh.”

“So you’ll keep me?” he asked.

“Try and escape,” I told him and pulled him into a fierce, possessive kiss. He laughed against my lips and kissed me back. I let the weight of his mouth force my head back against the ground and let myself drown in the pleasure of his lips and tongue.

I’m not sure how long he kissed me. It was erotic as hell—his tongue sliding past mine, his lips brushing across my cheeks and my eyelids before returning to take possession of my mouth. He’d stop occasionally to run his

whiskers up my neck, making me squirm and cry out, before he came back to my mouth to nibble and suck until I was completely helpless underneath him.

When his hand landed on my cock, I was in such a state all I could do was moan and twitch. My heels dug into the ground as he pressed his palm along my length. He slid it slowly up and down, running his fingertips over my balls with each down stroke. On every third or fourth trip, he'd cup them, or gently scratch his nails over my taint. I grabbed his wrist and tried to keep his hand where I wanted it, but all it did was lose me his mouth as he pulled back to grin fiendishly at me.

“Behave, Birdie.”

And then, *damn*, he pulled my arms up above my head and pinned them there, before returning to the maddening tease of his mouth and hand.

I tugged against his grip—not hard, but enough to be able to say I had.

He grinned against my mouth and pressed my cock a little harder against my belly. I moaned and rocked my hips for him. He rewarded me by turning to bite gently down on my right nipple. The pressure of his teeth on me, as he teased the tip with his tongue, forced a strangled gasp out of my mouth. In desperation, I shut my eyes and focused on not drowning beneath the agonizing pleasure.

It didn't work.

Justin straddled my hips and pressed his cock to mine, stroking them both in a rhythm that matched the frantic beat of my heart. My third climax of the day was approaching, but slower this time, something I didn't know if I should be grateful for or not. On one hand, it felt so damn good. On the other, I was seriously starting to worry about my brainstem stroking out and leaving me a vegetable.

Oh, fuck. Justin squeezed tighter and began rocking his hips, his cock sliding up as his hand slid down. My heart started making plans to leap out of my chest. I pulled harder against his grip on my wrists and writhed beneath him as the torment ramped up another level.

He uttered a low groan, and I felt the sudden heat on my stomach and chest, smelled the bitter musk as he came. I could have groaned myself, in frustration, but with a squeeze and a twist of his fingers over the head of my

cock, he brought me along with him. I arched as well as I could, lifting him off the ground as my legs tensed and my back curled in an almost tetanic seizure. Over the roaring in my ears, I heard Justin saying, “That’s it, Robin. Damn, that’s beautiful.” And in that moment, I felt beautiful, because Justin thought I was.

Justin settled by my side, his legs tangled in mine and his head propped on one hand. “I love the way you look when you can’t hold back any more.” He kissed me, like a fall of petals, delicate and lovely against my lips. “It’s like something you keep just for me. Makes me feel... I don’t know... special.”

I licked my lips and cleared my throat. “You are special. I’ve never felt like this with anyone before.”

“That makes two of us, then.” He chuckled and trailed his fingers over my chest, where the flush was gradually receding. “Robin Red Breast,” he teased. He licked one nipple, before turning away, nimble fingers hunting amongst the poppy leaves for other, larger leaved plants to clean away the evidence of our pleasure. I trailed my fingers over the graceful curve of his hip and waist, fingertips gliding over the sweat-dewed skin as the muscles slid beneath it.

“I want this to work, Jus,” I blurted, surprising myself.

He turned back to me with a handful of leaves and a smile. “It will.” He began scraping our combined fluids off my belly and chest, tossing the soiled leaves to one side as he worked. When the leaves had done as much as they could do, I grabbed the corner of the blanket that we’d completely ignored and gave myself a last wipe down.

Justin kissed me as I finished. “Feeling more relaxed now?” His grin outshone the sun.

I smiled back at him. “Yes. Thank you for this afternoon. It was wonderful.”

“Many more to come.” He winked lecherously at me and I burst out laughing.

“You have such a dirty mind!”

He pinched me softly on one hip and slid his hand over my stomach to circle around my bellybutton. “So much to work with here, Birdie. It’s a wonder I let you out of bed at all.”

Oh, bloody hell. Maybe it'll be worth losing my job, if it means I get to keep him. He won't worry if we have no money. I pulled him down to lie beside me on the grass and rubbed my cheek against the point of his shoulder. "Maybe it'll be okay, tomorrow. Something good will happen." But who was I trying to convince?

Justin sat up. "I want a picture of us like this. In our poppy field." He reached for the camera by our feet and then lay down with his head on my chest, body stretching away from me. His arm curled around my head, his fingers playing in the loose curls behind my ear. "Look at the camera, Robin."

"I'd rather look at you," I said. He laughed and gave me an upside down kiss. "Look at the camera," he said again, his voice beguiling.

"All right." And maybe I did want a picture, a physical reminder of this magical afternoon, with Justin chasing down every one of my fears and squashing them underfoot like so many cockroaches. If only real life worked like that. So I looked at the camera, to please him, but I couldn't summon up a smile. He turned his head and gazed at me from under his eyelashes while the shutter clicked.

"Smile for me."

"I don't know if I can."

He sat up. "Why?" Serious for once, he put a hand in the middle of my chest. "I know you're bothered about this meeting, but I don't get why you think it's like doomsday coming to get you. He probably just needs you to fill out some forms so you can start back."

I shook my head. "You don't meet with the head of your department to fill out HR forms." I didn't mention that I had a new worry now—I wasn't sure if I even wanted to go back to work. That total loss of control still loomed large in the back of my mind. What if I went back and it happened again?

"Maybe he wants to see what you'd like to do? It's not all doom and gloom." He rubbed his hand over my heart and slid it up to cup the back of my neck. "And even if it is, we'll find something for you. Nothing is ever all bad."

He made me smile, despite my determination not to. "You are such an optimist." And maybe I was being Chicken Little.

“Hey, the glass is always full. It just depends on what you think is filling it. Don’t be sad, Robin. Spring’s coming.”

Dr. Ogilvie walked right up to me and held out his hand. “Robin, how are you feeling now?”

I gripped his hand, hoping he didn’t notice how shaky I was. “Better. Ready to get back to work.” I hoped. The thought of going back, even into Oncology, made my stomach sick with nerves.

“Good,” he said, ushering me into his office. He showed me to a chair and took his seat behind the wide rosewood desk. “Admin and I talked, and they’ve agreed to let me handle this. I’ve been thinking about where to place you when you came back, but I’d like to get your thoughts on the matter, as well. I don’t think Palliative would be a good choice. You were very good at it, but you’re simply not the type to let your patients go.” He smiled sympathetically at me.

I took a breath to calm myself. “No, I don’t think I’m cut out for Palliative.”

He opened a file that had been sitting on the desk in front of him. “The problem here, Robin, is that, in the current economic climate, there really aren’t that many openings that suit your qualifications.” I watched his eyes scan down the page. “You have no surgical training, no post-grad courses in psychiatric care. We need a few floaters, if you’d be interested in that?”

I swallowed hard and flattened my hands against my thighs. “I don’t think I can really be picky, after...” My voice trailed off.

“Robin, I don’t want to lose you as a nurse. I’ve already had a few private clinics sniffing around when they heard you might be available.”

“What?”

“You don’t know your reputation, do you? You could walk out that door and have a job in any of half a dozen Oncology clinics today. And I’d certainly give you a good reference. But I’d like to keep you—we have two retirements coming up in the Oncology department within the next year. I want you back.”

“But... in Palliative...”

“Palliative needs a different skill set than the one you have. You’re precise, you’re well-informed, and you keep the whole patient in mind the entire time you’re with them, not just their illness. The mind-body connection can’t be ignored, especially in cancer treatment. Your patients *feel* that connection to you and it makes them fight harder, live longer.” He looked down at the folder in front of him. “I should never have approved your transfer to Palliative, so I have to take some of the blame for that.” He sighed and looked directly at me. “I can understand if you wanted to move to a private clinic. Better pay, more regular hours. I don’t have anything to offer you, really, except the floater or a short term position covering for a sick leave in maternity. Unless...”

I sat forward on my chair. “Yes?”

He closed the folder and leaned back in the chair. “I have a friend who’s setting up a charity hospital in Africa. He’s looking for an experienced nurse to help him get it established and to help him train the native staff. Thing is, he wants them for at least eight months and would prefer a year or more if he could get it.”

“Africa?”

“Chad, to be specific. You’ve got experience in Pediatrics, which is what he needs. The vast majority of what you’ll be dealing with is malnutrition and emergency medical care for teens and younger children.”

“I don’t have any administrative experience, except in the Cancer Center.”

“Are you telling me you can’t learn that?”

“No. No, I can learn it. But, wouldn’t he want someone who already knows how to run a hospital?”

“No, he wants someone who knows how to be a nurse. And you’ve got the administrative basics; this will be just somewhat bigger, and maybe a little bit stranger. It won’t be like here, that’s for sure.”

It wouldn’t be like here. Which was a selling point. But Chad. And what about Justin? “Can I think about it for a day or two?”

“Of course. You still have a few days left. I’m meeting Damien for supper tonight—why don’t you come along? You can ask all your questions then.”

What do you say when your head is whirling like an out of control merry-go-round? “I—okay, that sounds good. Where are you meeting?”

“At the Cattleman. Nothing like a good steak and a cold beer.”

I laughed and stood up, my head spinning with relief and joy and terror. It seemed to have become a habit with me lately.

Dr. Ogilvie stood up, too. “I’ll see you tonight at seven, then.” He walked me to the door.

As we left the office, Justin stood up from one of the doctor’s reception chairs. His anxious look reminded me of how much I loved him, as much as the bouquet of poppies he held in his hand told me that he felt the same way. He glanced between me and Dr. Ogilvie.

I stepped forward and put a hand on his arm. “Justin, this is Dr. Ogilvie, the Chief Oncologist.” I turned back to the doctor and realized that I didn’t really know how to introduce Justin. Was he my boyfriend? A friend? Some guy I was banging?

As usual, Justin stepped in to save me. “Hi, I’m Robin’s boyfriend, Justin Blue.” He shook the doctor’s hand and then handed me the flowers. “I saw these at a place down the street and thought you’d like them.” The twinkle in his eye said he knew exactly what I was thinking. My mouth twitched, and I held the flowers in front of my chest.

“Robin, why don’t you bring Justin along tonight? I’m sure he’ll have questions.”

Justin raised his eyebrows at me.

I cleared my throat and shuffled my feet. “Dr. Ogilvie knows someone who’s setting up a hospital in Chad and he needs a nurse. We’re invited to supper to meet him tonight.”

Justin’s eyes grew wide and, for a moment, I panicked, thinking he was going to call the whole thing off. Instead, he broke out into a huge grin. “Africa? That would be amazing!”

I gaped at him. “You know where Chad is?”

He laughed. “Northern Africa, right? Think of the pictures I could take.” His expression didn’t change in the slightest, so why was I suddenly dragged

back to yesterday in the flower garden? My breath caught at the idea of Justin and his camera, and me with no clothing. And then Justin with no clothing and what we could get up to on the African savannah. I conveniently ignored the possibility of lions. Did Chad even have lions?

Wrenching my thoughts back to the here and now, I gripped his arm with a bit more urgency. “You’d want to go?”

He grinned and then sobered. “Maybe we should talk about this at the apartment.” He glanced up at Dr. Ogilvie. “This is a big change for Robin. We’ll need some time.”

I glanced at the doctor, worried that he might be offended by Justin’s straightforward approach. He only smiled and nodded encouragingly at him. “Come to dinner tonight with your questions. I’ll make sure Damien’s primed with answers when you get there.”

We laughed and said our good-byes and then Justin ushered me out of the office, his hand warm on my hip as we walked silently along the hallway. I was grateful for it; I needed time to think, to process all this. If I let this move forward, my life would be upended completely. But hadn’t I been wishing for that, if only for a bit, just yesterday?

Outside the hospital, clouds scudded across the sky. I watched the patches of sun and shadows chase each other across the neatly manicured lawn and the formal flowerbeds that welcomed patients and visitors to the Cancer Center.

Justin dug in his pocket, coming up with a small paper bag. He reached inside and pulled out a cookie.

“Here,” he said, breaking off a piece and popping it into my mouth. “Thought you could use this too.”

I chewed and thought some more, while Justin fed me, like I was in truth one of the robins that dotted the grass surrounding us. The breeze made the poppies in my hand dance, and I ran my fingers over the silk of their petals, trying to corral my wayward thoughts. I’d been working my way toward change for the past four weeks. Could I jump into this one with both feet?

“What do you think about it?” I asked Justin.

He smiled and tossed a few crumbs at a particularly aggressive bird, before

stretching his arms out along the back of the bench. “You know me. I’m happy wherever. The question is, can you be happy?”

I slumped in my seat. “I don’t know.” I reached into the paper bag dangling from his fingertips and fished out a chunk of cookie. Breaking pieces off the end of it, I started a campaign to coax the robin up to our feet. “I should be jumping for joy. I mean, he wants me back. Regrets letting me transfer out of the department. And a chance to go work outside the country. That’s amazing, right? So, why am I...” I understood so little about my own feelings, I couldn’t even figure out how to finish the sentence.

Justin smiled at me and shook his head. I waited for him to say something, to make it all come clear to me, but instead, he tipped his head back and watched the clouds scurry by.

“Jus?”

He looked at me, still with that smile on his lips. It was only then that I realized he wasn’t going to tell me anything, because I already knew.

“You think I’ve been looking for a way out for a while, don’t you?”

The smile grew broader, and he closed his eyes.

I tossed the last of the cookie onto the ground, where the robin pounced on it, and mirrored Justin’s posture, letting my mind make pictures of the clouds above. “So, you think I should take this?”

“I think you should live your life for you, Birdie, just for while.”

Justin wasn’t going to give me an answer—I had to find it myself. I tried to picture myself, back in Oncology, or even floating to different departments, and it nearly brought on the panic attack that had set this whole train in motion.

But, Africa?

I didn’t know much about the continent, let alone Chad. Easily remedied, though. I’d always been a whiz at research. I stood up and held out my hand to Justin. “Let’s head over to the library. I need to look some stuff up.”

He grinned and let me pull him to his feet. As we left, he poured the crumbs out of the paper bag and threw them on the ground in front of our robin.

One month later, it was our last night in the apartment. The furniture was all in storage and the only things left were some disposable dishes and the air mattress and blankets we were going to sleep on that night.

Justin was already in bed, totally ready for tomorrow's adventure. Me, not so much. Now that the moment was upon us, I was restless, uncertain. I wandered the apartment in only my boxers, looking out the windows at the familiar vistas, tracing the edges of the sills and the hardware on the kitchen cupboards.

“Come to bed, Birdie.”

I sighed and walked into the living room.

Justin held up a hand and pulled me down to the mattress. “Nervous?” he asked and kissed my temple.

“Yeah. Wondering if this is the right choice.”

“There are no wrong choices, Robin. Not if no one's getting hurt. Just different choices and different outcomes. There's something interesting behind each one.”

I tugged the blanket over me and snuggled against him so we spooned on the mattress. His arm wrapped around me, heavy enough that I knew nothing could tear me away until he moved it. “Yeah. You're right. It's just—”

His hand covered my mouth. “No thinking, Birdie. You made your decision, I made mine. Whatever happens, we have each other, and we work through it together.” He canted his hips forward, rubbing his developing erection against my ass. “Need a distraction?”

I chuckled. “Not need, but want? Yeah. Always.” I reached back to slide my hand under the waistband of his boxers. “You offering?”

His boxers disappeared with astounding speed. “For you, it's always on the menu.” I felt his palm slide over my hip and then he was tugging at my own boxers. “Lift your hips. There's something in my way.”

Damn, but he could make me laugh, even when I was tired, and nerved up and questioning every move I made. Obediently, I shifted on the mattress and let him perform his magic, the cloth vanishing with a few efficient tugs.

Justin snuggled up against the back of my thighs and kissed me between my shoulder blades. “That’s better.” He rolled me onto my stomach and seated himself on the tops of my thighs, his cock resting lightly on the crack of my ass while his hands worked at the tense muscles of my back. “No wonder you’re tired. All this tension. I’ll have to teach you to meditate while we’re in Africa.”

“Do Africans meditate?”

“Does it matter?”

His hands were warm, almost hot, on my back, long, firm strokes that gradually coaxed my muscles into a state more conducive to sleep. By the time he’d worked out all the knots, I was completely relaxed and, contrarily, so hard even the air mattress was uncomfortable beneath me.

“Ready to sleep now?” Justin breathed in my ear.

I huffed a laugh and sighed. “Not in the least. But I think you may have outsmarted yourself—I feel like a limp noodle.”

He reached underneath me, making me gasp as he wrapped his fingers around the only part of my anatomy that seemed awake. “Never letting you cook me spaghetti, if this is how you define a limp noodle.” He let go of me and slid down between my legs. His chest rested on my back, and I could feel his cock seeking entry. “Up for something less—Shiatsu?”

I laughed into my pillow. Trust Justin to make a connection between deep tissue massage and sex. “Sure. Just don’t expect a lot of activity from this end.”

He kissed the back of my neck and licked his way down to my shoulder. “I can handle the activity part.”

“Please,” I whispered.

He chuckled softly and began. It was different tonight; gentle caresses that ghosted over my skin, awakening nerve endings I didn’t even know I had. My breath grew shaky as he moved about my body, touching, stroking, kissing—intently attentive to every inch of me. I began to shift underneath him, spreading my legs and pushing back in open invitation. And still he continued, until all I could do was quiver and moan under his hands and mouth.

I think he must have spent the better part of an hour loving me like that. I watched the moonlight through the window, as it crept across the room, and wallowed in the delight he created. Not just the physical sensations, but knowing that he cared enough to do this for me, when I could feel his own arousal, hard and insistent as it brushed against me with every movement of his body.

Then, through the haze of desire and sensation, I heard the click of a lube bottle and warm fingers made their way inside to continue the soft petting, but to a much different effect. I knew now that he liked to hear me, to judge his success by the sounds he cajoled from my lips. I let the moans and the sighs fall from my mouth, clutching at the blankets beneath me as he continued his seduction.

Justin had already brought me right up to the edge several times, before backing off to tease me, when he finally replaced his fingers with his cock. I made a strangled sound as he pushed inside and sobbed in time to his thrusts afterward. Beyond thinking or speech, I reached behind me to lay a hand on the muscles of his ass, so I could feel him tense and relax as he drove into me. Every muscle in my body was tight and getting tighter and each jolt of pleasure drove me a little higher, a little closer to that cliff edge I yearned for.

It was his tongue, running delicately up the ridges of my spine that threw me over the edge. I yelled and grabbed his hand, moving it to clasp my balls as they spasmed and shot their load, taking my brain with them. He grunted behind me, and then made a small whimpering gasp before he lunged forward, the slap of flesh on flesh louder as he let himself go. The hand not on my balls landed on my shoulder, pinning me in place when he forced himself hard against the back of my thighs, as he won through to his own release. I couldn't think, but my body knew what it wanted and it pushed back toward him to take him as deep as possible.

When his last shudders had eased, he withdrew, kissed the small of my back as I collapsed on the mattress, and headed off to the bathroom to get rid of the condom I hadn't even noticed him putting on. That made me smile—not only had I been so out of my mind that I'd ignored the basic rules of new relationships, but Justin had kept his senses long enough to be sure we didn't.

He came back and crawled into our bed, spooning me again. “You feel much more relaxed now, Birdie.”

I laughed. “Exercise will do that to you.”

He kissed me behind my ear. “Good. Now go to sleep.”

So I did.

The alarm woke us in plenty of time. I called a cab while Justin deflated the air mattress and packed it away. We rode to the airport in sleepy silence, checked our bags and had breakfast. I walked onto the plane like I was in a dream and was asleep again as soon as we fell into our seats. A pattern that was to continue all the way to our final destination.

“Birdie, wake up, we’re here.” Justin shook me awake. “We’ll be landing in a few minutes. You want the window seat so you can watch? It’s beautiful.”

I knuckled the sleep out of my eyes. “I can just squish over and look past you.”

“Come here.” With a mischievous glance over his shoulder to check on the flight attendant, he pulled me into his lap and positioned us so we could both look out the window.

The colours were so different from home—more a faded brown-olive, with patches of verdant green. The roads were a funny brick red and, as we approached, I could see that the runways were the same color. I wondered what it was made of. Most of my research had been on the political climate of the area. No way was I going to fly half way across the world to end up shot, or worse. But where we were going was relatively peaceful, compared to other parts of Central Africa.

The airport was small. We’d be stepping out of the plane, right into the open. I watched over Justin’s shoulder as we circled and then started our approach.

With a couple of bumps, we were down and rolling toward a small low building. Bright sunshine flashed off the windows, blinding me momentarily. The seatbelt sign finally went off, and we were able to stretch tired limbs and retrieve our belongings from the overhead compartment.

The plane slowly emptied, and we made our awkward way toward the front, bags and hips bumping against the seats in the narrow passage. I could smell something different in the air; a wildness that you didn't get back home. When I got to the door, I paused, caught up in the sights and sounds of our new home.

Justin stepped up behind me. "What do you think, Birdie?"

I twisted my head back to look at him. "I love it." Then I kissed him and added, "Thank you for making me brave."

"You were always brave, Robin. You just couldn't see it." He put a hand on my hip and urged me down onto the ground. At the bottom, our new boss, Damien, waited in a battered Jeep. I turned to look back at Justin, whose delighted grin shone easily as brightly as the sun. Maybe Justin wasn't the only one who'd found a home where he least expected it. I paused at the bottom of the stairs to pat the center of his chest and drop a brief kiss on his lips, before turning to climb into the Jeep and plunge into adventure.

THE END

Author Bio

Kate Lowell absolutely despises writing author bios. She'd rather be writing something she can make up. But, she can tell you that she's had a long and varied career, working in the fields of both human and veterinary medicine, has taught at all levels of education (including post-secondary) and currently lives on an organic farm in the middle of nowhere. She has one rescue cat, and two ponies, one of whom was also a rescue. Plus the assorted pigs, hens, ducks, geese, dogs, and cows that populate the farm itself. In the winter, she writes in the sunniest corner of the kitchen. In the summer, the whole shebang moves outdoors to the back deck, where many words are written and almost as many glasses of wine are drunk. Which probably explains some of the words. She has the attention span of a gnat with ADD, so she likes to switch genres a LOT. And don't ask her about squirrels. Or peanut butter.

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OFF GUARD

By Ali MacLagan

Photo Description

This prompt included two pictures. The first was a chiseled man with dark blond hair and blue eyes. His mouth is curved up in the smallest of smirks.

The second picture features a young man with dark hair. The only thing he is wearing is a pair of black briefs and he's bending over a sink displaying his ass to the camera.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am a bodyguard, an ex-marine. I have not had the time or inclination for relationships, preferring the occasional casual meeting with other men like me. Until now... until him... my new assignment.

He is utterly shameless. He drives me crazy. How did this happen to me? I'm falling for a twink.

Sincerely,

Susan A

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: bodyguard, twink, car bombing, kidnapping/abduction, shower masturbation, homophobia, revenge, mild PTSD

Content warning: mid-level violence

Word count: 23,995

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OFF GUARD

By Ali MacLagan

Joe scanned the crowd looking for his new client. The new client who had texted him saying something came up and he couldn't meet him at the condo, and would be at this address after nine. Joe was going to wring said new client's scrawny, freakin' neck.

Joe thought back to the file he'd received:

Nicholas Daniels. Twenty-three years old. Five foot eleven, brown hair, hazel eyes. Attended Columbia as an undergrad and graduated with honors. He then moved back home to Chicago, where he bought a condo in the Loop and was studying law at Northwestern. His parents were Michael and Dianne Daniels of Kenilworth. Michael was a tenured history professor at University of Chicago. Dianne was a federal judge.

And that's where the trouble started.

Judge Daniels had held her position for fourteen years. She was respected by most of her colleagues and had the well-earned reputation of being a hard-ass. She rarely showed leniency to those who were found guilty in her courtroom. Over the years, she had received her fair share of "fan mail". Letters that would threaten her safety in one way or another. All the letters had been investigated, and dealt with by the authorities. Then last month, a new fan had made himself known. Four letters, one a week, each describing in exacting detail what this fan would do to her when she was least expecting it. All and all, the letters were pretty standard, as far as hate mail went. Blah, blah, tie you up, blah, blah, kill you bitch, etc, etc. The content wasn't what had the judge worried. It was the fact that these letters had arrived at her home, not her office where letters from other fans had been sent. Security had been heightened around the judge. Alarm codes changed, armed escort to and from work, and cops making drive-bys throughout the night. All standard protocol. Then another envelope arrived. The contents of this one had shaken the judge. Four words were printed: *Your son for Mine*. With the brief note were pictures of Nicholas in various places in the city. In the parking garage by his

apartment. Walking into the law school. Picking out an avocado at Whole Foods. In each photo, there was a big red X drawn across Nicholas's face.

The FBI had been called. They took the letters, questioned the judge, her husband, and her son. No one had noticed anything out of the ordinary. The FBI told the judge that the Chicago PD would add her son's address as a scheduled drive-by, but neither the agency nor the police department could offer round-the-clock protection. No one had actually been harmed, and Nicholas was not a federal employee, therefore he was not eligible for protection unless an attempt to harm him was actually made. They were told to lay low, remain vigilant, and call if anything seemed amiss. When Judge Daniels protested the lack of protection—vehemently—one of the agents gave her a card and referred her to Joe's agency.

She'd made the call immediately. And Joe went out to meet the woman and her husband at their home in Kenilworth. Nicholas wasn't there for the meeting. His parents were apologetic. Joe was irritated, though he did his best not to show it. *How was he supposed to protect a man who couldn't be bothered to show up to meet him?* Professor Daniels explained Nicholas had something pressing at the law school that he was unable to get out of. The three of them went over the details, everything that was known. The judge had more than her fair share of people who might want to harm her, so the suspect list was still rather long, though the FBI was chipping away at it and had given assurances that it would remain a priority. After they exchanged information about how to reach one another, the judge assured Joe that she would call Nicholas and tell him to expect a call and to be home by seven so Joe could meet him at the condo. They shook hands and Joe left. Once he reached his car, he exhaled loudly and let his shoulders slump. Extreme wealth made him nervous, his skin itch. He could probably fit four of his small Naperville home into the Daniels' large Kenilworth one. He'd gotten in his beat-up SUV and headed back to the city.

Joe figured that Nicholas was going to be a challenge. The picture in the file had shown a handsome young man in a well-cut grey suit, white shirt and purple tie, standing in front of a late model silver Audi. Like the car, the man in the photo was sleek, lithe, and exuded confidence. He was attractive and

knew it. He also had little concern or respect in regard to the threats against him, demonstrated by his reluctance to wait at the condo for Joe, and not bothering to show up as his mother had originally requested.

There was one other thing that Joe knew that hadn't been included in the file. Nicholas was gay.

Joe knew immediately what he'd find when he saw the address in the text. A former lover had liked dancing and the nightlife, and Joe had found himself in this same club more than once before. And like before, the bodies were hot and crowded. Sweating and gyrating on the dance floor to the ever-present thumping bass that pounded out of the speakers. Finding Nicholas here, having never met him, would be a feat in and of itself. But when Joe found him, *and he would find him*, he was going to strangle him, and then he would have a long, detailed, and professional conversation with the boy about the definition of "laying low".

The lights on the ceiling swung around, illuminating various areas of the crowd in their bright colors. Beyond the dance floor, to the left, there were a few cages up on a platform with twinks dressed in leather trying to attract a daddy for the night. Opposite the cages was a runway-like platform with three steel poles running to the ceiling. One of the spotlights had zeroed in on the center one. Bodies on the dance floor slowly migrated right and turned to watch whoever was currently putting on the show. Joe started to move through the crowd, ignoring the grabbing hands and slurred come-ons thrown his way. He should have left his leather jacket in the car. He felt the sweat beading on his neck and dampening the back of his navy button-down.

He made his way to the bathrooms in the back, but the only thing he found was one of the leather-clad twinks on his knees enthusiastically lapping the uncircumcised cock of a big man who had his hand tangled in the boy's blond hair. Joe's eyes drifted from the twink up to the owner of the cock. The man opened his bright blue eyes and looked right at Joe. He was gorgeous. Broad shoulders, thick legs, tight stomach. The man quirked the side of his mouth and winked; Joe cocked his head and quirked his own mouth in response. He turned and made his exit as the man's head fell back against the stall, and his eyes fell closed again. *Maybe next time*. He headed back to the mass of bodies,

intent on finding the one body he was looking for. His pants a bit tighter now than when he'd left.

The crowd around the center pole had grown. Nicholas was nowhere to be seen so Joe made his way across to join the others, thinking that maybe his client was somehow camouflaged in the mass of men. As he pushed his way closer, looking at each face as he passed, he could see the men were captivated by whatever show was being put on. Drool was dripping from more than one mouth. Joe turned his head to look. Leaning against the pole, with his back to his audience, was the man drawing all the attention. The man was wearing skintight black jeans that made Joe wonder how he could even move in them, let alone dance. Sweat had made the purple T-shirt the dancer wore cling to his back; it climbed its way up as he shimmied slowly down the pole, exposing his nicely tanned back and a hint of what appeared to be a thong. The dancer danced his way up, only instead of his back against the pole, it was his ass, and the man bent forward so the pole nestled right between his jean-clad cheeks. The men around Joe started to swoon. Joe rolled his eyes. He didn't get off on the attention seekers. *The guy getting blown in the bathroom however... hmmm.* Joe looked around at the faces again, and not seeing his client, he headed to the bar. He figured eventually the man would want to find himself a drink.

He took a step, and suddenly he couldn't see anything. Cloth covered his face. He reached up to pull it off and realized it was the purple T-shirt the dancer had been wearing. Joe looked back at the dancer. He'd turned around and those jeans were displaying everything to the thirty or so men who had crowded around, each and every one of them ready to lick his toes and anything else he offered them. Joe's eyes continued up the lean-but-muscled torso, and on up further until they reached the long angular face surrounded by sweat soaked, dark brown hair. Hazel eyes smiled directly at him. *Fuck.*

Hello, Nicholas Daniels.

Nick wondered how long it would take the hired Neanderthal to find him. His mom had sent him a photo so he'd know who to look for. Nick had seen him as soon as he'd entered the bar. That's when he'd made the decision to put

on his little show. The man was attractive. Short blond hair, goatee. Deep-set blue eyes. Maybe Neanderthal was not quite the right term. He looked a bit like a modern day Viking. Beautiful and brutal. But, Jesus, the man was tense, intense. Shoulders pulled back tight, jaw set, furrow between his eyes that were set intently upon the crowd. Nick had ducked every time the man's eyes turned his way. Nick wasn't going down without a fight. From the glare the Neanderthal/Viking was giving him, he could tell, it was going to be one hell of a fight.

Nick brought two fingers to his lips and blew the man a kiss.

Nick didn't think Mr. Viking—Joe, his mom had said—could get any tenser, but he was wrong. The man's face turned bright red. The deep furrow between his brows got deeper, the shoulders tenser. He jerked his head towards the bar, with a force that made Nick wonder if Joe the Viking had given himself a concussion. Joe started that way, obviously expecting Nick to follow.

Nick decided to appease him, at least this once, and squeezed his way through his throng of admirers, pausing along the way to shove his tongue down the throat of a hot brunet who grabbed his ass. The guy started rubbing up and down Nick like he was the pole he'd just abandoned. Forgetting all else, except his own super-hard dick, Nick rubbed back. His tongue intensified its assault and Nick could feel the vibration from the guy's moans, which only made him try to shove his tongue deeper and his erection closer. And that's how Joe found him.

“Excuse me.”

Nick looked up to see Joe tapping the brunet's shoulder.

“Back off, buddy.” The brunet said to him, releasing Nick's mouth and moving on to devour his throat. Nick leaned back to give him more room and let his hands drift down to the brunet's waistband. Nick let his head fall back and looked up at Joe with a smirk. Man, you could almost see the steam coming out of the Viking's ears. He'd be lucky if he had any teeth left, he was grinding them so hard. Nick thought he should give Joe the number of his dentist. Maybe his massage therapist too.

Looking down at Nick, Joe narrowed those deep-set blue eyes and then quickly looked back up at the brunet who was doing a Hoover impression on Nick's neck. "No, you back off."

Oooh, Mr. Viking was getting testy.

Joe grabbed the guy's shoulder this time and pried him away from Nick's body.

"Hey!" The guy glared at Joe and squared his shoulders. A tingle went down Nick's spine. There was something oh-so-appealing about two alphas squaring off over him. Of course, it would be better if it was because they both wanted to fuck him. *Sadly, not the case.* One certainly did. The other probably didn't want to fuck him, but Nick was quite positive at this point, Joe wanted to fling him over one of those broad shoulders, carry him off to some cabin in the middle of nowhere and leave him tied up in a corner, while he guarded the door against any boogeymen. And while certain aspects of that scenario sounded appealing, most did not. *Not middle of nowhere, and not Mr. Straight Neanderthal.*

Joe took a step towards the brunet and Nick decided he should probably intervene, so he stepped between the two and put a hand on each man's chest.

"Whoa, fellas. Okay, Joe right? Let's go talk." He turned to the brunet. "Got a phone?"

"Yeah," the guy said, reaching in his back pocket and handing the phone over to Nick, while still determined to win the staring contest with Joe. Nick pointed the camera at himself, puckered his lips in a kiss, and snapped a photo. He proceeded to punch in his number before handing the phone back to the guy, reaching up, grabbing the guy's head and pulling it down for a hot, wet, sloppy kiss and then turned around. The guy's hands were still around him. They ran up his chest and pinched his nipples with a little twist before they started to migrate down towards his straining cock. Nick turned his head into the guy's neck, still writhing against him, and licking the outside of the man's ear.

"Call me, so we can finish what we've started." Nick looked up at the guy who was shooting daggers at Joe over Nick's shoulder. He rubbed one more

time against the brunet and felt the guy's erection right against his ass. Nick narrowed his eyes and shot daggers of his own at Joe, before he released his would-be-lover and took a step towards Mr. Neanderthal, who was currently mid eye-roll.

Whatever.

Looking up at him, Nick raised his hand and pointedly jabbed his two fingers into Joe's solar plexus. He heard the man suck in a rough breath.

"You! Let's go." Nick grabbed his shirt that was still in Joe's hand and walked off with his head high and his back straight. He didn't really give a damn if Joe was following him or not. He pulled his shirt on when he reached the door, gave the doorman a good-bye peck on the cheek, and then headed out into the crisp Chicago night without a single backwards glance.

Nick took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. He was pissed, hot, and horny. He exhaled and heard a throat clear. He turned around to find the Viking looking at him like he wanted to put him over his knee and spank him. *Uh, no thanks.*

"Joe Madsen." The man said as he reached his right hand out and held up an ID with his left hand. Nick face felt pinched as he glanced up at the ID, and then extended his hand to shake Joe's.

"Nick Daniels." Joe's grip was firm. Nick looked him in the eyes and tried to remove his hand only to be pulled in close. He could feel Joe's breath on his face as the man's nostrils flared. *Whoa, he was pissed.*

"Nice to meet you, Nick. Now let's go have ourselves a chat, shall we?"

Well, that went well. Joe thought to himself. He ran a hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. They'd made the ride down to the Loop in total silence. His passenger had sat ramrod straight in his seat, looking directly ahead the whole time; occasionally he would let out a dramatic breath and turn to throw a glare at Joe. *Great. Just what I need, a melodramatic, freakin' twink. The FBI better catch this perp quick. There are only so many episodes of Glee I can stand.*

Joe sat on a bar stool at the island in Nick's kitchen. His elbows rested on the counter as he scrubbed his face with his hands. Nick flitted, *fucking flitted*,

around the kitchen. He grabbed a glass and poured himself some red wine before moving over to flip through the pages of a cookbook. Pointedly ignoring Joe.

“Listen,” Joe started. “I know this isn’t the most ideal situation, but someone out there wants to hurt you. And it’s my job to stop them. I won’t purposefully try to cramp your style or impede your freedom, but unfortunately, until they stop this whacko, that is probably what is going to happen. The more unnecessary risks you take, the more opportunities you give him to be successful in his mission. The FBI is working leads. The Chicago PD is backing them up as necessary. With any luck this will be over before too long, and you can go back to your life in the clubs or wherever else it is that you want to be.”

Nick looked up from the cookbook and took a sip of his wine. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know.”

Joe kept his voice calm and his body relaxed. Losing his temper would probably get him nowhere. “Look, can we just go over your daily routine and figure out how, at least for now, things are going to have to change?”

Nick looked at him like he was a principal who had just called him into his office for chewing gum. Then he turned and walked out of the kitchen and down the hall. Joe sat and sighed. Nick came out a minute later. He’d changed into dark blue jeans and a button down purple shirt that he’d left untucked. He came over to the counter, grabbed his keys, and without a word, headed to the door.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” Joe stood up quickly and grabbed Nick’s arm. “Nick, stop.”

Nick blew his bangs up and out of his eyes. “I have plans. Stuff to do.”

Joe stood back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Oh, like the pressing matter you had this afternoon. The pressing matter that caused you to miss the meeting with your parents?”

“Ha!” Nick threw his head back and sniggered. “Mom has such a way of putting things. Though I suppose she did tell the truth even if she didn’t know it. There was a *pressing* matter. It was my face. It was pressed into the desk

while my professor plowed into me from behind.” He held his hand out, looked down at his nails and deadpanned, “I’m getting an A in that class.”

Was this kid for real? Joe opened his mouth and shut it. He had no idea what to say. He shook his head and looked down at the floor. *How the fuck do I get through to the brat?* Joe took a deep breath and lifted his head. Nick was gone. The door left wide open. *Fuck.*

Joe raced out the door, slamming it behind him. He rounded the corner and caught a glimpse of Nick’s foot as he stepped into the elevator. Adrenaline pumping, he took off like a shot and reached the elevator only to watch the doors seal shut. He let out a loud curse and banged on the elevator doors before he turned and headed down the stairwell.

Seven flights later, he banged open the door into the parking structure. Nick was strutting down the middle of the ramp. Joe could see the Audi at the end. He sprinted off, his breath labored until he finally was able to put himself between Nick and the Audi that was still thirty feet away.

“Stop!” He held up a hand to emphasize. “Where do you think you’re going?” His breathing was still strained, but he didn’t have time to catch it. He’d rest when he got Nick back up to the apartment. He’d carry the brat if he had to.

“I have plans. I’m heading up to the North Shore to meet some friends.” He rolled his eyes and waved his hand in the air, in some exasperated motion. His voice seemed to reach soprano and there was that singsong quality to it, which wore on Joe’s nerves like nails on a chalkboard. “Just a small get-together at a friend’s apartment. Let’s call it a study session, shall we?”

“No, we shall not. What we *shall* do is go back upstairs and have a little heart-to-heart about what it means to have your life threatened by some unknown psycho.” Joe’s face felt hot. He had better things to do than stand in the middle of a parking garage arguing with some twink. Especially since said twink was the one he was supposed to be protecting, and the parking garage was not exactly the most secure of locations.

Nick let out a long sigh, looking down at the key fob he was holding in his hand. “If I can’t live my life, if I can’t do what I want to do when I want to do

it, unknown psycho guy wins.” Thankfully, Nick’s voice had come down a few octaves. He looked back up at Joe, cocked his head, and wrinkled his forehead. His eyes looked as if he were begging Joe to understand. Joe didn’t buy it.

Joe stared at him, his muscles tense. He’d heard this rationale before. “No, unknown psycho guy wins when you’re dead. I am getting paid to make sure that doesn’t happen. I am here to keep your ass safe. Keep you safe from whoever it is threatening you, and if necessary keep you safe from yourself.”

Nick took a step towards Joe, his head tilted down, still looking at the keys. Slowly, he looked up through his dark bangs. Joe saw the greens and browns swirling in those hazel eyes. He held Nick’s gaze and wondered what he was thinking. Nick reached out with his right hand, and his fingers slowly walked up the buttons of Joe’s shirt. Joe’s breath caught.

“Aw, sugar. That’s sweet, but who’s going to keep my ass safe from you?” To punctuate the statement, Nick stretched his neck and pressed his lips so very softly against Joe’s own. Then he took the tip of his tongue and ran it over Joe’s upper lip.

Holy fuck. Who is going to protect me from Nick might be a better question.

Nick pulled away and smirked at Joe, who was standing there dumbfounded, trying to get his voice to work. Nick took a step to the side and pressed the button on the key fob. Joe was thrown forward into Nick, the breath knocked out of him completely for the second time. His back felt hot; a painful prickle hit the back of his legs.

Shit. The car just blew up.

What the fuck? Joe tried to open his eyes; they felt heavy. He was hot, and the smells of a mechanic’s garage on a hot summer’s day reached his nose. Only it was more than that. Everything sounded muffled. He couldn’t hear any traffic. What the fuck had just happened? Why was he lying on the ground? He felt the rough concrete under his hands, but his head was on something more cushioned. He finally managed to pry his eyelids open, but all he could see was purple. *Purple?*

“Oh fuck! Nick!” Joe’s voice sounded too loud. He propped himself up and looked down. Nick’s eyes were shut. His head lolled off to the side. Blood ran from a cut on his forehead and down the length of his thigh where his jeans had shredded. “Nick!” He moved up and put his ear next to Nick’s mouth while watching his chest. He saw the slow rise and fall and felt Nick’s breath on his face. *Thank God.* Joe’s eyes drifted over to where Nick’s car had been. Twisted metal and melted tires were all that was left.

“Shit, we need to get out of here. Nick, hey Nicky, can you hear me?” He tapped Nick’s cheek with his hand a couple times. No response. “Shit.” Gently, he took his hands and felt down the sides of Nick’s neck. Everything felt like it should. It was risky, but he’d have to take the chance. He didn’t know whether or not anyone was watching, waiting to finish the job.

Joe shook his head, trying to get rid of the cobwebs that the blast had put there. He looked around. Nick’s car was a skeleton and the cars next to it didn’t look much better. He moved into a crouch, ignoring the pain shooting from his back and down through his legs. He felt the adrenaline rush as he scooped Nick up as gently as he could, one arm under his knees and the other supporting his shoulders. Another look around and Joe took off towards his car, suddenly thankful to have decided to park in the structure instead of the street. *Get Nick to the car. Get somewhere safe.*

The SUV sat parked just as Joe had left it. “Nick. I need you to wake up, man. I gotta get you in the car.” He tried to reach into his pocket to get his keys. *FUCK! Gimme a fuckin’ break already.* Joe knelt down and gently placed Nick on the floor of the garage while he got the back door open. He picked Nick up and laid him down across the back seat.

His whole body winced as he maneuvered himself into the driver’s seat. *Gotta get somewhere safe.* Joe started the car and headed to the exit. He shoved the ticket and a credit card into the machine and then turned out onto street.

Where do I go now? Where can I take him? Not his parents’ house. “Fuck it.”

Joe took the ramp onto the Kennedy Expressway and headed towards Naperville.

Nick's head fucking hurt. Had Joe knocked him out because he'd tried to leave? God, he felt like shit. His leg felt like a thousand needles had been jammed in all at once. Jesus. He remembered Joe's lecture. He remembered kissing him, and then... *Aw, fuck. My car. My car blew up.*

He tried to sit up.

"Easy there, Nicky. It's okay, you're okay. You're safe now." Joe's voice reached through the layers of cotton that seemed to be surrounding his brain. Nick opened his eyes. Everything was spinning. Nick saw Joe's face kaleidoscoping around his vision. He closed his eyes again.

"Take it easy there. Let's lay you back down." Nick felt the pressure of a hand on his shoulder gently pushing him back. He had no strength to resist. Fingers moved over his face, then one of his eyelids was opened and a bright light shone in. Before he could react, the same happened to the other.

"Stop. My head hurts, asshole."

"Sorry." Joe sounded both apologetic and amused. "You hit your head pretty hard when you went down. Pretty sure you have a concussion. You also got nicked on the forehead by some debris and you got a pretty ugly gash on your thigh. Nothing looks like it needs stitches, though. I called my office and they were getting in touch with your parents to let them know you're okay."

Nick opened his eyes again and the world seemed to have settled down. He was lying on a bed in a bedroom. Not his. The walls were grey and there were a couple of pictures he couldn't make out hanging next to a small flat screen mounted there. The bed was big, the bedding black.

"Where am I?"

"You're at my house."

Nick closed his eyes, counted to five and opened them again. *Nope, still black and grey.* "Are you colorblind?"

"What?" Nick could hear the concern in Joe's voice.

"The room, there's no color anywhere. Just boring grey. I'll have my decorator call you. She can introduce you to the color wheel."

Joe chuckled. It was a nice sound. "This coming from the man who only wears purple. I appreciate the offer, but really, I'm all set."

Nick turned to look at Joe. Thankfully, there was only one of him now. One with no shirt on. One that was only wearing a pair of running shorts. One that had—*Holy hell, are there really that many muscles in an abdomen?*

“You’re beautiful.” Nick put his hand to his mouth. He looked over at Joe and the man’s skin pinking up from his lightly-furred chest all the way up to his cheeks. “Oh God, did I just say that out loud?”

“Um yes, and ah, thank you, I guess.” Joe raised an eyebrow and then turned to walk away, revealing his back to Nick. There was a bandage across the man’s neck and both thighs had been wrapped in gauze. Nick took in a harsh breath.

“Are you okay?” Nick couldn’t name whatever feeling lodged itself in his chest at that moment.

Joe turned back to him. “Huh?”

“Your neck and legs. Are you okay? What’s underneath the bandages?” Nick’s voice was soft as he spoke; the reality of what had happened was starting to sink in.

“I’m fine, Nick. Really. My jacket shielded most of my back, the jeans slowed whatever was flying at me enough that nothing cut too deep. What’s most important is that you are okay.” Joe took a step closer to Nick and crouched down next to the bed, grimacing slightly in the process. “You should sleep.” Joe’s voice was low and soothing as he reached his hand out and patted Nick’s arm. “I’ll wake you in a couple of hours. Right now, I’ve got to make some more phone calls.”

Nick looked down again at the man’s legs. He wanted to say something but the words just seemed scrambled in his brain. Unable to string anything together, he looked back up at Joe’s deep-set blue eyes. The man’s eyebrows were knit together in concern. He patted Nick’s arm again, and then moved his hand up and stroked Nick’s cheek like he would a child. “Go to sleep, Nick.” Nick didn’t want to think more about the ugliness that might lurk under those bandages, so he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Joe ran his hand through his hair and winced when it hit his neck. He'd forgotten about that cut. He was lucky it wasn't worse. He took a deep breath and rubbed his temples.

Joe ached. His head, his legs. Sleeping on the couch hadn't helped much either. He headed to the bathroom to take care of business and grab some more ibuprofen. He pushed the door open and took a step in. His breath caught in his throat. Nick was there, leaning in close to the mirror, inspecting the cut on his forehead. And all he was wearing was that little black thong.

Joe couldn't move. His eyes wouldn't look away. When his breath finally caught up with him it was audible. Nick turned his head and looked right at him.

Joe knew his mouth was open. He could only hope he wasn't drooling. *How could I have not noticed that ass before? Fuuuck. No. Not fuck. Client. Young client. Twink client. No fucking. But man, that ass...*

"Where are my clothes?" Nick's words made their way through to his distracted brain. Joe felt the heat rush to his face.

"Um... I had to cut them off you. Your shirt was ruined, and the jeans were ripped when you got that gash. Hold on, I probably have something that will fit you." Joe quickly turned around before Nick noticed another problem that had just popped up, i.e. Joe's half-hard cock. *Shit.*

Joe rummaged through the dresser and came back with a T-shirt and some old sweats that still had a drawstring. Nick was way too thin for Joe's clothes to fit without a little help.

"You cut off my clothes? What the fuck man? Those were my favorite jeans." Nick sounded put out as he pouted.

Joe let out something caught between a sigh and a chuckle. "Well, obviously you don't have any brain damage, since your priorities are still in order. When they catch whoever's behind this, you can sue him for a new pair of jeans, oh—and a new Audi too." Joe handed the clothes to Nick. "Here, these should fit. At least until we can get something else. Why don't you take a shower? Everything you need is in the bathroom, and those towels are clean. I can put new bandages on you when you're done. Then we can find something to eat."

Nick walked out of the bathroom freshly changed and bandaged. He'd found the first aid kit under the sink, and figured he didn't need Joe to do that for him too. It was bad enough Joe had had to bandage him up the first time. Bad enough he was right to begin with. Someone *had* tried to kill him. Both he and Joe had the soon-to-be scars to prove it. The warmth that had been with him since the shower left him; he felt ice cold. His stomach churned. He made his way to the bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed, too afraid he would fall down if he remained standing for much longer.

Someone tried to kill me.

He bent his body in half, resting his elbows on his knees and hanging his head down low between them. He shut his eyes and forced himself to take a deep breath. *In through the nose, out through the mouth. Find my inner chi or whatever the fuck my yoga instructor called it.* He knew the word, it was lurking somewhere in his scrambled brain, but the only words that found their way into Nick's consciousness were words like *explosion, psycho, hurt* and *dead*.

Someone tried to kill me.

Fuck. In through the nose, out through the mouth. The words went on repeat in his head. He forced his body to comply and, breath after breath, his mind began to clear. When he felt like he wasn't going to pass out, he lifted his head and looked up at the wall at the end of the bed. There were two photos hanging next to the screen.

Nick stared at them a moment before his curiosity got the better of him, and he got up to take a closer look. The larger of the photos showed a group of five men, barely men, they all looked younger than Nick was now. All of the men wore camouflage pants, two of them had tank tops on, but the others were shirtless. They each had their arms slung around the shoulders of the man next to them, smiles wide on their faces, their eyes showing the gleam of invincibility. And comradeship, friendship. Joe was easy to pick out. His hair was cropped short. It looked almost white, but whether that was just a reflection of the bright sun, or whether the sun itself had bleached it, Nick couldn't tell.

The smaller photo showed Joe with just one other man. The man had dark hair cut short, and the brightest green eyes that Nick had ever seen. Joe and his

friend were sitting in deck chairs hunched forward, each with an elbow on their knee and a Budweiser in their hand, leaning towards one another. Joe had sunglasses on. Something had made him laugh and turn his head to look at his friend just when the photographer clicked the shutter button. He looked so relaxed. So happy. There was no furrow in his brow, his shoulders were relaxed. *Was this really the same man who was in the other room?* It made Nick sad. The Joe that was here with him had nothing in common with the Joe smiling in the picture. Nick lifted his hand and lightly ran it across the glass of the frame. The green eyes of Joe's friend smiled at him, and Nick felt the corners of his own lips turn up. Whoever this man was, he could make people smile without even having met them.

“Hey.” Joe's voice broke whatever spell Nick was under, and he took a step back from the wall. “Are you ready for new bandages?”

“I found the first aid kit under your sink and did it myself. Thanks though.”

“Did you use the antibiotic cream? Did...”

Nick rolled his eyes and waved his hand, effectively cutting Joe off. “Yes, Mother. I used the antibiotic cream. I even made sure none of the adhesive stuck to the wounds,” His voice rose up high and held an entitled air as he spoke. He knew he was acting more uppity than was warranted, but damn it, he was not a child. He might, begrudgingly, need a bodyguard, but he'd be damned if he needed a nursemaid too. He was tired of talking about how he was hurt.

“Nick, we've got to go. I got a call, and the FBI wants to talk to you. Not to mention your parents. I talked with them last night and told them all the pertinent stuff, but they still want to talk to you in person. Your parents aren't very happy with me right now.”

“Huh, why? I'm fine. There's nothing you could have done to stop anything. I was the one who left the apartment. You stopped me in time. You got me out of there and kept me safe.” The cold feeling in Nick's spine returned. He looked down at the floor and then back up at Joe. His stomach felt like it was on a rollercoaster.

“Well, that's not exactly how they see it. They think you should have gone to the hospital.” Joe sighed. “We've got to head downtown for a meeting with

the powers that be. They've got a theory about who's behind all this. Your parents will be there too."

Nick didn't want to leave. He felt safe here in this house, even with its black-and-white-movie color scheme. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"So, you were in the military." He lifted his hand and gestured towards the picture on the wall.

"Yeah. Marines." Joe's hands were in his pockets, and his shoulders hunched a bit forward.

"Oooh... my own personal G.I. Joe. I never had one as a kid. But I think I could appreciate *you* as my action figure. Though, between you or Channing? I'd have to pick Channing. No offense." Nick knew he was being a brat. It happened when he got nervous, and the idea of leaving was definitely making him nervous.

"No offense." Joe rolled his eyes at him. Nick thought he could still see the hint of a smile trying to curl its way into the corner of Joe's mouth. Nick liked it.

"I'm only teasing." Nick smirked at him and then looked back at the photo of Joe and the other man. "I am, however, totally serious when I ask, who's the hottie in the picture and when do I get to meet him?" Nick looked back at Joe and waggled his eyebrows.

The almost amused look in Joe's face slid away, replaced with one of pure ice. "You can't. Aaron's dead." Joe turned on his heel and left the room.

Shit. Nick had just wanted to see Joe smile. Instead, he'd hit a mark he hadn't intended to hit. Nick looked at the picture of Joe and Aaron. Aaron had been beautiful and obviously he'd meant a lot to Joe. Nick had just brought that loss front and center. He'd caused more trouble than he'd meant to. Hell, they'd both nearly gotten blown up because of Nick's antics. Nick knew it, felt badly about it. But here at Joe's home, Joe was supposed to feel safe, and Nick had just inadvertently hurt him. Now they had to leave and head back out into the world where cars blew up and people wanted him dead. Nick looked over at the happy Joe and let that tiny bit of warmth flow through him before heading out of the room.

Joe sank down onto the sofa and reached up to rub his neck. *Fuck*. Yet again, he'd forgotten about that stupid cut. *Damn it*. He'd overreacted. Nick hadn't deserved the hostility Joe'd given him. It had been a while since anyone had asked about Aaron, and he'd been unprepared to respond.

"Joe?" Nick stepped into the room. His hands were in his pockets, his voice, soft.

"Hey, Nick." Joe replied, looking up at him. "I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't have been so harsh."

Nick took a few quick steps and sat down next to Joe. Joe leaned back and rested his head on the back of the couch.

"You don't have anything to apologize for, I was being a bit too... well, a bit too me."

Joe turned his body to face the other man. "Nick, you couldn't have known. And don't ever apologize for being yourself. Aaron's been gone a long time now."

Nick looked up at him, his hazel eyes soft with concern. "Did you serve with him?"

"Yeah, we met in boot camp. We were in different companies and ended up with different assignments until both companies got sent to Afghanistan a couple years later. It's like we'd never been apart." Joe gave into the small smile that thinking about Aaron always brought out. "That picture was taken while we were on leave four years ago. He was killed three months later. I got out two months after that."

"I'm so sorry, Joe. He meant a lot to you. I didn't mean to make light of that."

"I know that. Nick, really, please don't feel bad. You had no way of knowing." Another deep breath. Joe looked at Nick again. He cocked his head, and the corner of his lip turned up. "It was Aaron's idea to start the agency. We were going to be partners. In every way." Joe's voice had drifted off to barely more than a whisper.

Nick narrowed his eyes and looked at Joe. "You mean you guys worked together. Like paired up on assignments and stuff?"

Joe shook his head and let out a soft laugh. “No, Nick, we were partners. I think you know what I mean. Last night, that was not the first time I’ve been to that club.”

Nick’s eyes went from slits to saucers as the realization hit him. “You’re gay? Like *gay* gay, not happy gay?”

This time Joe let out a full-fledged chuckle. “Yes, Nick, I’m gay, like *gay* gay. Like, I have sex with men gay. Gay.”

“Holy fuck! How did I not know this? Shit. Are you sure?” Nick was still shaking his head, his brow furrowed a bit as if he were working out a geometry problem and trying to figure out the different angles.

“You sound like my sister did when I came out to her when I was sixteen. I’ll tell you what I told her. Yes, I’m sure, I’ve been sure since I was twelve when all the boys in my class were turning to look at Lucy Wilson’s new boobs, and I was stepping back to look at their asses.” Joe’s smile widened.

“Wow. Like, wow!” Nick sat back and looked right at Joe. His mouth hung open. He shook his head again. “I think I need my gaydar checked. Jesus. Seriously, I can usually smell a hot gay man from across the state, but I was completely oblivious to you.” Nick took in a quick breath and brought his hand to his mouth. His eyes got even bigger. His face suddenly an adorable shade of pink. “Oh shit! I kissed you. Man, I’m so sorry.”

“So you wouldn’t have been sorry if I was straight?” Joe snickered. “It’s not a big deal, Nick. Really. Though if I’d been straight, your car might not have blown up, because I probably would have decked you. Instead, I was just a bit dumbfounded.”

“I’m just sorry. Gay, straight, either way, I shouldn’t have kissed you. I was in my shock’em mode. Take’em off guard and then do what I want to. It tends to work most of the time. Except for you. Haven’t managed to get rid of you yet.”

“Nope, and you won’t be getting rid of me. Until they catch this bad guy, you’re stuck with me.”

Joe smiled at Nick and watched the light in his eyes dim a bit. Joe hoisted himself up, reached over and placed a friendly pat on his leg. “Come on man, up and at ’em. We gotta head out before we have the FBI after *us*.”

Nick looked down at himself. “Um... No offense, Joe, but I’m not exactly comfortable going out in public looking like this. Got anything else I can wear?”

“Sorry. Any jeans I have would end up hanging down past your ass, and somehow I think *that* look would work for you less than this one does.”

Nick looked up at him with his head cocked and waggled his eyebrows. “Maybe, but at least *you’d* get a great view.”

“Knock it off. I’ll find you a hoodie. You can wear my sunglasses. We’ll call the ensemble: Nick Incognito.” Joe waved his hand in front of him and put some singsong in his voice. “It’ll be the next big thing on the Paris runways. I just know it.” Joe scrunched up his nose and quickly cocked his head and raised one shoulder.

Nick giggled. Joe felt that giggle down in his own belly and shook his head. He couldn’t hold back a smile as he held out his hand. Nick grabbed it and let Joe pull him up off the couch. A warm comforting feeling spread from Nick’s hand and continued all the way down through Joe to his toes. Nick bounced up and then they headed to find the Incognito Ensemble.

“Anthony Harris. Recognize him?”

Nick sat in an aluminum chair, his back straight. He concentrated on keeping his leg still when all it wanted to do was bounce. He felt ice cold and wished they’d turn down the air conditioning. Maybe they did it on purpose so suspects would confess before they froze to death. The way the chubby agent across the table was staring him down, he was starting to feel like one. His partner, a shorter, bald man just sat there looking bored.

Nick felt all boxed in. The room was small, way too small to be holding the six people that were currently in it. His mother was on one side of him, his dad beside her. Joe sat on his left, quiet and steady, watching the agents with narrowed eyes. Nick wanted to know what he was thinking. He wanted to take the hand his mother had a death grip on and put it in Joe’s hand instead.

“Nick, do you recognize him?” the chubby agent asked again. Nick flicked his eyes down at the photo. He’d never seen the man before and said as much to Chubby.

“Judge, Professor Daniels?”

“The man looks vaguely familiar. The name definitely rings a bell.” Nick’s mother looked at the photo and back to the agent. His father just shook his head.

“How about his son, Jared Harris.” Another photo, another blond man, similar features to the first picture. This photo obviously a mug shot with the telltale measurement lines behind him. Nick repeated his answer from the first photo.

The judge picked the photo up. Her eyes widened. “I had his case. He was found guilty of drug trafficking.”

Chubby nodded. “Yes, and you gave him the maximum sentence.”

“Yes,” Nick’s mother replied. She let go of Nick’s hand and Nick stifled a thankful sigh. His mother was using the “judge voice.” The voice was cool, controlled. Nick had heard it many times before, mostly when he was about fifteen-years-old and caught sneaking in after a late night study session with his lab partner. At least that’s what he told his mom at the time; most of the time he was studying sex ed, and only some of those times were actually with his lab partner. He felt a small smile trying to grow. The cool voice broke through his memories and the almost-smile vanished.

“It was not his first offense. The sentence was fair. Is this the man that is trying to kill my son?”

“Anthony is, yes...” Baldy leaned forward, finally deciding to speak. “Last week, Jared Harris was found dead in his cell. He’d hung himself with his bed sheet.” The agent’s voice was flat. He looked over briefly, dismissively at Joe, and then he leveled his gaze on Nick and his parents. Nick’s leg started bouncing; he didn’t try to stop it.

“What does that have to do with my family? The letters started over a month ago. The timing doesn’t match up.” Nick’s dad had taken his mother’s hand and looked across the table at the agents with concern on his face.

“It didn’t seem to at first, no. But we delved into things a bit more.” Baldy reached his hand out and pointed at the picture of Jared. “Six weeks ago, Jared Harris was taken to the infirmary. He had extensive injuries. Among them,

facial fractures and anal trauma. I think you can deduce what happened to him.”

The judge brought her hand to her chest. Her husband shook his head and looked down at the table. Nick sucked in a quick breath and tensed up even more. A warm hand came and rested on his left knee, stopping the bouncing. Nick focused on Joe’s hand, trying to let the calm that it was lending spread through him.

“Jared was raped.” Joe said, keeping his voice even.

Chubby looked over at Joe. “Yes, Jared was raped.” The agent gave Joe another dismissive look and turned his gaze back to the judge. “We believe that Anthony was made aware of the attack and became enraged and focused all that rage on you.” Chubby nodded at Nick’s mother before continuing. “You were the one who sentenced his son, and thus put him in the place where the rape occurred. Then, when his son killed himself, his target switched from you to Nicholas. *Your son for mine*. An eye for an eye, it would seem.”

“That’s ridiculous.” The judge’s voice had taken a higher pitch as she spoke.

“Maybe to you and me, but not to Mr. Harris. The evidence we collected from the scene of the car explosion has a signature similar to other incidents that were tied to a militant group. We believe Anthony Harris to be a member of this group. These men are not known for being rational.”

Nick’s mother straightened her head and stared at the agent. “So, what do we do now?”

Nick didn’t want to hear what the agent was going to say. Somehow it had gotten colder. The only warmth came from Joe’s hand that was still on his knee. Nick wanted to take his hand and hold it. He wanted to run out the door before Chubby could answer his mother. He didn’t think he was going to like what Chubby would say. Joe took his hand away, and Nick looked over to see the man run it through his hair, only to flinch when it hit his neck. *He needs to stop doing that*.

“We get the guy. Until then, you and your husband will go back to your home. We have agents assigned to you twenty-four-seven. Nicholas will go

into protective custody starting immediately. We'll take him to a safe house where he will remain until Anthony Harris is apprehended.”

Nick's stomach dropped to his toes.

“Okay.”

“No!” Nick and his mother spoke at the same time. Nick's eyes were wide; his jaw dropped open and then shut with such force, his entire skull vibrated. His leg was moving like he was running a marathon. The judge looked over at him and placed her hand on his arm gently.

“Nicholas, darling. We need to keep you safe. The FBI will do that.” She tilted her head. “I know you're worried. I know you don't like being told what to do, but surely you understand that we all have to make sacrifices here.” She'd busted out the mom-voice, the one he hadn't heard since he was seven and he'd broken his foot.

Nick turned from Chubby to look at his mother. “I understand I am in danger, yes. I understand this man is a lunatic and blames you for his son being raped and killing himself, and that has somehow mutated into a desire to see me dead and you suffering. Yes, I get it. I know it. I understand it. What none of you seem to understand is, that while you may be the one receiving the letters, mother, it is my life that is being threatened. And while it may be true that hurting me will indeed hurt you, I am the one who will be in pain. I am the one who will be dead.” He spoke the words with conviction. His voice stayed deep and even. His mother's face seemed to pale as fast as his face was warming. He didn't know if he'd ever spoken to her in such a manner, but he wasn't about to back down. Standing from the table he continued, “That being said, I will assume that you can all understand why I choose not to place my trust in an organization that, as of two days ago, couldn't be bothered with me.” He snapped his jaw shut and turned his narrowed eyes on the agents. Taking a deep breath, he grabbed the back of Joe's shirt and hoisted him to his feet with a force that left the man teetering. Nick couldn't quite read Joe's face as the man stumbled slightly before righting himself.

“Let's go, Joe.” Nick took a step behind Joe and headed around the table towards the door, only to find it blocked by Chubby's wide body when he got there.

“Sit down, Nicholas.” Baldy stood up next to him.

“No, if you’ll excuse me, *please*, we are leaving.” Nick took a step forward and Chubby mirrored his movements. They stood chest-to-chest. Nick glared down at the man. “You need to move.”

“I am not moving,” the man replied. “You are going into protective custody. This is not something you can refuse.”

Nick’s nostrils flared, his heart hammered. He bent down the two inches so his gaze was direct. “Let. Me. Pass.” Nick felt Joe come up behind him. The hair on his neck stood up, whether it was caused by the adrenaline or Joe’s hot breath, Nick couldn’t tell. He would think about it later. Right then, the only thing he could focus on was the portly man in front of him and his bald little partner.

“No.”

Nick stepped to the side. If the man wouldn’t move, Nick would simply go around him, but Chubby brought his arms up and latched onto Nick’s biceps. Nick felt himself being shoved towards the table.

“Hey!” Suddenly Chubby was on the floor. Nick looked up to see Joe standing between them; his feet planted wide, his hands in fists hanging rigidly at his sides. “Hands off, asshole!”

Joe’s hand reached back, grasping for Nick’s hoodie. “You all right, Nick?”

Was he all right? Shit. “Um, yeah. I’m okay.” His voice was shakier than he’d wanted it to be. Nick pushed off the table, took a step to the side, and walked around Joe to the door. He turned around and looked at the scene he was leaving. His father sat there, gaze steady. He understood and was okay. His mother’s eyes bounced between the agent on the floor and Nick. Her mouth hung open, for once it appeared she really didn’t know what to think.

“We’ll be in touch.” Joe’s voice had an ice to it that Nick never wanted to hear directed at him. “Professor, Judge Daniels.” Joe gave a curt nod and, stepping over Chubby on the floor, made his way to stand behind Nick. Nick got the door open and took a step when Chubby found his voice.

“Listen, you stupid fa—Nick. You cannot leave. We can, and will, hold you as a material witness if you refuse to cooperate.”

Nick stopped so fast, Joe bumped into him and bounced off. He turned back towards the room. Joe looked him square in the eye, and Nick knew he was silently asking, “*You okay? Got this?*” Nick gave him an imperceptible nod and he knew Joe understood. Joe reached up and gave his forearm a light squeeze and stepped to the side, allowing Nick to go back into the tiny room.

Nick’s parents were on their feet, looking at both agents with their jaws set. Chubby had made his way upright. His face was beet red. If the man breathed any harder, Nick thought he might have a heart attack. Nick felt like helping him get there.

“First of all, *sir*, I may not be studying criminal law, but I know for a fact that putting your hands on me and pushing me are both grounds for an assault charge, federal officer or not.” The man opened his mouth to speak, but Nick raised his finger and put it in the man’s face, effectively silencing him. Holding the man’s gaze, Nick continued, his voice steady. “Secondly, I *am*, however, studying civil rights law. And trying to detain me would be a violation of my rights as an American citizen. I am not a material witness; I am a target, a victim. I have no knowledge of the perpetrator beyond what I’ve just been told by you, nor do I have any information pertaining to the bombing of my car, beyond the fact that my Audi is now scrap metal. So if you even think about holding me as a material witness I can guarantee a lawsuit so big, this room will seem like a lovely Hawaiian timeshare compared to the cubicle you will be stuck in. And lastly...” Nick paused a moment, stood up straight before lifting his chin and jutting out a hip and placing a hand on it. He leaned over the man who seemed to be shrinking in front of him. He let his voice go high as he channeled his inner RuPaul. *Fuck that inner goddess crap from fifty-whatever-it-was.*

“Lastly, I have been called every name in the book. Twink, fairy, poof, pansy, sword-swallower, pickle-chugger, shit-stabber, butt boy, and *fag*. Among others. Sticks and stones, sweetheart, sticks and stones. If you are going to insult me, be fucking original, you bigoted fat cow cunt.” For emphasis, Nick added two snaps up, turned on his heel and sashayed to the door. “Let’s go darling.” He put his hand on Joe’s arm and looked up at him with a smirk and batting eyelashes. Joe’s face was red, obviously trying to

hold back the laughter, his blue eyes were smiling down and Nick could see the tears threatened to spill over.

“But of course, darling.” Joe placed his hand over Nick’s on his arm and led them out of the building.

Joe’s head was stretched back against the headrest of the SUV. He couldn’t hold back the laughter anymore. He and Nick had practically run to the car. He wiped the tears from his eyes and looked over at Nick.

“Oh shit man, that was brilliant! You were amazing in there.” Joe smiled down at the man. Nick was curled up on the seat, part of his face covered up with his hood. “Hey Nicky, you can’t tell me you don’t realize how perfect that was?”

Nick pulled the hood away from his eyes and peeked out. His face was bright red. Joe could see the corners of his lips turned up. “I shouldn’t have called him fat.”

Joe chuckled and shook his head. “You called the man a cow cunt, but you’re more embarrassed because you called him fat?”

“Well, it was rude. And unoriginal. And...”

“And true.” Joe cut him off. He reached over and pulled the hood all the way back so he could see Nick’s face. “You dressed him up and down, and he deserved every bit of it.”

“But I’m not like that. I know I act like I’m all into appearances and things, but I’ve never been one to look down on someone because they’ve got some extra weight on them. It’s as bad as making fun of someone ’cause of their ethnicity or they have a big nose. It’s part of who they are, not how they act.”

“Okay. I hear what you’re saying. But that doesn’t change the fact that the guy had it coming. He had you all labeled in a box as soon as you walked in there. And as soon as you stepped over his predetermined line, he let his ugliness out. And you took that ugliness and just threw it back at him. You were just a mirror. Only a mirror that was a lot smarter than he was.” Joe smiled. “Remind me not to piss you off by the way.”

“I was going to say the same thing to you.” Nick sat up a little straighter, though he was still hunched down a bit. Nick’s smile had grown. It was a nervous smile, but it was real. “Damn, what did you do to him?”

“Well, he pushed you, so I pushed him back. He was out of line. I put him back in it.” Joe looked over at Nick. “That’s what I do, Nick. It’s my job.”

Joe wasn’t sure, but he thought Nick’s smile dimmed a bit. Then Nick looked up at him, his face suddenly serious. Whatever laughter had been lingering was gone. “So, Anthony Harris.”

“Yes, Anthony Harris.”

“What do we do now, Joe? I pretty much just told the FBI to fuck off, so what happens now?” Nick shoved his hands in the front pocket of the hoodie and looked out the window at the street.

“Now, we do what we have to do to keep you safe. They’ll catch Harris. Regardless of what just went down in there. I have a feeling your mother is currently giving the whole Bureau an earful.”

“But how is this going to work? Where is safe? This guy could be anywhere. He knows where I live, where I shop. He might know about you by now.”

“Yeah, I know that.” Joe looked at Nick before reaching into the back seat and grabbing a silver briefcase. “This is my kit. It has all kinds of things that I might need while on the job.” Popping the case open, he pulled out a small device. “Here, take this. You probably won’t like it, but carry it on you, somewhere that might not be found if something happens and you get searched.”

A mischievous grin spread across Nick’s face. Joe’s face got warmer. “No, Nick, don’t shove it up your ass. Try your shoe.”

“What is it?” Nick asked, inspecting the flat square.

“It’s a tracking device. If anything should happen and we get separated, this will let me know where to find you. Just push that button and it will turn on. Your location will get sent to my phone.”

“Where did you get this thing? Do they have like the super spy store here in Chicago?”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Nick, nowadays you can buy a personal tracking device at Best Buy.”

Looking in the case, Joe pulled out a cell phone, a credit card, and a set of keys. He left the Glock where it was. “Here, I know it’s not as nice as the one you’re used to, it’s only a burner phone. But just in case. My number is already programmed in. Now, let’s go catch a cab.”

“Huh? Why do we need a cab?” Nick’s brow was wrinkled in confusion.

“We need a different car. We’d probably know by now if they’ve seen this one, but I’m not going to take the chance. We’ll head to my office and pick up one of the company cars. One that can’t be traced back to me. Then we’ll find a hotel and hole up for the time being. To be honest, I probably should have taken you to one last night, but I didn’t think walking in bleeding, with my jeans shredded in a very non-fashionable way, would be the best of ideas. And I didn’t have any first aid supplies in my car. You ready?” Joe raised his eyes from the case and looked over at Nick. He looked like he’d just run a marathon, completely exhausted, just slumped down. “Hey, you okay?”

Nick turned his head to look at Joe, still resting it on the headrest. “Yeah, Joe, I’m fine. Thanks. Let’s go.”

Joe couldn’t help thinking that Nick was lying.

Nick looked up at the sky. It was all grey, dismal, and seemed appropriate to him. They’d been at the hotel for two uneventful days. Under any different circumstances, he’d probably be happy to be stuck in a hotel room with Joe. But Joe had been tense and closed off since they’d arrived. When Nick asked what was wrong, Joe said he was just doing his job. He had to stay focused. *This was Joe’s job, you are just a job.* Nick frowned as he realized that at some point along the way, he’d let himself forget that. And it was obvious that Joe hadn’t and didn’t want to either.

Joe hadn’t smiled since they’d left the FBI office. That smile that made his whole face light up and his eyes twinkle. That smile that made Nick’s belly warm and made him want to smile himself. Nick wanted to see it again. Wanted to know he was the reason for it. *It’s just his job, Nick. Stop deluding yourself into thinking a man like Joe could want a twink like you.*

A twink that had already caused enough trouble for him. He knew Anthony Harris was ultimately responsible for everything, but if Nick hadn't been a brat and had just cooperated from the get-go, the car might have never blown up. The backs of Joe's legs might not look like he'd had a run-in with a three foot tall Freddy Kruger, and they might not be stuck in some airport hotel waiting for Agents Cow Cunt and Baldy to nail down Anthony Harris. Then Joe would go on to the next client and Nick would go back to life as usual. Nick sighed as he let the curtain fall, turned back into the room, and flopped face down on top of the bed with a groan.

"You okay, Nick?" Joe asked from his seat at the tiny hotel desk.

"I'm fine." Nick replied, his voice muffled by the pillow.

Nick felt the bed dip and a warm hand on his shoulder, gently lifting it up. "Look at me, Nick." Joe's voice was soft and soothing. Nick turned his head and peeked up at him through his long bangs. Joe's blue eyes looked down at him, his head bent at an angle so it was parallel to Nick's. "You've been *fine* for two days. Want to talk about it?"

Nick wanted to say something. Wanted to say that something was going on inside of him that he didn't quite understand. That every time he looked up and saw Joe looking at him, butterflies swarmed around his stomach. That every time Joe sat at that desk with his brow furrowed, Nick just wanted to walk over and kiss it away.

But he knew the response he would get and he knew he wouldn't like it.

"No, really I'm fine, really," Nick lied. It was better than hearing some lecture about how it's normal to form attachments in situations of extreme pressure, but in the long run, those feelings don't last. *No, Nick, you're only feeling this way because we've been stuck together for days. Really. As soon as this is over, you can head back to school and to the clubs...* Nick didn't want to think anymore about what Joe would say to him if he confessed.

"I don't believe you, Nick." Joe gently patted his shoulder and leaned back against the headboard. Nick turned his head the other way and closed his eyes. He felt Joe's hand rub back and forth trying to comfort him. Nick felt that warmth spread through him. Suddenly he was incredibly thankful he was lying

on his stomach. *Shit. I shouldn't be getting wood from a guy rubbing my shoulder like I was a little kid who'd just lost his baseball game. He's just trying to comfort me, not get me off. So why the fuck does it feel like there's an electrical current running from my shoulder to my dick?*

“Ugh.” Nick couldn't stop the word from coming out of his mouth. “Thanks Joe, but really, I'm all right. Just can't wait for all this to be over.” Then maybe he could forget his brutal Viking.

With a final pat that seemed a bit harder than the others, Nick felt the mattress pop up abruptly. He turned his head back and saw Joe was sitting back at the desk staring at the phone. “Soon enough Nick. This will all be over soon enough. Um, do you need anything? I think I'm going to take a shower.”

“No...”

“I know, you're fine.” Joe looked over his shoulder at Nick and gave him a small smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

Fuck. Fuck. Shit. Goddamned. Fuck. Jesus, Joe, pull yourself together. Joe braced his hands against the bathroom counter and looked up at himself in the mirror. He looked like shit. He hadn't exactly been sleeping the past couple of nights. Both nights, they'd laid down, each in their respective beds, and each night all Joe had been able to do is stare up at the dark ceiling, listening to the beautiful man breathe and wishing he was in bed next to him feeling his weight draped over his chest.

Joe spun around and turned the shower on. He shed his clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor and stepped in, letting the hot water run down over his face, hoping maybe it would clear his head out. He hadn't laughed as hard as he did after Nick's showdown with Agent Cow Cunt in years. Probably not since Aaron. He missed Aaron. He knew if Aaron were there right then, he'd kick Joe's ass. Tell him to man up. Fuck the job—well, not really. Protect Nick, but stop acting like he was doing it because it's his job, because it was certainly more than that. Joe figured that out the minute the door to the hotel room closed. He'd turned around to say something to Nick and couldn't remember what the fuck it was, because he was overcome by a very sudden

and very strong urge to take the man and throw him up against the door and kiss the ever-living life out of him. Nick with his dark hair that fell over his hazel eyes. The hazel eyes that seemed to swirl around, changing color from golden brown to green and back again depending on his mood. Nick, with that lithe body and that gorgeous ass.

The thought of that ass, the one that had shimmied up the pole in the club, the one that had been proudly displayed in his bathroom, that ass was enough to send Joe's hand straight down to his cock. *Jesus Lord*. He hadn't jerked off in days. He didn't think he could and still look Nick in the eye.

But as he stood in the shower, he didn't care. He stroked his shaft from the base to the tip, and then gave it a twist. He closed his eyes. In his mind he could see Nick kneeling in front of him. The water plastered the man's dark hair to his forehead as he took Joe's cock in his hands. Joe's stroke grew faster. Nick licked his lips; his pupils were blown out, leaving only a thin rim of golden green around them. Joe braced his shoulders against the shower wall. The grip on his cock got tighter as he slowly moved his hand up and down.

Nick looked up at him and Joe brought his other hand and ran it over his rigid belly before continuing up to pinch his nipple. First one, then the other. Giving a slight tug before running it back over his stomach and down to cup his balls. He squeezed gently a couple times and then gave them a rough tug. He bit his lip to silence the groan that threatened to escape. He stroked his cock faster as he felt Nick pushing that tight body up against him, chest-to-chest, thigh-to-thigh, cock-to-cock. *Oh God*. Faster. Tighter. Harder. Frantically, he pulled and stroked and twisted. His balls pulled up tight and he took the hand that had been massaging them and moved it around his hip to glide lightly down the crease of his ass. He squeezed his eyes tight and he could taste the blood on his lip where his teeth pressed down so hard they broke through the skin. Nick wrapped his arms around him. He pushed his middle finger into his hole and twisted the tip of his cock. Nick kissed him. Licking his lips, sucking his tongue, Joe's world went white, his body spasming in orgasm, as he shot ribbons of cum across the shower. He continued to slowly stroke himself until his balls were drained, then slid down the wall and curled up into a ball on the floor of the tub.

Joe opened his eyes. His vision blurred from the water that fell over them as he leaned his head against the wall and stared at the ugly green tile surrounding him as he sat alone in the bathroom while a beautiful man lay on a bed in the next room. He hugged his legs up tight to his chest. He knew what he *should* do. He knew what he *wanted* to do. But he had absolutely no fucking clue what to *actually* do.

Shit.

“Did you not hear me the first time? I said, ‘NO FUCKING WAY!’”

Nick opened his eyes and found himself staring at the hotel wall. He’d been roused from a very non-restful sleep by a very pissed-off Joe, who was on the phone with someone who obviously had not heard him the first time. Nick rolled over, snuggled down in his pillow and looked over at the blond man.

Joe stood at the desk facing away from where Nick lay. His shoulders were pulled back and tense. One hand gripped the phone so tightly his knuckles were white, the other flexed in and out of a fist as it hung rigidly at his side. He hadn’t bandaged the gash on his neck and it wrinkled as he moved his head up and down as if to emphasize the words he was saying. Nick thought it must hurt but Joe was probably too worked up to realize it.

“No. Absolutely not. Listen, it’s your job to find Harris. My job is to protect Nick.” Nick closed his eyes and inhaled through his nose. *His job.*

“Just because you can’t manage to do your job does not mean...” Whoever was on the other end of the phone must have interrupted, because Joe stopped. Nick could see the bone of Joe’s jaw popping out. *He really needed to stop grinding his teeth.*

“Can you guarantee me that absolutely no harm will come to him...?” Joe turned and raised his eyebrows. “Then I stand by my first answer. No fucking way. You are not going to use him as fucking bait because you can’t get the guy. You know his name, his associates, and his last known address for Christ’s sake. Get off your asses and go find the man. We live in the motherfucking twenty-first century, I’m sure there is some technology available to the almighty FBI that can help you locate Anthony Harris.”

Nick took another deep breath. He was tired. He was tired of this hotel room. He was tired of hiding. He felt like a coward. He pushed the covers off him and swung his feet down onto the floor.

“Give me the phone, Joe,” Nick said, keeping his voice low as he held out his hand.

Joe shook his head and mouthed, “No.”

“Give me the phone.” Nick’s voice was louder than he’d intended it to be, but it made Joe pause.

“You sure?” Joe’s brow was furrowed again. Nick just nodded his head and kept his hand held out until he felt the phone pressed into it.

Nick put the phone to his ear. “Hello? This is Nicholas Daniels.”

There was an audible sigh of relief from the man on the other end of line. Joe had started pacing, muttering a curse when he ran his hand through his hair and it hit the gash on his neck. *Again.*

“Nicholas, my name is Craig Anderson. I’m an agent with the FBI, Chicago Division, and I’ve taken over the Anthony Harris case from Agent Murphy.”

“Who’s Agent Murphy?”

“Agent Cow Cunt.”

Nick blushed. “Oh.” Nick pushed the embarrassment aside. He wanted to get to the point. “What do you need Agent Anderson?”

“We’ve been running down leads on Mr. Harris, and unfortunately it appears the man has gone to ground, so to speak. We need to draw him out.”

Nick looked up at Joe. The man had stopped and stood still leaning against the wall closest to Nick’s bed. “And you need me to do that.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes Nicholas, we need you. We would like you to come out of hiding. Hopefully, in doing so, it will lure Anthony Harris out and we will be able to apprehend him.”

Nick looked up at Joe again. The man shook his head, his eyes pleading with Nick. But Nick was done. He just wanted it over. Nick looked down at the floor before he straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath.

“Okay.”

“No.” Joe looked pissed. Joe *was* pissed. Nick ignored him.

“What do you want me to do?” Nick held his voice firm. He listened as the agent gave him instructions before he gave an affirmative reply and disconnected the call. Nick placed the phone on the bed next to him. In a voice just slightly above a whisper, he uttered, “I have to be at the condo at two o’clock.”

Nick blew out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding and looked up. Joe was standing there with his feet apart, his face red. Nick could see a vein in the man’s temple throbbing and the tendons in his neck were pulled taut.

“Joe...”

“Nick, do you have any idea what you just agreed to do? Any clue at all?” Joe’s voice was strained and he rubbed on his neck but didn’t curse this time. Nick figured he was too pissed off to feel it.

“Yes, Joe. I know what I agreed to.”

Joe continued as if Nick hadn’t said anything. “They are going to parade you around and wait for Harris to make his move, hoping that they have people in the right places. You are going to be in the open. And *I* won’t be there. As soon as we get to your place, they’re taking charge and I am being dismissed. I don’t trust them, Nick. And three days ago you didn’t either. What the hell are you thinking? What the fuck changed?” Joe sank down to the floor, his back pressed against the wall, his arms resting on his knees. Looking down at his hands, he inhaled deeply, before turning his eyes to Nick and tilting his head. His voice was soft and rough. “What’s going on, Nick? What changed your mind? Can you please explain it to me? Explain what you’re thinking.”

Nick couldn’t help himself; he leaned forward and placed his hand on top of Joe’s. “I’m thinking I want this over. I know it hasn’t been all that long. We’ve only been here for three days. But what if three days becomes three weeks, months. When does it stop, Joe? I have school, friends.”

“You have a future. A future you could be throwing away by agreeing to this. What if something happens to you?”

“Then something happens. At least it will be over.” Nick blew his bangs out of his face and took a moment to collect his thoughts. “Joe, I can’t stay in this room anymore. I want my family safe. I want this to be over. One way or another. It’s not like I want something to happen to me. But I’m tired of sitting here hiding away not doing anything. I’ve made my decision.”

Nick squeezed Joe’s hand gently before he got up off the bed to go get ready. He ignored the very tight feeling in his chest and the intense urge to vomit.

Joe gripped the wheel of the car, his knuckles white. He’d been trying to come up with an alternative plan. Some way to keep Nick from going through with this. He hadn’t completely ruled out the idea of turning the car around and heading to O’Hare and catching the next plane out. He didn’t think dragging Nick through the terminal bound and gagged would work out so well.

He pulled up next to a parking meter, amazed to have found street parking at this time of day. He didn’t want Nick to face the parking garage again. They sat in silence less than two blocks away from Nick’s building as he turned the ignition off. They’d barely spoken since they’d left the hotel. *Hell, we’ve barely spoken in the past three days.* Three days of dodging Nick’s looks, answering any questions with a simple word or two. Beyond that, Joe pretended to be busy most of the time. Afraid to look at the man for fear his body would give into what it wanted instead of doing what his brain told him he was supposed to do.

Joe sighed, still facing forward. “You sure about this? We don’t have to go in. We can go somewhere, not the hotel, anywhere you want and figure out a plan.”

“I’m sure, Joe. Really.” The words struck a place in his heart that he’d forgotten he’d had.

All right then, let’s get this over with. Joe threw open the door and made his way around to the front of the car, meeting Nick as he stepped up on the sidewalk. Joe’s eyes scanned the area, coffee shop, and hotel. Nothing was

necessarily outside of the norm, though he doubted it would appear so on the surface anyway. He put his arm around Nick's back to usher him quickly into the back door of the high-rise. The weight of the gun in the back of his waistband made him feel slightly better, but he couldn't shake the nerves.

They made their way through the back entrance to the service elevator, where Nick pushed the button and they stood waiting for it to arrive. Joe looked over at the younger man. He was still wearing Joe's hoodie. It warmed Joe; he liked seeing Nick in his clothes, but they so weren't the man's style. He couldn't hold back the soft chuckle that escaped through his lips.

"What?" Nick looked over at him, questioning. "What's so funny?"

"If nothing else, it'll be a relief to be able to choose clothes out of your own closet."

Nick looked down at himself, as if he'd forgotten about his clothes. A soft pink colored his cheeks and a small smile turned up on his lips. "Oh, shit. Sorry man. Let me give this back to you."

"No, no. Keep it. It looks good on you." Joe smirked.

"Liar." Nick elbowed him in the ribs and Joe winced.

"Hey now. Stop beating on the old man." Joe heard the ding of a bell and watched as the doors to the elevator opened. Nick straightened himself up and stepped inside, looking straight ahead, and Joe followed him in and watched him hit the button for his floor.

"I didn't fuck my professor." Nick was looking at the floor.

"Huh?"

"I wasn't fucking my professor when I missed the meeting at my parents. I had to meet with my advisor to explain the situation, tell him that I might need to withdraw for a semester." Nick's voice was soft when he spoke.

Joe wanted to hug him. "Nick, you don't have to apologize or explain. I have no right to judge you for the choices you make."

"I know, but I wanted you to know."

"Thank you. Thanks for telling me."

"You're welcome. And I'll get your sweatshirt back to you."

“Keep it. Maybe you can dye it purple.”

Nick looked up at him with a sad smile. Just then the elevator jostled to a stop and the doors opened. Nick walked straight out and into the corridor, and suddenly Joe couldn't breathe. Just a few seconds, and Nick would be walking into the less than capable hands of the FBI and out of Joe's life. *Shit, fuck damn it all.* Joe jumped out of the elevator before the doors could close on him and took two hastened steps.

He reached out his hand to touch Nick's arm just as he was pulling out his keys. “Wait a minute, Nick. Hold on.”

“Oh, the sweatshirt...”

“Damn it, Nick. This isn't about the hoodie. I want to talk to you, for just a minute. Please.”

Nick turned and looked at Joe. His hazel eyes were doing that swirling thing that Joe had realized he liked so much. His teeth were nibbling at his bottom lip, and Joe wished those were his teeth doing the nibbling. *Get a grip, Joe.* He tightened his grip on Nick's arm ever so slightly, dragged him over to a sofa outside the elevators and sat down next to him. “Sit down a sec. I need to talk to you before you go in there.”

“Okay, I guess we have a couple minutes. It's not like they're going to start without me, right?” Nick wore a smile that didn't reach his eyes and his shoulders were slumped. O'Hare was looking better and better.

“Look at me, Nick.” Joe turned his upper body and Nick mirrored his actions. “Okay. Now, I don't know what is going to happen after you walk through that door, but if anything, and I mean anything goes haywire, or makes you uncomfortable, if you need anything at all, I want you to call me. I'll come. I don't care what time it is, day or night. Okay?”

Nick shook his head. “I'll be fine Joe. I get to that door and your job is over. You can be done with me and my antics. Don't worry about it, really.”

What? “My job? Nicky, what are you talking about?” *My job? Antics?* “Where is this coming from?”

“I don't know. I mean, hopefully, I go in there, they do whatever it is they have planned. They catch Harris. I go back to school, you move on to another

client, one that's probably more cooperative and less work than me." Nick shrugged his shoulders and turned his head towards the elevator doors. "That's what's supposed to happen, right?" *Was that what Nick thought? Really thought.* Realization hit him. Joe had been so paranoid about crossing some line, that he completely alienated Nick. Made the man feel like he was some burden that Joe had been putting up with. Made him feel unwanted. Like he was just a job. *Shit.*

Joe had had enough. "Yes that's what's supposed to happen. But that isn't *all* that should happen." Joe grabbed Nick's chin and turned the man's face so it was square with his, making sure he couldn't turn away. "There's a lot that should happen. You are not just a job. You haven't been just a job for days. And you have never, ever, been a burden." Joe squeezed Nick's chin a little tighter and let his eyes bore down on him, trying to convey everything he wanted to say but couldn't. Nick's eyes were uncertain. Joe could feel him trying to move his head, but he held firm. "When this is over, you and I are going to talk. But right now, I need you to promise me, please, that if anything happens you will call me. Can you promise me that, Nick?" Joe let go of Nick's chin. He couldn't say anymore, not with the FBI around the corner. Not when Nick needed to focus on staying safe, so they would have time to have that conversation. Joe exhaled roughly. Nick sat there. Still and silent. "Nick?"

"Yes Joe. I promise. I'll call. I'd better get in there." Nick's voice was a whisper, as he started to rise.

Joe felt a lump rise in his throat. His stomach felt like it was going to lose its contents. He'd said the words he'd needed to say, the ones that could be said. Now Nick was walking away from him. If the FBI screwed up, it could be the last time. Joe's body was moving before he could process what he was doing. He grabbed Nick's arm and twirled him around, clutching him close. Chest-to-chest, thigh-to-thigh. Joe's hand pressed into the small of the man's back.

Nick's eyes were wide as Joe lowered his head those few inches. Joe let his eyes drift shut as he pressed his lips against Nick's and let his lips say all the other words he couldn't. He felt Nick's body relax and push into his. Warmth spread from his lips, all through his body, his cock twitched and filled.

The kiss was slow and gentle. Lips gliding over each other, learning the landscape. Joe nipped at that bottom lip he'd been eyeing earlier, and then licked away the hurt. He was rewarded with what sounded like a soft whimper. His hands roamed up between the hoodie and Nick's T-shirt, slowly exploring the feel of those muscles he'd been admiring for days. He groaned as he remembered that they were out of time. He pulled his lips away and kissed his way down the man's neck.

"God." He breathed out the word as he placed his forehead on Nick's shoulder and brought his hands down to settle on his hips, still under the hoodie.

Nick leaned back, forcing Joe to raise his head. He raised his hand up and Joe felt a single finger run down his cheek to his jaw and watched Nick's eyes as they followed it before returning to stare into Joe's. "What was that for?" Nick whispered.

Joe let out an amused sigh. "Luck." With reluctance, Joe stepped back, releasing Nick who had taken that finger and was brushing it across that delectable bottom lip of his, and shook his head slightly like he was trying to solve a puzzle.

"Luck. Huh?"

"Luck, Nicky. Luck." Joe gave him a small smile as he reached out and took Nick's hand in his. He turned and took a step towards Nick's apartment but was yanked back and straight into Nick's arms. There was no confusion in the look that Joe was receiving. Nick was serious. Focused.

Nick's voice rumbled. "This one is for me."

Joe's lips were under attack, a vicious desperate, sexy attack. Nick's teeth were tugging at his lips, his tongue pressing for entry, and Joe's parted willingly. Tongues entwined, caressing, stabbing. There was nothing gentle in this kiss. This kiss was all Nicky. Joe felt the man's hands reach up under his shirt, and he tightened his own hands around Nick's waist and let them glide down and grab that fine ass like they'd wanted to for days. One of Nick's hands slipped under Joe's shirt. One traveled up and stroked the skin over his shoulder tickling at his back and the other one pinched and twisted his nipple.

The groan that emerged from Joe's throat was quickly swallowed. Joe moved one hand up to Nick's head and tangled his fingers in his hair, then pulled. Nick whimpered again. Where his cock had given acknowledgement before, now it was standing up and saluting for all its worth. Joe could feel Nick's erection pressing against his thigh, and he wished more than anything there was a broom closet handy where he could sink to the floor and suck that cock down his throat.

The click of a door brought him back down to earth. With one last nip of the man's lip, Joe stepped back. Nick looked straight at him; the swirls in his eyes were back, along with a mischievous glint.

"Nicholas Daniels?"

Still looking at Joe, gaze unwavering, Nick responded, "Yes."

Joe's mouth turned up and jerked his head, indicating that Nick should turn around.

The man was attractive, tall with broad muscular shoulders. He wore a grey suit with a blue tie that set off the blue in his eyes. *I fucking hate him.* Joe gave him a nod and a tight-lipped smile. "Mr. Madsen, I assume?"

"Yes."

"Hi, I'm Agent Craig Andersen. We spoke on the phone."

"Can we see your ID, please?" The please was forced. But the man handed his ID over, obviously anticipating the question. Joe looked down at it intently, almost wishing he could spot an irregularity so he'd have justification to drag Nick away. The ID was real. Joe sighed as he handed it back.

"Mr. Daniels, why don't you come into the apartment with me?" The agent reached his hand out to Nick, and Joe had an urge to shoot it off with his gun. Nick looked over his shoulder at Joe, his eyes soft with feeling. Joe tried to smile and failed.

"Thank you for getting him down here, Mr. Madsen. We'll take it from here."

Before Joe could open his mouth, the agent had scurried Nick through the door and left Joe staring down an empty, silent hallway.

Nick sat curled up on the end of his sofa facing the two agents. He knew they were talking to him, explaining some plan they had, but the words all swirled around in the air, nothing registering. He wasn't really there. He was still in the hallway. Still feeling the scratch of Joe's goatee on his chin. Still feeling the sting of the man's hand pulling at his hair. The coarse hair of Joe's chest under his fingertips. The sounds that vibrated from his throat. Still feeling the hard erection against his hip. Mindlessly, he reached up and brushed his fingers over his lips.

"Nicholas?"

"What? Sorry, did I miss something?"

Agent Andersen looked at Nick like he was annoyed. Nick straightened his back and squared his shoulders before crossing one leg over his knee. He smoothed his hands over his leg, and then picked off a piece of imaginary lint. His voice had gone high, when he brought his narrowed eyes down on Agent Andersen. "Can we go over this from the top? I think I missed a couple things. You know how it is. So much going on around me. FBI agents with all their energy, and their big, um, guns. I get a little distracted." Agent Andersen gave him an eye roll. Nick smiled on the inside.

Whatever.

Joe looked around his yard. It looked pretty good. Grass mowed and raked. Flowerbeds weeded. *Weeded*. He'd never really paid much attention to the perennials before. They'd been left behind by the previous owners. But in the three days since he'd left Nick with the FBI, he had been left with a lot of time. He hadn't gotten any new clients, and the paperwork and billing hours were caught up.

That first day, he'd watched a movie, or at least pretended to, but after a half an hour, it became clear he wasn't paying attention and every other man that appeared on the screen looked like Nick. That's when Joe realized he needed a new plan. So he moved on to physical labor. He felt tired. He took a deep breath through his nose and coughed when he realized the stench he smelled was coming from him.

He headed into the shower, where he promised himself he wouldn't think about Nick. He ended up breaking that promise.

Nick hurt—again. His head hurt. His shoulders hurt. Everything hurt. He was dimly aware of someone moving about in the room, but his eyes felt too heavy to open. He knew he was sitting down, but he couldn't move. His arms were tied behind him, whatever was binding them, cutting into his wrists. His legs were bound together. He knew he needed to focus, figure out a plan. Since the FBI's plan obviously didn't turn out so well. *Don't provoke your captor.* He thought he'd read that in a book once. Made sense, though he was pretty sure his captor was, at this point, provoked by his sheer existence.

Nick tried to open his eyes, only to shut them quickly when he saw the fist that was barreling towards his face. His head was snapped back and his eye felt like it was going to pop. *Shit.*

"I know you're awake." His head was snapped the other way, this time it felt like a backhand.

"Open your eyes, you little faggot."

Nick forced his eyes open.

"Well, hello, there. I was wondering when you'd join the party."

Nick looked back down at the floor, praying the spinning would stop. His world spun more when the fist connected with his nose and blood started pouring out and down onto his jeans.

Okay. Just need to last long enough for someone to find me. I can handle punches. If it hurts, I'm not dead.

His head felt heavy, despite the recent loss of blood through his nose. He struggled to lift it up but couldn't, so he raised his eyes instead. The first thing he saw was a broad chest covered by a brown T-shirt, as his eyes slowly traveled up, he saw a thick neck with straining tendons, and then the sneer and cold blue eyes. Anthony Harris.

The man in front of him bent his knees so his eyes were level with Nick's. "Having some trouble there? Well, I'd say it'll get easier, but I was never one to lie."

Another punch to the face, this time coming from the left instead of the right. *Great, he's ambidextrous.*

"I can tell you, for whatever comfort it might give you, that I'm not going to kill you straight away. I'm going to take my time, like those prison faggots did with my son."

Nick's eyes got wide. An icy tingle went down his spine, and he fought to keep his body still when the urge to pull at the restraints was greater. *Fuck. Please Joe. Find me. Soon.*

"Jared never would have been there if not for your mother. Everyone knows how bad that place is. She could have sent him somewhere else. Hell, the whole thing was rigged from the get-go. Every objection overruled. Evidence not allowed. And your mother was the one responsible. That bitch that birthed you. Jesus, she couldn't even do that right. Look at you, for Christ's sake. Little girly-boy. Way I figure it, I'm doing the world a favor. But know this, none of this would be happening if not for your mother. Everything that happens to you here is because of her."

None of this would be happening if you weren't so psycho, Anthony Harris. Nick closed his eyes and willed his brain to go somewhere else for a while. He didn't want to listen to the monologue, the psycho's ramblings anymore. He looked up again. Harris had picked up a broom. He looked at Nick, then back to the broom. The man brought his hand up to the top of it and stroked it down the length as his mouth turned up in a wicked smile.

"Oh, yeah, this is going to be fun."

The last thing Nick saw was the broomstick arcing towards his head, then he felt a sharp pain, and finally, he felt nothing and sunk into blackness.

Where the fuck are you, Nicky? Joe looked down at his phone and then out into the stretch of dirt road that was closer to a hiking trail ahead of him. Nothing but the Wisconsin wilderness on either side of him. Nick was here somewhere. He was close. The tracker indicated he was within a half mile, though it was only accurate to about a hundred yards. Joe kept scanning as the SUV bumped along. *Come on, come on.*

Two hours ago, he'd just gotten out of the shower when his phone buzzed at him. He picked it up and his heart sank when he saw it wasn't a call he was receiving, but the tracking beacon. Nick had activated it. Thank Christ he still had it. Joe had been out the door sixty seconds later. He texted the FBI when he'd gotten into the car. The tracker had Nick north of Naperville and that's where Joe started, following along as the location refreshed and changed until it finally came to a stop, in the middle of Wisconsin's back woods.

Joe felt like crawling out of his skin. His nerves were on end. Nick was close, the tracker said so. The only things visible were trees and darkness. His knuckles were white where they gripped the steering wheel. Bumping along the road, he saw it. The tiniest of lights shimmered in the dark. Joe switched off his headlights and drove a bit further until he could make out the slight outline of a barn, still some distance away. He pulled over and turned off the ignition. He climbed out, grabbed his gun and slid it into his waistband. He patted his ankle, making sure his knife was still there before closing the door ever so quietly. He took a second to text the FBI; they'd be pissed, but fuck them, he wouldn't need to be here if they had done their jobs to begin with. He turned and headed towards the light.

Joe heard Anthony Harris before he saw him. He crouched low and slowly approached the closest window. It was dirty with years of grime, but through it he could see a broad man pacing and gesturing towards the back wall. He could only assume that was where Nick was. There were no other people visible, no other voices beyond Harris's. Joe stayed in his crouch as he approached the front of the barn. He needed to confirm who was in the barn and figure out the best way to go in.

Nick was roused from unconsciousness. He didn't know how long he'd been out, but however long it was, he was thankful for it. It didn't feel like Harris had done anything more to him in that time. His head hurt like a bitch. He shifted his legs and found them stiff but unbound. The relief dissipated when he realized there was a rope around his neck and his shirt was gone. Panic hit. His breaths came fast and shallow as he looked up to see Harris smiling down at him.

“Now the real fun begins.” The menacing sound of his voice made Nick wish he were still unconscious.

Nick pulled at his arms, testing the bonds at his wrists, but there was no give and only caused the rope to cut into his skin. His eyes got wide as he moved his head around to take in his surroundings. It looked like an old barn. The floor was dirt, and old planks made up the walls. Exposed beams lined the length of the room, and screwed into the one directly above his head, Nick realized with an intensified dread, there was a pulley with a rope threaded through it. A rope that was wrapped around Nick’s neck. His heart beat faster as he turned his head to follow the other end of the rope, only to have it stop all together when he saw the other end of the rope wrapped around what looked like a winch. Nick couldn’t stop the trembling that overtook his body.

Harris moved over to a table that stood on his left. Slowly, he skimmed his hands across the items laid upon it, almost like a hostess from a game show. Nick saw the broom from earlier, a beer bottle, and a couple of knives.

“It’s amazing what you can find in an old barn. There’s usually a lot of junk, but every now and again, you can find a real treasure.”

Nick’s stomach churned when Harris’s hand stopped to hover over a long metal stick with a U-shaped end and a blue handle. *A cattle prod.* Harris picked it up and pressed a button. The thing buzzed with electricity and a flicker of light jumped between the two prongs. Nick lost the battle with his stomach and vomited its contents all over his lap. *Oh God, please help me.*

Harris walked around behind him. Nick couldn’t see what he was doing. All he knew was that the man still had the cattle prod in his hands. He heard a click and a stream of metallic creaks, before the rope started tensing up from his neck. His neck was stretched up and then he was pulled up onto his feet. He heard another click. The motor silenced leaving Nick standing on his toes, struggling for balance to prevent the noose around his neck from tightening. He heard the buzz of the prod again and cringed. The action caused his body to crunch and the rope to tighten. Nick tried to regain his footing, and when he finally did, he drew in a rough breath.

“You see, Nicholas, my son was a good son, a dutiful one. A father couldn’t ask for more than Jared.” Anthony Harris’s voice was cold and it

scared Nick more than anything. Nick could hear the man's footsteps as he came round to face him. "But that was all taken away from me, and your mother was the cause. She sent him to that place. And then those prison faggots raped him. Held him down, shoved their dicks in his ass, ignored him as he screamed. And the guards, they were no better, they could've helped. They had to have known, yet they did nothing, and my son, after having been raped and beaten, ended up hanging from a bed sheet. Do you know how angry that makes me? Can you imagine what it is like for me to think about what he went through?"

Harris looked at the cattle prod and then back, straight into Nick's eyes that were wide with terror. "Maybe you can. And if not, you will. Everything my son felt, you will feel. That is a promise. Don't worry though. I have no intentions of putting my dick anywhere near your filthy faggot ass. I have other things planned."

The man took a step closer towards him and Nick tried to draw back, but the rope around his neck wouldn't let him. Gripping the prod in one hand, Harris reached the other one out and flicked the button on Nick's jeans. Nick's heart beat erratically, faster and faster, as Harris stepped back around Nick, out of his view. He felt the man grab at his jeans and boxers and pull them down to his ankles, effectively binding his feet again.

No, no, no, no, no! Oh God. No! Please. God. No! The words went round and round in his head, his mouth worked the words, but his voice wouldn't come. As if it knew that to make a sound would only further the man's fury. He felt the metal prongs dragging lines along his calf and up past his thigh. He clamped his eyes shut and prayed to whoever might be listening to just turn off his brain and his body. He willed the unconsciousness to come back but it wouldn't, and he jumped when the cattle prod scratched up the crease of his ass. He heard the man behind him draw a breath. Nick's whole body tensed.

A loud metallic sound started and Nick jerked forward, the rope cutting off his airway. He felt a deep scratch moving up his back and he was jerked again when the most intense pain he'd ever felt radiated from the center of his spine. He could feel the scream trying to escape but it was literally caught in his throat, and all that came out was a high-pitched squeak. He couldn't breathe.

That thought sent him into more of a panic. His body jerked again and again. He became unaware of his surroundings as he closed his eyes and focused all his energy as he tried to get his body back under his control. Throwing his shoulders and head, he wrenched himself back, and some of the pressure on his trachea was removed. He inhaled successfully once then twice, and with the second breath, regained his footing and balanced on his feet, naked with the rope around his neck and the pants around his ankles. He took a breath. Sweeter air than he'd ever tasted traveled from his mouth to his lungs. Another breath, and another, and another. Nick savored that sweet taste and momentary peace. Then he opened his eyes.

Joe had felt his heart stop when he'd finally found a hole in the barn wall that let him peer inside. Nick naked, held up by his neck. Anthony Harris walking around him, stalking, prodding with a cattle prod. *Anthony Harris is a dead man.* He needed to get inside, but first he needed to get Harris away from Nick. Away from the winch that would wind the rope tighter around Nick's neck. Get him away before he could do anything with that fucking cattle prod.

Quickly, he turned and let his eyes scan his surroundings. Nothing but weeds surrounded him. An old tractor, long past working he was sure, sat about thirty feet away. At the far corner of the barn past the small door, Joe saw what looked like the edge of an aluminum trash can. He moved closer to see and found not one but two. Joe had to improvise. He tried to tip one of them, but it was heavy. He was only able to tilt it an inch and he heard liquid sloshing around the inside. He grabbed at the other and it moved. Joe sent up a prayer. He bent his knees and lifted it, moving back a few feet and hoisting it as high as he could, throwing it with all his strength into the other can. A loud clanging sound echoed through the trees. And Joe moved.

He pulled the gun from his waistband, flicked the safety off, and took two quick steps to the door just as a strangled, garbled scream came from inside the barn. Joe lifted his leg and kicked the door in, his gun held straight out in front of him. The door bounced off the wall behind it but Joe barely noticed as his entire focus was on Anthony Harris, who had moved from behind Nick and now stood between them.

“Get on your knees.” Joe stared the man down. His gun was pointed at chest level. Joe managed to keep his voice cold and steady even as his heart was threatening to beat out of his chest. He needed to stay in control. He heard Nick’s labored breaths, but he couldn’t afford to look up at him, knowing the moment he did, his focus would shift, and that might be all Harris needed to get the upper hand.

Harris stood there. His gaze directed at Joe’s, cattle prod still gripped in the hand at his side. He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes, as if he were trying to puzzle out the situation. Joe had the answer, as he put a gentle pressure on the trigger, effectively letting the man know there would be no compromise.

“Get. On. Your. Knees.”

The corner of the man’s mouth turned up slightly. Joe’s brows knit together questioningly, but the other man held his hands out to his sides and his hand loosened slightly on the cattle prod. He made to drop it, but instead, swung his hand back and flung it forward as he charged. Joe squeezed the trigger.

The prod went wide and Anthony Harris fell to the floor, a perfect red circle in the center of his forehead. Brain matter and bone littered the floor. Joe took a deep breath and clicked on the safety of the gun before he tucked it into the back of his pants.

Finally he looked up at Nick, who stood stock still, silent tears running down his cheeks. Joe felt the sting of tears behind his own eyes, and he crossed the barn and bent down to cut the rope using the knife at his ankle. Nick slumped and Joe reached out to gather him in his arms before he could fall.

“I’ve got you, Nick. I’ve got you.” Nick eyes stared at him, through him. His nose was crooked and looked broken. His left eye was swollen, almost shut. Ugly purple bruises were blooming on both sides of his face. Joe couldn’t fight the tears anymore as they ran down, wetting his cheeks. “It’s okay, baby. He can’t hurt you. No one is ever going to hurt you again. Let me get these ropes off you okay?” Joe saw the tiniest of nods. Gently, he turned Nick around and reached up and loosened the noose before cutting it. He

didn't want to have to pull it over Nick's head; he was already traumatized enough. Then Joe sliced through the rope at Nick's wrists and fought to keep his breath silent as he looked at the angry abrasions they had left there. *Oh, Nicky.* He bent down and grabbed the pants at Nick's ankles and gently pulled them up.

His eyes leveled on an ugly gash running from Nick's ass to the middle of his back where it ended in a burn mark left from the cattle prod. Joe leaned over and placed a tender kiss on the wound. Nick's body started shaking, and the sounds of sobs filled the room. Joe wrapped his arms around him and pulled him tight against his body. Anthony Harris got off easy.

"Come on Nicky. Let's get out of here." Joe turned Nick around and tucked his head against into his neck, making sure to keep his body between Nick and the corpse on the floor as he moved them out the door.

Nick lifted his head and took a deep breath through his mouth as soon as they stepped out of the barn. The night was cool on his bare chest. He couldn't breathe through his nose, but he could taste the air on his tongue, and at that moment he could think of nothing better than the taste of fresh pine. He would never take breathing for granted again. He raised his hand to his throat. The skin was rough where the rope had been. He knew there would be ugly bruises there to match the ones on his wrists. His hand traveled from his throat to his face and gently traced around the puffiness, wincing when he went over his nose. It was broken. He probably wouldn't recognize himself if he looked in the mirror right now.

He closed his eyes, letting the night wash over him. He felt the calm of the woods and the sound of a breeze through the trees. He opened his eyes and tilted his head up to look at the sky and the millions of stars shining down. Stars he couldn't see through the city lights of Chicago. He wasn't afraid anymore. He brought his gaze down to Joe's face. A face filled with concern. His brows were furrowed again, and Nick didn't stop himself from bringing up his hand to smooth them out. He had the urge to smile, so he did.

"Nick? Are you okay?" Joe took his hands and rubbed them up and down Nick's arms. Nick didn't know if Joe did it more to reassure Nick or himself, but he let out a quiet sigh and leaned into the man.

“Nick?” There was a quiver in Joe’s voice. Nick pulled back and looked at him.

“I’m okay. Joe. I’m okay.” Nick’s voice came out scratchy and nasal. He brought his hand to his throat and swallowed.

Joe’s brought his hands up and gently placed them on each side of Nick’s face. His eyes darted around to Nick’s bruises and then back to his eyes, as if he were trying to decide if Nick was lying. Nick moved his hand up to cover one of Joe’s. “Really. I’m okay.”

Joe sucked in a breath and Nick watched as the veins on his forearms and neck started to pulse as if under a large strain. “Nicky...” Joe’s breath caught; his eyes were moist. Nick pressed his face into Joe’s hand. “Nicky, did he... did he...”

Nick didn’t want Joe to finish. He didn’t want to think about what would’ve happened if Joe had been even sixty seconds later.

“No, Joe. You got here in time.” The expression on Joe’s face relaxed, though it remained concerned. Then he drew Nick into a tight hug.

“Thank God. Thank God you kept the tracker. Thank God, Nicky. Thank God.”

Needing the mood to lighten now that the danger was gone, Nick let himself smile again. “Wow. Mr. Neanderthal finds religion. Huh? Who woulda thought?”

The curve of Joe’s mouth warmed Nick’s belly and spread out through his limbs.

“No, Nick. I found you. I found *you*.”

Nick pushed up on his toes and pressed a chaste kiss to Joe’s lips just as the FBI arrived.

Joe leaned back into his sofa and propped his beer on his knee. He hadn’t wanted to cook, so he’d ordered a pizza and figured he’d eat it and watch the game. It had almost become a routine. It had been nearly two months since that night with Anthony Harris. The FBI had swarmed in, and before he could do anything, Nick was carried away, and Joe was plopped into an SUV and

taken to an office and questioned for hours. Joe had headed to the hospital as soon as they let him go, but Nick was gone. His parents had him transferred to a private facility to avoid press, where he could recover in peace.

Joe had called and left messages, texts. None had been returned. Joe had taken a couple weeks off, and when he went back, he'd taken mainly assignments working out of the office, coordinating jobs and consulting over the phone. He knew he wasn't quite ready to head back to the field. He'd even gone to see the therapist. Not uncommon for police officers and war veterans. Joe had fought in a one-man war, and won but that hadn't stopped the nightmares. Nightmares that woke him at night. Nightmares of strangled screams and of Nick hanging from the rafters because Joe had been too late. They had lessened somewhat over the weeks, but even as recently as two nights ago, he'd woken drenched in a cold sweat unable to return to bed.

Letting out a long sigh, he swiped at the condensation dripping down the beer bottle with his thumb. The doorbell rang, and he leaned over and grabbed his wallet before he hoisted himself up and headed to greet the pizza guy.

Joe opened the door and sucked in a rough breath. It wasn't the pizza guy.
"Nick."

"Hi, Joe." He looked good. He sounded good. His voice seemed to have recovered from any damage the rope might have caused. The bruising on his face had vanished, and he looked exactly the same except for his nose, which had a small bump right in the middle of it. Joe's heart thumped wildly, and he fought off the urge to bend over to kiss that bump and then those lips. Nick hadn't called him back. That was enough of a sign for him to realize that the feelings that had caught him so off guard were one-sided. That last kiss, and every one before it, had been adrenaline fueled. He'd come to accept that fact. Adrenaline faded, but unfortunately, Joe's feelings didn't. He looked down and saw his grey USMC hoodie folded neatly under Nick's arm, and his heart sank.

"Can I come in?" Nick's voice was soft as he looked up at Joe through those dark bangs.

"Yes, of course, sorry... I thought you were the pizza guy." Joe opened the door and stood back to let him pass.

“No, I should have called first, but didn’t want this conversation to be over the phone.”

“Um, all right. Have a seat. Do you want a beer or something to drink?”

“No, no thank you. I don’t know how long I’ll be staying.”

Joe dropped his gaze to the floor. Dread flooded through him and mentally he threw up every wall he could. He didn’t want to have this conversation. He was happily miserable living with the small hope that one day Nick might come back to him. *Not like he was ever his to begin with.* He looked at Nick and tried unsuccessfully to smile, knowing that he had to accept whatever it was the man had to say. He had to accept it and let that miniscule speck of hope inside him die. He owed Nick that much. Finally, he took a deep breath and closed the door.

The doorbell rang. *Goddamnit.*

He threw the door open with a little too much force, not hearing what the man said, just shoving a twenty in his hand and grabbing the pizza. He grunted a thank you and closed the door.

“Want any pizza?”

“No thanks, Joe. I’m fine really. I need to say some things and then I can let you get on with your evening. Um, I brought your sweatshirt back. Thank you for letting me use it.” Nick pointed at the sweatshirt he’d placed on the coffee table. He was sitting with his back straight, and had started fidgeting with his hands.

Joe’s feet were heavy as he walked to the kitchen table and tossed down the box before steeling himself and heading back to the living room. He took a seat in the armchair across from where Nick was on the sofa. He scrubbed his hands over his face and rubbed the back of his neck before resting his elbows on his knees. Then he raised his head to look at the handsome man sitting across from him.

“Okay. What do you want to talk about, Nick?”

“I just wanted to thank you. Thank you for everything you did. You saved my life that day.”

“I ended Anthony Harris’s life, Nick. You saved your own when you activated that tracker.” Joe looked back down at his hands. There were so many other things that he wanted to talk about. Anthony Harris was not among them.

“The tracker that you gave me...” Nick’s voice was soft, and he had turned his head and looked out the window. The sun was starting to set, and Nick’s face was glowing in the orange light. *God, he is beautiful.*

“Nick, you don’t need to thank me.”

“Did you get the check from my parents?”

“Yes, Nick.” The Daniels had sent a check covering his fees to the office. Another check totaling more than three times his annual salary had arrived at his home. That check remained in a drawer in his desk.

“But you didn’t cash it?” Nick was looking at him, his head cocked to the side, questioning.

“I didn’t want the money, Nick. It wasn’t about the money.” There was an edge to his voice he hadn’t meant to be there.

Nick took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a few seconds. He looked like he was trying to calm himself, or working out the right words to say. Joe waited in silence.

Then Nick started talking.

“It’s been a long two months, Joe.” Nick paused, but Joe didn’t think he was looking for Joe to fill the quiet. So he waited.

“After the FBI came, I was caught in a bit of a whirlwind. Doctors, agents, my parents... It was just room after room, question after question. I don’t remember what I said to them. They said I was in shock. I tend to agree.” Nick exhaled in a sigh. “My parents showed up, and a whole new shit storm started. I’m sure you can imagine my mother was not too happy with the FBI. She went up one side of them and down the other. It made my cow cunt speech look like praise.” Joe looked over at the man who was looking at his lap and smoothing his hands over his jeans. He thought he could see a hint of a smile on Nick’s mouth.

“Anyway, I’m sure you know, I was transferred to a hospital closer to home and got released about a week later. They were worried about head injuries, between the car bombing and the repeated blows to the head. But my wounds healed, and there are no long-term repercussions to my brain.”

Joe just looked over at Nick and drank him in while he could. It felt awkward between them. Nick was closed off. He’d never seen him look as unsure as he did sitting on that sofa.

“I heard, Nick. Your mother wrote me a letter and sent it with the check.”

“Oh, God, I’m doing this all wrong.” Nick ran his hands through his hair, and his leg had started bouncing. Joe moved over and sat next to him on the couch making sure to leave plenty of room in between them.

“Nick, it’s fine, you’re fine. If you don’t want to talk, you don’t have to. It’s okay.” It wasn’t really, but those were Joe’s issues. He just wanted to comfort Nick, but stopped himself from reaching out physically.

Nick let out another sigh. “No, Joe, I need to say this. I’ve wanted to call for weeks, but I’ve been trying to deal with... I’ve had some anger issues.” Nick turned to look at Joe. His face showed a determination that hadn’t been there before. Joe didn’t want to hear what he’d say. He’d already gone over all the mistakes he’d made with Nick. He knew when he heard the same words come out of Nick, they would hurt twice as much.

“Nick, I’m sorry. I know I need to apologize, I couldn’t figure out the right words to say how sorry I am, that I let you get hurt. That I wasn’t there to stop him from taking you. I’m...”

Nick reached up and put two fingers over Joe’s lips. Joe’s heart raced with the contact. “No, I’m not angry with you. I’ve never been angry with you. You got me out of there. You never did anything wrong. I was angry with everyone else, the FBI, my parents, Harris, the world. But I’ve never been angry with you, Joe.” He let his fingers slide down, and looked up at Joe with those swirling hazel eyes. Joe couldn’t look away if he’d wanted to. “I was in a dark and ugly place for weeks after you saved me. But I’m working through it. I’ve been talking to some people, and they are helping me. But I wasn’t ready to talk to you. Not until now.”

“I didn’t want you to see that ugliness. And, I wanted to make sure what I was feeling was real. Not something that sprang out of an intense situation. But the truth is that I haven’t stopped thinking about you for the last seven weeks. I close my eyes and see you, and it’s not you standing over Harris’s body. Or you when you wrapped your arms around me and cut the ropes off. No, I’m thinking about how your laugh sounds or the look in your eyes when you’re talking about your friends. The way you cursed when you forgot about the cut on your neck and rubbed it anyway. I want more of that. I want to see more of you. I know I’m younger and...”

“Shut up, Nick.” Joe grabbed Nick and pulled him into his arms before crushing his lips down on that pretty mouth. Nick sat stiff for a moment before sinking into Joe and the kiss with a sigh. When his lips parted, Joe took advantage, pushing his tongue in between to explore. Nick squirmed and moved his hands up to run through Joe’s hair. Joe pulled back to look into Nick’s face. Nick looked at him with wide, swirling eyes. “I want you, Nick. All of you. Every outrageous, beautiful, amazing piece. I want it. Somewhere in there, I fell. I fell hard. I haven’t found my way back, and I don’t want to.”

Butterflies swarmed in Nick’s stomach. Joe wanted him. His whole body tingled. He pulled Joe’s head over to kiss him and pushed them both back so they were lying on the couch. He felt Joe’s hands rubbing up over his back and finally down to squeeze his ass. Nick sighed into Joe’s mouth as he broke the kiss and let his lips and tongue move down over the stubble and down to Joe’s neck. He sucked at the pulsing vein and then placed a gentle kiss on Joe’s prominent Adam’s apple. He felt the vibration and heard a groan before he moved over to the other side, chuckling, and licked up his neck to nibble at Joe’s earlobe. “Take me to bed, Joe.”

Nick suddenly felt weightless, and the next thing he knew he was staring upside down at Joe’s mighty fine ass. He couldn’t stop himself as he leaned in and gave it a bite through the thick denim. Joe yelped, and then Nick was flipped over and onto the bed. He looked up to see Joe stalking towards him. The man’s blue eyes were dark as he pulled his T-shirt over his head and threw it onto the floor. Nick stared at him, not caring that he was drooling. He felt his cock fill as Joe crawled over and laid himself down between his spread

legs. Nick reveled in the weight pressing down on him and bucked his hips up as his mouth frantically searched for Joe's lips, needing to taste them. He brought his arms up to Joe's shoulders and squeezed tight before letting his nails dig their way down the man's back. Tongues tangled; Nick's hands followed the skin from Joe's back and down under the waistband of his jeans. He pulled Joe's hips towards his own, needing friction and relief.

"We've got too many clothes on." Joe's voice was breathless as he pulled back and got off Nick to stand at the side of the bed. Nick groaned at the loss but knew it was worth it when the sound of a zipper reached his ears. Joe looked into his eyes, never breaking contact as he pushed his jeans and boxers to the floor. Joe's cock was thick and cut and stood up proudly against his belly. Nick licked his lips and maneuvered to the edge of the bed. Glancing up at Joe, he stared at the hard cock in his face before leaning his head to the right and tracing a line from the man's thigh to his hip with his tongue. Nick watched as goosebumps rose all over that tanned skin. He smiled as he continued his quest, his tongue moved over to Joe's belly button and dove in.

"Lie down, Joe." Nick's voice was shaky and he didn't care. He got up off the bed and Joe lay down on his back, slowly stroking his cock with one hand, the other rubbing up over his ribbed abdomen to his furred chest. Nick thought he'd come just at the sight of it. "God, you're beautiful."

Joe chuckled. "I guess we can't blame the head injury this time huh?"

"I couldn't blame the head injury then." Nick watched Joe's eyes widen as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt and then let it fall off to the floor. He toed off his shoes and socks and rubbed his hands down his chest pausing to pinch at his nipples. He watched as Joe's cock got thicker, his eyes darker.

"Do you know how many times I imagined this? How many times I lay in my bed and stroked myself off imagining it was your hand or your mouth? How many different ways I've thought of having that fine cock of yours, wondering how you were going to taste?" Joe was shaking on the bed. His pupils blown, his cock dripping. Nick licked his lips. "I'm going to find out, Joe."

He brought his hands to the buttons of his jeans and flicked them open. Hooking his thumbs in his waistband he turned around and bent over to

display his ass as he wiggled his pants and boxers to the floor. He slowly rolled his body back up and turned back and found his face an inch away from Joe's. One of Joe's hands grabbed the back of his head and brought it to his in a desperate kiss, the other roughly grabbed at Nick's cock. If Nick could have breathed, he would have whimpered at the contact. Nick shoved his tongue into Joe's mouth and they twisted and tangled. Hands were everywhere. Rubbing, touching, grabbing. Nick caught a breath and brought his hands up to Joe's chest. He captured a nipple between his fingers and twisted. Joe growled. It was the sexiest sound Nick had ever heard.

"I thought I told you to lie down." Nick raised an eyebrow. Joe narrowed his eyes at him, but did as he asked. Nick crawled on top of him, lining them up mouth to mouth, cock to cock. He took his tongue and traced around Joe's mouth and when the man's tongue darted from between his lips, Nick caught it with his teeth. Joe whimpered and Nick released him. He pushed up on his knees and bent his head down, tracing Joe's body with his tongue and nipping with his teeth. Joe groaned when he sucked his nipples into his mouth, first one then the other. He sat up and ran his hands over Joe's chest, relishing the feel and scratch of the hair beneath his fingertips. Nick's cock was hard and twitching. He moved his hips and let it rub up against the length of Joe's.

He moved down the bed before his cock overruled his mind and finished this much too early. He bent his neck to lick at the toned muscles of Joe's abdomen. Joe's cock was trembling at his chin, and he smiled and brought his hand over to stroke it slowly from root to tip. Joe let out a long moan. "Nicky..."

Nick smiled. He released Joe's cock and bent and placed a kiss on Joe's hipbone. He laved it with his tongue and sucked at the skin, marking him before moving down between Joe's legs. Joe gasped when he took his tongue and ran it up the line separating his balls. He circled each one before drawing it into his mouth. Joe tasted salty and musty and all man. Nick loved it, as did his cock, which was raging and angry and desperate to come. Nick reached down and tugged at his sac, hoping to relieve some of the need and buy himself some more time. He traced his tongue up from Joe's balls to the tip of his cock, lapping around the crown and sucking up the precum that had pooled there before taking the whole thing down his throat.

“Holy fuck! Nick! Jesus stop. Don’t stop. Nick, I’m gonna...”

Nick pulled off and clamped his hand around the base of Joe’s dick. “Oh no you don’t, not yet. Where’s the stuff, Joe?” Joe reached a shaky hand over and fumbled in a drawer of the bedside table then threw a strip of condoms and a bottle of lube at Nick. Nick laughed. “Ready, huh?” Another growl. Nick’s cock poked up at his belly.

He tore the condom wrapper open with his teeth, then quickly rolled it down over Joe’s hard cock before he took a squirt of lube and reached around behind him to stretch himself. He kept his eyes on Joe’s and watched as the man’s eyes became impossibly large. He smiled down and wiped his hand on the sheet before moving up to position himself over Joe’s cock. He closed his eyes as Joe’s hands traveled up his torso and back down to settle on his thighs. He grabbed Joe’s cock and held it firmly as he worked his way down onto it. He breathed in with the burn and slowly moved himself up and down, letting the tip slip in just an inch before raising himself back up and doing it all over again. Joe’s breath was coming hard, and Nick looked down at the man beneath him. His neck muscles were tight and his jaw clenched. Nick felt his own need building and building within him, and he pushed himself all the way down with a feral cry.

“Oh, fuck me, baby. Fuck me. Fuck me. Hard.”

Nick drew himself up to the tip again and crashed his weight down, feeling Joe’s balls against his ass. He did it again. Joe moved his hips up to match the rhythm. The room was filled with the smell of sex and sweat, the sounds of slapping flesh. Nick couldn’t stop the mumbled gibberish that was coming out of his mouth. He needed to come. He needed to come now. He reached his hand down to his prick and Joe batted it away. He gasped as the man stroked his length, twisting at the end. Nick felt his balls pull up tight. “Oh yeah, God, Joe. Please I need... I need...”

“Come for me, Nicky. Come for me now.”

And Nick did. He came with a scream. His vision filled with white and he covered Joe’s hairy chest with streams of cum. He rocked his hips once more, and Joe’s deep groan filled the room, his hands grabbed at Nick’s ass and held them steady as he pumped his cock up once, twice then came with a deep shudder and a shout that Nick could feel vibrating in his belly.

“Come here.” Joe pushed up, pulled Nick’s face to his, and kissed him long and deep. He broke the kiss and pulled back, resting his forehead against Nick’s as he caught his breath. “Jesus. That was fucking amazing.” His eyes were blue and soft when he looked up into Nick’s eyes. He pulled his head back and stroked down Nick’s hair. Nick pushed his head into the touch. He felt sated and safe.

“You are amazing.” Nick’s voice was almost a whisper. Joe looked at him and smiled, still combing his hands through Nick’s hair.

Joe sighed and lay back, as he pulled out of Nick, then leaned over to toss the condom in the garbage can. He lay back on the bed and pulled Nick close. Nick placed his head on Joe’s chest, closed his eyes and listened to the beating of his heart and the breath moving in and out of his lungs.

“Nick?”

Nick propped his chin up on Joe’s pec. “Hmm?”

Joe looked serious. His eyes were narrowed and that damned furrow was back between his brows. Nick stiffened, unsure of what Joe planned to say.

Joe’s voice was stern when he spoke. Needles crept up Nick’s spine. “You took me by surprise. I usually don’t like teases, or teasing. You took control. You got off on it too. I gotta be up front with you, Nick...”

Nick knew his eyes were big with worry. *Oh, fuck. He didn’t like it, Joe didn’t like it. It was a one off. He’d come on too strong. Shit, shit, shit.*

“All that licking and sucking...” Joe leaned over and sucked Nick’s bottom lip into his mouth. Nick saw a hint of a smile that grew into a bigger one when he released Nick’s lip. “I’m a competitive man, Nick. I need to warn you of that, because...” He took a deep breath. Nick’s breath stuck in his throat. “Payback is a bitch.”

Nick was taken off guard as Joe tackled him and proceeded to show him that, along with being a bitch, payback could be mind-blowingly incredible as well.

THE END

Author Bio

Ali MacLagan lives in a small town in Maine with her two children. It has been an embarrassing number of years since she's written anything substantial. In between refereeing her two teenagers, and her full time job working with mentally ill adolescents, she enjoys photography and taking strolls in the woods or by a lake.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#)

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HEAD OVER HEELS

By Sunne Manello

Photo Description

Although it's in color, the photograph has an old-fashioned feel. Two short-haired men recline together, visible from the waist up. Both wear collared shirts with no ties, and their sleeves are rolled up. The young man in the foreground wears suspenders, his eyes are half shut and he has a peaceful expression. The slightly older man cradling him wears a waistcoat. He looks with nearly closed eyes and a loving expression at the man in his arms.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I have tried to come up with a specific prompt for this photo but nothing is coming to me. This photo could be telling so many different stories:

Perhaps the man in the suspenders is relaxing in the arms of his lover/husband after a particularly long, hard day at work...

Perhaps the two men are finally together for good after dealing with many obstacles that kept them apart...

Perhaps they have just made it to their hotel room and are finally able to relax after their very long and tiring (but very happy) wedding day...

Perhaps because of distance or circumstances, they are only able to get together sporadically— a weekend every few months, etc....

Perhaps they are lovers, partners... but the man in the back is also a Dom and the man in suspenders is his sub and needs some “attention” from his Dom...

I am completely open to whatever story this photo inspires in the author, all I want is serious, emotional, romantic. Don't care if it's angsty or kinky as long as the emotion is there.

Sincerely,

C.J. Anthony

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: brother-in-law, widower, first time, family, full life, loss, men with children, age gap, quick evolving love

Word count: 13,658

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HEAD OVER HEELS

By Sunne Manello

Summer 1955

Richard Anthony Beale III stood at the railing of the small balcony and gazed out at the ocean. Blue and grey mixed together in an impressive but depressing way. The rolling motion of the huge ocean cruiser *Liberté* had become familiar over the last two days. Behind him, in the luxury suite, he heard Therese, his baby's nanny and his childhood ally, singing a sweet song to his baby boy. It was nappy time, and William was by god due for some sleep. He hadn't handled being at sea well so far.

But what could Richard do? It was long past time to fulfill his dead wife's last wish.

“Begrab mich bei meinen Eltern.” Bury me with my parents.

Elisabeth's spine had been broken, her lungs punctured. She had died a painful death. Richard closed his eyes; the image of her young and vital body so cruelly destroyed still haunted him. Damn that car, that crazy fast car. It had been her wish, a present for the birth of his first son, and he had given it to her, like everything she had desired. It was the least he could do for her after marrying a guy like him, a man who wasn't able to cherish a beautiful and vital woman like her. And as soon as she had been able to party again, she had been driving around like she had lived—fast and fearless.

And now, ten months later, he was bringing her ashes home to her twin brother to be buried in the grave with her parents. It had taken this long because he hadn't wanted to cross the ocean with a baby in winter and he had to arrange for all his business to be taken care of by his assistant, Jonathan. Now they were on their way to Le Havre and from there on they would travel by car to Germany, to a city called Friedrichshafen at Lake Constance. Elisabeth's parents had been buried there, and her brother Paul was teaching in the well-known boarding school, Salem, close by.

A noise behind him disrupted his morose broodings.

“He is sleeping now.” Therese took one long look at him and added, “Maybe you should take a nap, too. I don’t mind staying here.”

“No, go and have some fun at the sun deck. Enjoy it. I’ll be there if he wakes up and if I need you, I’ll send a steward after you, okay?”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, go!” He quietly ushered her towards the door. “We’ll be in Le Havre tomorrow and then your fun will be over.”

“Ha, as if.” She grinned back at him over her shoulder, then snatched a book from the table, gathered her sunglasses and stylish sunhat, and left the suite.

Richard couldn’t help but smile. She had been his own nanny’s helper and so much fun, just nine years his senior when she had started to work for his parents at the age of fifteen. Therese had been enough of a child herself to hide in the woods with him, playing robber and sheriff. And every so often coming up with a plan to hide activities which hadn’t been suitable for the heir of the “Beale-fortune”.

The moment it had become clear that Elisabeth wouldn’t care for their son he had called her, and she had come within days. Now over fifty years old, she still hadn’t lost that spark of mischief that had entertained him as a child. Her down-to earth attitude had kept him together over the last months. She was his savior.

Richard stopped his musings. He tiptoed to his son’s room, opened the door cautiously and peeked into the bed. William slept on his back, both hands in little fists, the soft auburn hair on his head a bit sweaty, his lips thrust out as if he was waiting for a kiss. To resist the urge to do exactly that, was difficult. He loved his baby. He loved him like no one else in this world.

Paul closed the book in front of him and looked up at the faces of twenty-four children.

“And this is the end of the story.” He paused dramatically. “And the beginning of your summer holidays.”

The noise level only increased a bit. Ah, such well-behaved children, his pupils. Karl stretched his arm, indicating that he wanted to ask something.

“Yes, Karl?”

“Herr Hohenfels, is it true that you are going to teach us English next year?”

“That is true. The government has concluded that starting the next school year, English has to be a part of the education. As you may know, I’ve learned English at my school, and studied it as a minor subject at University. That means I’m going to be your English teacher next school year.”

Another hand in the air. Paul looked at the boy. “Patrick?”

“Is it difficult? And do you know anyone who is from England?”

He had to keep himself from grinning: “No, I think it is very easy to learn. You are all going to like it. And no, I don’t know anyone from England. But I’m going to meet my brother-in-law tomorrow for the first time, and he is from America. Also, my mother had friends in America who came to visit us shortly after the end of the war.”

Karl’s hand was in the air again in his own slightly erratic manner. He burst out, “Why do you have a brother-in-law in America?”

“Karl.” Paul gave him a stern look. “Can you please wait until I give you permission to talk?”

“I’m sorry, Herr Hohenfels.” Eyes downcast and a demure look on his face; this boy was going to be a real handful in a few years. Who was he kidding, he already was a handful.

Paul took a deep breath. That was the hard part: “My sister visited the American friends I mentioned. She fell in love and married an American. Now he is coming to bring her ashes back. She died last year.”

His class was silent and Paul sighed. So much for the good mood before the holidays. These kids had been born in the last years of the war, and he was all too aware that somewhere in their memories the fear of dying had been planted. To lighten the mood he added, “And he is bringing my nephew. A little boy named William, just a year old. Can you imagine how excited I am? I haven’t seen him at all.”

And like a light switch turned on, his pupils brightened and spent the last minutes asking questions about the baby.

After the lesson, Paul did a quick clean-up of his classroom. He had done most of it in the days before, well aware that leaving directly only a day after closing for summer was a favor granted by the headmaster. “Extraordinary circumstances”—thank god. Paul would be on his way to Friedrichshafen tomorrow morning.

Richard hadn't slept well. Oh, it hadn't been the bed's fault, that one was very comfortable, the room big and airy despite the fact that the Hotel Krone in Friedrichshafen was an old and historic building close to the small yachting harbor. His dreams had bothered him. He couldn't recall them but the permanent feeling of loneliness and loss still tingled in his guts.

Today was the day. He would finally meet Paul, his brother-in-law. They had to arrange the funeral, and of course, Paul would want to meet William. He groomed with special care. It always helped him to focus and today was not going to be easy. He knew what Paul looked like; he had seen a few pictures. The similarity to Beth was obvious. Paul was the male version of his pretty and dead wife—the very attractive male version. Young, fresh face, clean eyes and a charming smile. He couldn't suppress the nervous flutter in his stomach. Immediately the guilt followed. Not the guilt to find a man attractive. No, he had made his peace with that fact a long time ago. It was the remorse that he hadn't been able to be a better husband to his wife and that of all men in the world this one would be the worst for him to find striking.

A look at his watch showed him that his peace would be over soon. He was already hearing Therese and William in the adjoining room, accompanied by the soft clinking sounds of dishes. They obviously were having breakfast. The delighted sounds of his boy made him smile. William was close to walking. He pulled himself up on every available piece of furniture and had no patience. Richard wasn't so sure if it was a blessing or a curse when the boy finally would be able to walk.

Smiles greeted him when he entered the bright living room of the hotel suite.

“Good morning my lovelies. How fare thee this wonderful morning?” A kiss on his son’s auburn hair, a smile for Therese, and he took his seat at the table. “Do we have eggs?”

“Good morning, Richard. Of course, here,” Therese handed him a basket with brown, warm eggs. “And how are you?”

He wanted to tell her that he was well, fine and dandy and whatever but blurted out. “Nervous.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m afraid that he is going to blame me?” Not that he wasn’t already blaming himself enough.

“No, Richard,” Therese’s voice got that stern sound that he remembered so well from his childhood. “Stop that immediately. It was a car accident. Beth was driving; nobody else was in the car, not even on the street. She miscalculated the speed and the bend and it happened. It is not your fault.”

“I know, rationally I know. But I still feel like I did something wrong.”

“Did you?”

“Do something wrong?” He frowned, not sure where she was going with this question.

“Yes. Did you do something wrong to Beth that makes you feel guilty now?”

Richard wasn’t sure how to answer that. Marrying her in the first place? Never telling her he was queer? Getting her pregnant? Buying her that damn fast car? Therese could have her pick.

He was saved from his answer by a knock at the door. Their visitor had arrived.

This was the moment Paul had waited for. He would finally meet his nephew. The door of the hotel suite opened and Paul recognized the man he had seen and silently admired in pictures. He had to make a conscious effort to not let his jaw droop. Richard in person was his very own wet dream. Every inch a manly man, well groomed but still with an unmistakable hint of alpha

male around him. Short, dark hair, grey eyes, the kind of skin you knew would hold stubble well before the evening, broad shoulders, an inch taller than him at least.

“Good morning. It’s nice to meet you finally.” And the man had a sexy voice, too.

Paul scrambled his last remaining brain cells together: “Yes, likewise.” Great answer to make an impression; this was so not how he had pictured this meeting. “I mean, I’m glad I can finally meet you and, of course, William.”

“Of course, come in.” Richard motioned into the room. A pretty older woman and a toddler were sitting at the breakfast table.

“Come and meet Therese, Will’s nanny, and,” the pride in man’s voice was obvious, “here is William himself.”

Paul knew he took the woman’s hand and greeted her, but his eyes were glued to the boy, who, unconscious of the severity of the moment, munched happily on a cookie. God, he looked so much like Lisa and even more like himself. The spitting image of their heritage, the auburn hair, the big blue eyes, he even had the same slightly bigger right earlobe like Paul himself.

“Hello Will.” Paul extended his hand cautiously, offering it palm upwards. William grabbed one finger and stuffed it into his mouth, chewing on it with sharp little teeth, the blue eyes intent on his face. Slimy cookie remainders slipped over his finger and Paul fell in love head over heels. With a sudden clarity he realized that he wouldn’t be able to leave and go on with his own life. His sister’s son had just stolen a big piece of his heart.

A warm hand on his shoulder kicked him out of his daze.

“Don’t let the little dinosaur bite you, his tiny teeth are sharp. There are more coming and he stuffs everything in his mouth to chew on.”

Paul laughed shakily: “I can feel that.” He carefully extracted his finger, bite-marks and cookie-slime the evidence. “Can I hold him? Please?”

Richard just handed him a napkin and nodded.

Paul wiped his finger and then took the boy in his arms, and sticky, sweet-smelling hands touched his face. William’s body was so light, the bones still

small in his hands. He hadn't been prepared for the onslaught of emotions, for the sudden and total rearranging of his own priorities. He didn't realize the tears that were running down his face either. So this was how love felt. He wasn't going to give him back.

“Paul?” That voice again. “Are you okay?”

He nodded, of course he was okay, he was just falling in love with this little person in his arms. A little finger tried to crawl into his nose. He playfully snapped after the hand and was rewarded with delightful giggling. “Yes, everything is fine, sorry. It's just... he is wonderful.”

“I know.” Nothing more. Richard couldn't say anything more anyway. He was out of his element, so completely that it shocked him. Paul was eerily similar in appearance to Beth but so different in manners. How he had immediately tuned into William made him speechless. And the obvious delight and emotion he showed was nothing compared to the slightly helpless affection Elisabeth had shown for her son.

With a firm hand on his shoulder, Richard led Paul to the couch in the middle of the room and nudged him to sit down. “Take your time, Will is obviously pleased to meet you.” And it was true, William gurgled and giggled and patted Paul's face with delight. Paul just nodded, eyes fixed on the boy.

Richard turned back to the table where Therese was following this emotional moment without interfering. Now she stood up, laid her napkin on the table and murmured, “I'll be in my room just in case, but I think he needs a bit of time. Poor boy looks overwhelmed.” And with a thoughtful look first at Richard and then Paul, she left.

Richard's eyes followed her exit with a stunned expression. She was going to let him handle this alone? No help? God, he really didn't understand women. He turned back to the young man on the couch.

“Do you want something to drink? Maybe a cup of tea? I can order you a breakfast, you must be hungry.” Richard wasn't sure what made him so nervous that he suddenly started talking like there was no brake between his brain and his mouth.

“No, thanks, I'm fine.”

“I’m sorry, I’m usually...”

“It just overwhelmed...”

“Sorry, please, I didn’t mean to interrupt...”

“Oh, the whole situation...”

Paul started laughing. They both were hilarious, asking, making excuses, talking at the same time. William made high squealing noises of delight and jumped with his whole little body up and down in Paul’s arms.

“Hey there, little man. Careful, I don’t want to let you fall down.”

“He can be a handful.” Richard couldn’t suppress the grin. Will was a whirlwind; a handful was a mild description of his son.

“I can imagine. If he takes anything after his mom...” There was a pause. “Don’t get me started on her.” Paul felt a lump in his throat. He didn’t want to think of Lisa right now. It still hurt even after all this time. Maybe it was because he had never buried her. For him, nothing substantial had changed since the time she had traveled to America. The only difference had been the absence of letters. The last one, the one that burnt a hole in his jacket, came a week after he received the phone call that informed him about her accident and death. A message from the grave. Paul wasn’t sure whether he should show the letter to Richard or not. It was a very personal message, a very telling and private observation. He needed time; he needed to get to know the man. Time, yes, maybe the best course of action was to find out about that.

“How long do you intend to stay?”

“As long as it takes.” Richard wasn’t sure what he meant with this answer but it seemed right to him. As long as it would take to feel normal again? As long as it would take for Paul to get to know William? Or as long as it would take for him to get to know Paul? “Well, we have to plan the funeral. That would be the first step.”

“And after that? You are going back to America?”

Richard could see disappointment in Paul’s eyes. He had the sudden urge to put him at ease. “No, I don’t plan to go back for a while. My business there is in good hands and I’m thinking of expanding to Europe. So I thought of

finding a base here in the vicinity, and traveling around to get new business connections”

“A base?”

“Yes, I thought of renting or buying a house. Maybe here at Lake Constance? I enjoy the view over the lake.”

“It certainly is a great view on sunny days. On rainy days it can be depressing as hell.”

Richard grinned: “You’re sure you are a schoolteacher?”

“Yes?”

“Depressing as hell? Language, my dear Paul, language.”

The blush that crept into the young man’s cheeks was adorable. Two bright red spots that immediately got beaten with two very sticky baby hands. Paul turned towards William: “I think someone is getting very impatient here? What do you think, Will?”

As if given permission, the baby boy started to babble incoherent things and tried to leave Paul’s grip. Which was the reason why Paul positioned him on the floor: “He is lively. How do you keep him tamed?”

Richard had paid less attention to the action than to the grown, cute man in front of him, so he was startled by the question. Damn, had his brother-in-law caught him ogling? “Will? Oh, we provide him with outlets, like his playground at home, which actually so far isn’t as used as it will be the moment he can walk. But he loves to play in the sand. Or the swing. Here it’s going to be a bit more difficult. I thought about going to the lake and feeding ducks later. Maybe we can find a playground.”

Paul wasn’t sure what to think of the pause that had followed his innocent question. It wasn’t like he had told the attractive man in front of him that he not only wanted to get closer to his nephew but to the nephew’s father, too. He hadn’t expected it, this sudden, overwhelming attraction. And the immediate moment afterwards when he had seen Will for the first time, the urge to claim and protect and never let go. The pull towards Richard had been forced into the background before it had even had a chance to take root. But now it had come back. Mightily. *Wow.*

“Would you like to accompany us? Will, Therese and me? Feeding ducks, I mean?” Richard wasn’t sure what he had done but Paul seemed to be struck with muteness: “Paul?”

“Ducks? Yes, of course, it would be my pleasure. I’m sorry, I’m just... it’s all a bit overwhelming.” The shy smile did something to Richard’s guts.

“Well, then let’s go. I’ll call Therese, can you pick up Will and follow me?” And with that, Richard took command of “Operation Ducks”.

It was a full success. William was delighted, Therese and Richard bantered good-naturedly, and included Paul in their conversations. They ordered a light lunch in a café near the lake, then walked slowly back to the hotel to tuck William in for his nap. Therese excused herself again, declaring that she wanted to take advantage of someone else looking after Richard during Will’s nap. She finally would be able to finish the novel she had been reading for weeks.

They were alone, a pot of coffee on the table and a load of questions and tasks to tackle. Richard wasn’t sure where to begin. So far he had gotten the impression that Paul was a very easygoing, calm and warm person with a dry wit. He obviously adored William, it was fun to watch. Talk about being bent around a little finger. He liked the young man already, he enjoyed his company. It was a pity that he had never seen brother and sister together, as a pair they must have been quite a show. Well, maybe it was for the best he would tackle the most important questions first: “Let’s talk about the funeral first, okay?”

Paul nodded: “Yes, I have already informed the pastor. We can have a service at the little chapel in the graveyard, and the stonemason will add Lisa’s name and dates to our family’s gravestone as soon as I give him notice.”

“Are there any relatives or friends you want to invite? How do you do your funerals?”

Paul’s face darkened: “No, no relatives left, and no friends. The only family friends that remained are the Winterbergs, the family Lisa went to in America.”

Which meant that Paul had no family friends or relatives either.

“Okay, then, what about having the funeral next week, as soon as the pastor can manage. It’ll be just us. And I have brought a few things back with me, too. Your letters to her, for example. And a few pieces of jewelry I assume have been in your family for a while?”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

So he was back to being polite. Somehow the topic had caused Paul to retreat, to rethink his open attitude. Richard wasn’t sure why but he was certain that he didn’t want that. “Paul?” The demanding tone in his voice seemed to startle the young man.

“Yes?”

“You know that you still have a family? We are family. William is your nephew and I’m your brother. We will keep contact, hell, we even intend to be here for a while anyway.” Brother, oh my god, he had just called himself Paul’s brother. He wanted to be anything but his brother. Lover, oh yes, that would be a good idea but he hadn’t even a clue if Paul was queer, even more if there would be a chance for an old guy like him. Brother...

Paul looked a bit shell-shocked: “That is... I don’t know... you don’t have to...” He was back to stammering, great. This perfect man in front of him offered to be his family. A wonderful idea with just one little mistake. He didn’t want to be Richard’s brother. His over-imaginative mind suggested differently. But Paul had to be cautious. Lisa’s letter had hinted something but he wasn’t sure if that wasn’t just his wishful thinking. He blushed, not sure how to react to the offer of family. In the end he did the only logical thing, he looked Richard in his eyes, smiled and said very deliberately: “I thank you.”

It was a stone that dropped from Richard’s heart. He hadn’t known how much Paul’s acceptance really meant to him. But he knew what he wanted even more and decided that there was no time but the present: “What do you think about moving in with us?”

Another surprised expression flickered over Paul’s face: “You want me to live with you?”

“Yes, with Will, Therese and me. I intend to buy a house in the area. I need a place to stay for a longer time. My business in America is taken care of and I want to expand my overseas connections and companies. Germany is a

growing market. You can say it's still under construction; there is a lot to do, to buy and to invest. I intend to stay here for at least a year, probably longer. I need to fly to America from time to time for a few days to keep an eye on my other companies, but I want to make my home base here, at least for a while. And I want you to live with us. William needs to know his uncle. We need to be a family."

"I have a room at the school." Paul wasn't sure if that was relevant but it was the only coherent thing that came to his mind. Scratch that, it wasn't coherent, it was the only thought he could voice openly. Thoughts like "Oh my god, I could live with them." or "Seeing Will and Richard every day?" weren't suitable for this talk, or at least he assumed so.

"Well, you wouldn't need that anymore. But you could keep it of course, just in case we are impossible to live with."

"Ha, ha, you haven't seen my room. Maybe you are going to throw me out as soon as you realize that I have a book-problem?"

"You have a problem with books?"

"You can say so; I have more books than shelves. It can be a bit... crowded." Paul wasn't going into detail about the books on his chairs and floor.

"Then a house with a library can be the solution."

"A library." Paul tried to hide the smile. "I think you have convinced me."

"Good, then we start house-hunting tomorrow. You'll get your say, too."

"So I'll be back tomorrow?" Paul checked his watch. It was time for him to go if he wanted to catch the train.

"Sure, and bring a few things with you, clothes and that stuff. We'll find you a room here in the hotel."

"I can't afford that."

"I'll pay."

"Richard, I don't think..." Paul tried to voice his protest but Richard interrupted him immediately.

"No, don't object, please."

Paul couldn't get rid of the feeling that this might be important to his brother-in-law and so he agreed. Five minutes later, he was on the way back to his room with the book-problem, not knowing what to expect of the coming days but somehow exhilarated and nervous.

The next day started in chaos. A loud bang and a hearty curse woke Richard from his pleasant dreams. More curses followed and Will began to cry. That was definitely not Therese's usual way to start a day. Richard hastily slipped on his robe and hurried to the living room. There on the floor sat Therese, face contorted in pain while William wept next to her.

"What happened?" Richard kneeled next to her and cuddled his bawling son in his arms.

"I slipped." Teeth clenched, face pale, Therese tried to stand up. "Damn, that hurts. Ah... Will's just shocked because I went down like a stone. F...reaking hurts."

"Stay down, I'll call for a doctor."

"No." But she melted back onto the carpet.

"Yes, just stay here. Don't go dancing."

"Ha-ha, very funny."

"Somebody needs to be." And with that, Richard hoisted the still-sniffing Will to a better position, stood up, and made the call.

A few minutes later, he got the confirmation from the receptionist that a doctor was on his way. In the meantime, he had dried William's tears and put a cold towel over Therese's ankle, which got bigger just from looking at it.

Her head rested on a cushion and her eyes were closed, but when he took a seat next to her on the floor again, she looked at him and stated very matter of factly, "I won't be able to look after William for a while. You'll need to find other help."

"I'll get that arranged. Paul is going to come and stay at the hotel. I invited him yesterday."

"Good, but you need him in the room next to Will. You know that you

don't hear him at night; you always sleep like a dead man. When you finally wake up, he is already so worked up that he won't sleep again."

"Okay, we can put him in your room and you can get mine. Or the other room I'm going to book as soon as I get you looked after."

"Yes," she sighed, "that would do."

For the next half an hour Richard was busy entertaining his cranky son, cooling Therese's leg and waiting for the doctor. Finally the man came, took one look at the swollen ankle and decided that x-rays would be necessary to determine the further treatment.

Richard was discussing the merits of calling an ambulance, which meant waiting again, or driving Therese himself—all with a whiny William around and nobody to take care of him, when Paul knocked shyly at the open door.

"Hi?" His open gaze fell on Therese and he rushed to her. "You're hurt?"

"Paul!" Richard was relieved; he hadn't expected his brother-in-law to come so early. "You're the man I need." And with those words, he pointed to his son who was sitting next to Therese on the carpet. "I need to get Therese to the hospital, you are going to look after Will, okay?"

"Sure, but what happened?" Paul smiled at the little boy.

"She was clumsy, her ankle is swollen."

From down on the floor Therese's voice sounded acerbic: "Thank you for the clumsy, you elephant, now help me to the car." Richard and the doctor hoisted her up carefully, and she hobbled ungracefully through the door, supported by both men.

"He hasn't had breakfast! No honey for him!" Her voice carried back to them. Then Paul and his nephew were alone.

William glanced up from the floor, a disbelieving look in his eyes, his lower lip quivering.

"Okay, Will. We are on our own now." Paul crouched down to the boy, carefully extending his arms, not sure of his welcome. A smile, with teary eyes but still a real one, was his reward. And then he had his arms full of joyfully babbling boy.

They had a good morning. After a huge breakfast ordered from the hotel kitchen, they went out again, through the small park to the lake. The ducks were already waiting and William fed them with the same enthusiasm as the day before. They finally discovered a small playground with a swing set and a small hand carousel. By the time they returned to the hotel-apartment, William was tired, and after a short lunch he went for a nap in no time.

Paul took his book out of his bag and got comfortable on the couch. But he knew the story already, and watching a toddler had been more work than he had imagined. Soon his eyelids dropped and light snores escaped him.

This was what Richard found when he entered his hotel-apartment. On the couch in the sitting room lay the epitome of male beauty, asleep, hair tousled, mouth slightly open, a book on his chest, one hand hanging to the floor. The only hitch in the perfect picture was the sound.

“Chrrr... pffffff... chrrrr... pffff...”

Richard suppressed a grin. Paul was adorable. But he shouldn't think that, he shouldn't think of his brother-in-law this way. He didn't even know if the young man was queer. A pretty boy like him must have a girl waiting for him. There was this air of innocence around him, maybe he never had met a girl? Maybe he...

Seriously, Richard tried to hold his thoughts in check, but that open mouth, those lips, they were so tempting. It didn't help that Paul was what you would call his “type”. He still remembered very fondly Tim, his first hooker. That boy had been beautiful, with white skin and auburn hair.

Richard had picked him up on a business trip to Chicago. The director of the Chicago branch, Artie MacBright, had thought it a good idea to entertain him with a spree through the seedier parts of the city and there, on a wall close to a bar, this pretty boy had been waiting next to others. “Hookers,” MacBright had called them and had directed their car to another bar. Later that night Richard had come back, and had taken the too-slim young man to a hotel room. It had been his first time, but Tim had been a good teacher. At the end of the night he had learned a lot, and gave Tim a job in his company. Nothing special, office help, but enough to keep him off the streets.

They met every time Richard came to Chicago, and he visited that branch more than the others—for not so obvious reasons. He had broken off this connection when he married Beth. It wasn't in him to cheat. Tim had wished him luck. These days he was one of his most trusted employees in Chicago.

Now he looked at a prettier, manlier, and innocent version of the male beauty that was unique to men with auburn hair and fair skin. “The Snoring Beauty,” he could call him.

Richard tiptoed around and peeked into William's room. The boy was sound asleep, too.

“I wonder what you two did this morning to be so out to the world?” He shook his head.

Obviously Paul was a light sleeper because those muttered words penetrated into his consciousness and he opened his eyes: “Oh, hey.”

“Hey yourself. How was your morning?”

Paul grinned. “My, he is a handful. We had fun at the park. He wore me out.”

These words tingled in Richard; he wanted to wear out Paul but in a much better way. But he smiled back. “I know he can be a real whirlwind. I think it's his mother's heritage. I was a brave and quiet kid.”

“Yeah, I sooo believe that.” Paul stood up from the couch and rubbed his hair, ruffled it a bit more than it had been. “How's Therese?”

“Ankle is sprained. They'll keep her for one night so that they can have a look at her. Her blood pressure was a bit too low. And they also want to change the dressing tomorrow when the swelling is down.”

“Good that nothing's been broken.”

“She's been lucky and we've been lucky. That would have annoyed her big time and an annoyed Therese isn't funny.”

“I can imagine. What are we going to do now?”

Richard hesitated, but he had to get this out anyway, and what use was there in stalling? “I asked for another room so that you could sleep in the one

next to Will. I'm useless at night, I don't wake up. And I thought Therese could take mine and I'd get another one. But." He paused and Paul could sense that he was uncomfortable. "The hotel is booked up. So either I go to another hotel or I could sleep here on the couch, or..."

"Don't use the couch. Seriously, I feel like sixty and I have only taken a nap on it. Isn't there another bed in the room?"

"Well, the one I'm using now has two beds, but it's going to be Therese's room and I can't sleep in the same room with her. And the one for you has only one bed, a king-size."

Paul's eyes widened a bit and slight flush crept into his cheeks. But he looked levelly at Richard and asked, "And that is a problem for you?"

"No, no, of course not. I was thinking of you. We..." He searched for words, "we don't know each other that well so far, and I didn't want to impose on you."

"You won't. So it's okay. I promise not to snore." Paul looked relieved and a bit anxious at the same time.

"You do, you know. Snore, I mean."

"No, I don't." Indignation, your name was Paul.

"And what do you call that sound '*chrrr... pffffff... chrrr... pffff...*', hm?"

The couch cushion that hit him was soft enough to not do any damage.

"Maybe you should take the couch after all."

"Oh no, you are not taking back your offer. I'm going to sleep with you in your bed." The moment the words left his mouth, Richard paled. Not that this wasn't exactly what he wanted, but you just couldn't say that to another man, especially not one you had met just the day before. Or your freaking-fucking-brother-in-law.

Paul's blue eyes were wide and open, his face flushed and his lips a promise of sinful desire. Then he lowered his lashes and the blush deepened.

"I'm sorry, shit, that came out totally wrong." Richard hurried to apologize. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded, I'm sorry." Oh god, he had meant it exactly the way he had said it.

“It’s okay,” Paul mumbled.

“You will stay? I didn’t screw that up?”

“Of course. I love William and you need help. You didn’t do anything wrong. You just said something in a very weird way, okay?”

“I know. And as I’ve said, I’m sorry.” Richard took a step closer to Paul. “You trust me enough to sleep in the same room with me?”

“Hey, you were married to my sister. I don’t think I have anything to worry about with you.”

Richard didn’t comment on that, how could he? It would have been so wrong. He was falling hard head over heels for the young man in front of him. Instead he picked up the book on the floor.

“*The Two Towers*? You are a Tolkien reader, too?”

“Yes, I love the books. It’s the third time I’ve read them. I can’t wait till the last one is published. You know them?”

“Sure, who is your favorite? Arwen? Galadriel? Eowyn?”

Paul laughed: “Do I have to pick a woman? I’m thinking more of hero worshipping. Of course Aragorn is my hero. But I have to admit, Faramir is pretty good, too.”

“I love the elf, Legolas, how he handles Gimli. They are so different and yet so close.”

“Which is your favorite Hobbit?”

“That’s easy, it’s Pippin. He is the most light-hearted person in the books. I love his brave innocence. And yours?”

“Hm, I like them all. Each one represents values, like bravery, loyalty, knowledge and intelligence.

Richard had never thought of that but Paul was right, the Hobbits were created to be similar on some traits but to have individual fortes, too. He sat down next to Paul, and for the next half an hour they talked about the books.

When William woke up, they decided that the afternoon’s entertainment would be a short walk into the core of the town to shop for a new toy for William. Most of his toys had been left in America, and the boy had grown

tired of the ones they brought with them. Richard also wanted to see if the realtor he had contacted the day before had come up with suggestions. The sooner they got their own house, the better.

Paul had enjoyed the day; it had been one of the best days of his life. Will was a vivid and funny kid, full of joy and laughter, quirky, and sometimes like quicksilver. Being in Richard's company had been exhilarating and nerve wracking, in a good way. He was so smitten by the man, it was embarrassing. Hopefully Richard hadn't noticed the lovesick expression he knew had been plastered all over his face the whole afternoon.

Now here, in the bathroom of the hotel suite, he looked at his reflection in the mirror and saw the constant blush that had bloomed again during their last hour of talking. William had been sleeping in his little bed; he and Richard had looked at pictures of possible houses and had made a list of their favorites. They had sat close together, considering one suggestion after the other and discussing it. Paul had been able to feel Richard's body warmth, the heat seeping into his own side. More than once they had brushed legs or shoulders accidentally and every damn single time his body had tingled. And now he was supposed to sleep in the same bed. While Richard had showered, he had unpacked his suitcase, then showered himself and changed into his pajamas in the bathroom, even gone so far to wear briefs under them, just in case. It would be awkward for him if Richard saw what effect he had on him. A knock on the door startled him out of his musings.

"Paul? You okay in there? Can I come in? I've forgotten to brush my teeth."

"Sure. I'm done."

The door opened and Richard entered, already dressed for bed in grey silk pajamas, which accentuated his eyes even more. The urge to reach out and touch the fabric, listen and feel how it would slip over the hairy chest, was strong. Thank god for the tight briefs under his pants, his cock made it perfectly clear he was interested.

"I assume you'll take the side next to William's room," Richard said. "It won't make much sense if you have to climb all over me if he cries at night."

Climb all over him? Paul wanted to do exactly that, and not in the way the other man had meant it. It didn't matter that he hadn't done this so far. His experiences could be counted on three fingers, and one of them had been a hand job he had paid for in a dark alley in Frankfurt. The other two sexual moments in his life had been a kiss from a fellow student, and watching another student jerk off in the shower after sports. In theory, he knew what they could do with each other, in practice he was as clueless as a newborn kitten.

"Fine with me." He turned away from the mirror and Richard's reflection and strolled to the door, singing in a high girly voice: "I'll be in bed if you need me, honey."

"Smartass." Richard tried to hit him with a towel but missed.

"Tsk, ts, that is not gentlemen-like."

"Leave, I need a moment. I'll be in bed soon." Richard grinned and made his voice so very sultry. "Honey."

Paul couldn't suppress the shiver that ran down his spine. At this moment he wanted nothing more than to be that "honey" for Richard. He would be an emotional mess if they continued this way. For him, it felt like they were flirting, but what did he know?

Richard watched the young man leave, his eyes firmly planted on the cute ass in the modest black and blue striped pajamas. He contemplated if a cold shower was necessary but decided against it. Paul would wonder why he'd taken a second shower. He turned to the sink, and splashed cold water onto his face while wondering what he was doing. With a heavy sigh, he took his toothbrush and decided that sticking to the mechanics of going to bed and not thinking about the sexy man next to him would serve best.

A few minutes later he slipped under the covers, carefully avoiding looking at Paul, who had his nose buried in *The Two Towers* again.

"You want to read for a while?" Richard was very aware of his neighbor, his body, the sounds he created while turning a page, rustling the fabric.

"No, actually, I'm beat. I just waited for you." Paul laid his book on the nightstand and switched off the lights. A sliver of moonlight came through the

open windows. They hadn't pulled the drapes completely because they both wanted the fresh night air to come in. Still, the bed was in the dark. Richard turned his body to look in Paul's direction. He could see the silhouette of his head.

"Do you miss her?" Paul's voice sounded different in the dark.

Richard took a moment to think his answer over. Should he go with the expected answer or should he be honest? Paul deserved honesty. "Yes and no."

"Why?" The curiosity was obvious. "Didn't you love her?"

Oh god, that was the question, wasn't it? The question he had asked himself often enough during their marriage, the question he wanted to avoid answering now. But he wanted to be true, to be honest with Paul. "I did, but not like she should have been loved. I think I," he paused, contemplating how to word it right, "loved her more like a sister."

"A sister? You don't marry your sister!"

"I know. It was... difficult. I thought we had it, I really thought so. She was different from any other woman my parents had shoved into my face since I reached the right age for marriage. She was funny, snarky, intelligent, larger than life. Everybody paled in comparison to her. You knew her, you know that."

"Yes, yes, I do. It was my luck. She made it possible for me to be me because people tended to forget I existed when she was around. It was comfortable to be invisible in comparison her."

Richard had to smile. This was so Paul's way of looking at it. Every other sibling would have been jealous, but not Paul; he had loved the freedom she had given him. "I felt attracted to her; I thought she could be the one. I hoped she would be the one. We married in a hurry, I know. It was the wrong decision, but she seemed so happy about it, she wanted it fast. I realized very soon, shortly after she got pregnant, that it wouldn't work," he paused again; it was harder than he had imagined, "that I couldn't love her like she deserved to be loved."

Richard heard the rustle of the bedcovers, and Paul's silhouette turned to him. "Why couldn't you?" There was no anger in his voice, only curiosity.

“I can’t explain, I just couldn’t.” He had no way to tell Paul that he now knew no woman would ever be right for him. “I will regret this for the rest of my life because she was a wonderful woman. The day she died,” god, this was harder than he imagined and he had to swallow hard to get rid of the lump in his throat, “I was in my office, working out how to ask her for a divorce, listing what I would give her to make her life comfortable. She deserved to live a better life than she had with me, one where she was free of a useless husband. Then I got the call.” Richard knew that Paul could hear the tears in his voice. It didn’t matter. “You know, I really loved her, just not the way she wanted.”

Paul switched on the light. It blinded Richard for a short moment, and then he saw the other man slip out of the bed, go over to his clothes and take a slip of paper out of his jacket. He turned around, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Here, I think you need to read this.” And he handed Richard the folded piece of paper.

Richard took it and opened it. The handwriting shocked him, it was Beth’s. It was strange to see German words written by her, all her notes or messages to him had been written in English despite the fact that he was fluent in her language. It looked familiar and foreign at the same time.

Dear little Brother,

I’m a mother now. Funny? I think so because I still don’t feel like one. I assume I have no motherly bone in me. Don’t get me wrong, I love little Willy (don’t tell anybody I call him so), he is very sweet. But I find all the tasks that are required to keep him happy just boring. Seriously, how interesting can it be to hold a bottle for a quarter of an hour and just look at a drinking baby, even if it’s mine?

Richard is overjoyed, and like the perfect husband he is, he has already organized for a nanny. He finds said bottle holding interesting, the same with watching the baby sleep. But enough of that.

Paul, I need your advice. No, the sky is still not falling down on the earth, I need it anyway and you can feel proud that I ask you.

I made a mistake by marrying Richard. No, it's not him, he is the picture perfect husband, he is very attentive, always trying to fulfill all my wishes (he even bought me the convertible I asked him for). You have seen how good-looking he is in our wedding picture and despite my enormous efforts to waste money, we are still rich.

I don't love him. So, I finally said it to someone. He is a nice guy and I like him like a brother. Not as much as you of course, little one. But I married him for the wrong reasons. I was panicking, unsure what to do. I couldn't live with Anne and her parents forever and where would I go from there? I needed to find either employment (and can you imagine that for me?) or a husband. And there he was, like the prince for Cinderella. He asked and I said yes, hoping that love would come with time.

Since then I have learned a lot about myself and Richard. Love doesn't come if you wish for it. I'm in love with being the wealthy wife but not with my husband. The fact that I don't miss his company whenever we are apart should be proof enough. But that's not the main problem. It is the fact that all the time and wealth and attention from my husband can't keep my restlessness at bay. I want to run, I want to scream, I want to feel free! I think I finally have realized that in my heart I'm a gipsy, I don't want to be trapped down by anything. It's bothering me. I don't know what to do now. Shall I explain all this to Richard and hope he will accept this, too? He already has accepted so much, my constant wish for entertainment, my wish after I got pregnant to not be "bothered" with anything physical (don't blush little brother, I know you know how babies are made) and so much more.

Not that I think that this upset him much, I can't get rid of the suspicion that Richard and you have more in common than being bound to me. If it is so, I wish he would find someone. I hate the thought that he tries to be faithful to me while my heart and soul are screaming for freedom.

I'm a mess. Paul, you are the one with the sense. Write to me.

Your dear loving older sister (even if it's only for a few minutes)

Lisa

Richard stared at the letter. It was dated two days before her accident. He looked up and right into Paul's intense stare. "Oh my god."

Paul tentatively reached out and touched his arm. "It is okay, she understood you. She didn't blame you, you get it?"

"Yes." Richard shook his head, still a bit dazed from the revelations of this letter. "I think I understand, at least partially."

"Good, I wasn't sure if I should show you the letter but now—I think you needed to know that it was her, too. I don't want you to feel guilty and neither would she."

"No, she was not one to harbor grudges." A small smile crossed over his face.

Paul grinned back. "Yeah, she couldn't care less."

"Thank you for showing me that letter. It helps a lot to know that she wasn't in love with me." Richard threw Paul a curious side-glance. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, you are already doing it anyway."

But Richard sensed a hesitation in the answer. He asked anyway, "What did Beth mean with us having something in common?"

Paul's heart dropped. This was the question he had been afraid of. He wasn't sure if he had drawn the right conclusion, and if he admitted to being queer and he was wrong and Richard wasn't queer, too? That would mean the end to his time with William and Richard. He couldn't flat out say it. But what if Richard was like him, too?

"I assume she meant that," he swallowed hard, "I have no interest in women." There, that could mean anything, for example, he was just a geek and more interested in his work. Paul closed his eyes and waited, afraid to face reality.

Warm fingers touched his cheek carefully, and Richard whispered, “Me neither.”

Relief flooded Paul and without thinking, he turned his head and kissed the hand on his face. The gasp he heard made him open his eyes immediately. Richard stared at him with a hungry intensity that burned. The desire he saw made Paul bold, and he licked the palm, carefully wiping his tongue along the lines, dipping between the fingers. He could hear Richard’s harsh breaths and feel the hand tremble under his ministrations. It tasted salty. An urgency built up in his belly, a wish to be closer to Richard, and he could feel his cock harden. It took him less than a second to decide what he wanted to do next, and he voiced it before he took Richard’s middle finger into his mouth and sucked on it. “I want you to fuck me.”

Richard’s body was definitely very interested in this idea. His erection strained against his pajama pants, eagerly hoping for body contact. His brain struggled between *Oh, yes, please, finally* and *This is my brother-in-law*, but the *Yes, please* part quieted it immediately with *no bloody blood relative, shut up*. So he leaned in, breathed the lightest of all kisses on Paul’s lips and asked, “You have done that before?”

“No, I have no idea what I’m doing.” Paul lay back in the middle of the bed, insecure and with bright red spots on his cheeks.

“Me neither.” Richard moved closer, touched the face in its pale and red glory, the blue eyes shining unnaturally.

“But you have done that before.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean I’ve done this with someone who matters to me.”

“I matter?” How could Paul still be so insecure?

“You do.” And with that conviction, Richard took the other’s face in his hands and kissed him. Oh, the lips tasted good and they felt like heaven or something similar.

The hands on his face made Paul want to melt, to crawl closer. The touch was warm, the skin an unfamiliar caress. The lips on his were so indescribably new, different and the most personal touch he had felt in years. And he wanted

more. The tongue, people used their tongue to kiss. He opened his mouth. The sensation of Richard's tongue sweeping over his was more than good. The taste, the texture, everything made Paul crave more. His arms sneaked on their own around Richards body, bringing them close together. Contact, physical contact, a warm and hard body pressed against his own. And a hard-on! The blood pounded in his head and in his groin.

Richard felt the young man melt into him, all that beautiful fresh body. He pressed them close together, devouring the open and eager mouth. This was different, so different from the male whores he had bought to satisfy an urge. This was how it should be. His hands started to roam along Paul's back, pressing against the fabric of the pajama-top. He wanted more, he wanted skin. The hot, light skin he had seen before, with the few freckles on the back and shoulders. "Your top, can I take off your top?" His question was husky, murmured against the open mouth. His breath ghosted over Paul's lips.

"Hmmm," it was difficult to answer, "yes." Paul wasn't sure he was still functional; his brain definitely had handed in its notice. The hands on the hem of his top weren't helping, either. Then the fabric was gone and after a short moment of disorientation because Richard, too, was missing, the man was back, shirtless himself. Freaking fantastic, coarse chest hair scraped over his skin, tingling and tickling, causing new sensations. He couldn't suppress the loud moan, only dampen it by burying his face in the crook of Richard's neck. But there was skin, directly under his mouth and it smelled so good. Paul licked and tasted salt and man. The whole package drove him crazy. The hands on his back, stroking slowly and torturously, now and then dipping under his waistband and tantalizing his butt. The male chest pressed against his own, the hair stimulating his nipples and the neck under his mouth, the neck that tasted so unbelievably good. And the best of it was the slow and rhythmic pressure on his cock. Should he warn Richard?

"Richard," another moan escaped, "I'm going to... oh god, oh, stop... stop, oh..." The sound he made was not very flattering, probably like an ape in the zoo, but it didn't matter. Shocks went through his body, cramps tightened his abs and his back like electricity as his orgasm pulsed through him.

Richard felt him shudder in his arms. He had made him come. It was a powerful feeling, strange but so potent. Just from that touch and the kissing,

the rubbing and holding. Richard knew what he wanted to do now. He wanted to see what he had caused. “Undress,” he huffed, “quick, undress, I need to see you.”

Paul tilted his head back from his comfortable place at Richard’s neck, and looked at him with dazed eyes. “What?” It seemed that the orgasm had killed his last brain cells.

With a little insecure laughter, Richard kissed him lightly on the lips: “I need to see you.” He tore down Paul’s sleeping pants and there, right in front of him, he saw the white boxer shorts with a large wet patch. Paul’s penis was still half hard. It was an impressive sight; he had been gifted by the gods. Carefully Richard pulled the boxers down. Directly under the tip of the cock was a little puddle of glistening semen, little drops still gliding out of the hole at the tip. Richard bent down and licked them away. The taste was strange and unfamiliar. This was new to him, too. But the way Paul jerked under him made him feel like the most powerful man in the world.

“What are you doing?” Paul thought his brain had been fried out already but that was torture in the most enjoyable way. His half hard cock tried to come back to life, stretching to welcome the caress. It was an overwhelming sensation and he wasn’t so sure anymore that he was already done. “Oh god, if you keep that up, I’ll be up again sooner rather than later.”

“That’s the idea,” came from his groin.

“What about you? Don’t you want to...?”

Richard chuckled and continued his ministrations. “What do you want me to do?”

Paul closed his eyes and tried to get his brain sorted out but all he could feel was the persistent tongue on his cock. And the wish to know it all. It was, as cliché as it sounded, now or never. “I want it all.”

Richard’s head jerked up. “All? Are you sure?”

“Yes” The admission was breathless.

“Don’t you,” Richard wasn’t really sure if he wanted to ask, if he should ask, “want to wait? We know each other for less than two days. You’re young.”

“And? Richard, I’m twenty-four, I’m in bed with the man I think I’m falling in love with, so far it feels incredible, and now tell me again why I should wait?”

“Love?”

Oh, shit, had he said that? “Ehm, yes?” His voice sounded insecure, a bit like a little lost kid.

Richard scrambled up towards Paul’s face, a very tender smile curving his lips. “That’s great, because I’ve fallen head over heels for you, too.”

“Really?”

“Hm, really, from the very first moment. You stole my heart the second you came into the room.” He winked.

“Now you’re getting cheesy, you know that?”

“Oh yes, but what is a bit cheesy in the face of true love.”

“Continue and I won’t believe you. I’ll think these are your pick-up lines.” And with a mischievous smile Paul added: “And then I can’t let you fuck me.”

That stopped Richard; he knew it was just a tease but holy hell, he wanted to bury himself in Paul. He licked a nipple and murmured, “My lips are sealed.”

“Well, hopefully not so tight that my cock wouldn’t fit in.”

A little sharp bite to his nipple made Paul gasp.

Richard growled: “Well, let’s test that.” And he opened his mouth and sucked the big dick into his mouth. The skin was very soft and the flesh still malleable under his tongue, the taste strong and a bit bitter. Richard pressed it against the roof of his mouth and started to lick and press and suck. The moan he got in response was an obvious sign Paul enjoyed it, and the hardening flesh another. Soon enough the whole deal no longer fit into his mouth.

He tried to breathe between those slow thrusts, sometimes it worked, sometimes he just got suffocated. He didn’t mind, all his concentration was focused on the slow movement in his mouth, the smell of aroused male, the trembling of Paul’s legs under his hands, and the sounds. Oh god, the sounds. His own hard-on was aching between his legs but he just couldn’t take care of

it. The whimpers and groans got louder and the thrashing wilder. The man at his mercy was nearing another orgasm, Richard could feel and taste it, the pre-cum changed in flavor.

“Richard!” Paul knew his voice was shaking, that he was close to begging. “Now, please.” The mouth on his cock disappeared; cool air hit the hot wet flesh. Then he heard the tin box with the Vaseline, which sat on the nightstand, be opened. The next moment a slippery finger probed his ass. The sensation, the utter and sheer knowledge of what would happen, made Paul shiver in anticipation. He tried to catch more, get more contact but Richard was careful and cautious. “Oh, come on, come on.”

“Shhhh, don’t hurry.” Richard kissed the tip of his dick, licked with a broad and flat tongue along the most sensitive spot at the underside, exactly where his foreskin was. A finger slipped into him without effort. It didn’t hurt, on the contrary—it felt damn good.

The hot mouth sucking him, one hand flat and stable on his stomach, the other working his ass—Paul felt already taken. He writhed under the assault to his senses. Two slippery fingers breached his hole, slowly entering his body, searching inside of him for the spot that would send jolts of pure sexual lust through him. He was going to combust from the sheer intensity sooner rather than later. Richard added another finger and Paul felt the sting for the first time. “Ow, this...” he couldn’t breathe, “...hurts a... bit.”

“Relax, it’s getting better. Promise. Push a bit like you’re taking a dump, okay?”

“You’re talking shit now?” Paul tried not to laugh but, oh, so good, it suddenly became so much better when he laughed. Then Richard curled his fingers up again and Paul didn’t speak anymore.

This was way beyond his imagination. And this was the man he had admired and wanted from the moment he had met him, oh shit, from the moment he had seen him in the photographs. Paul did the only possible thing; he opened himself up, body and soul, to be taken by Richard.

Richard noticed the subtle shift in Paul. He had turned from hot and sexy virgin to pliant debauched sex god, waiting to be devoured and possessed. And Richard was going to be the one to take him, take him and never let him go.

Hot and greedy emotion welled up in him. This young man was his and he would take care of him, sexually, and from now on in every part of his life.

With a swift movement he positioned himself between Paul's legs, opened them up with one hand and slicked his own cock with the Vaseline. He positioned the tip against the ring of muscle, feeling the tightness, the warm and slippery circle engulfing him. Slowly he pressed further; the pressure gave way to more warm and slick heat. The whole time Richard was watching Paul, searching for any signs of discomfort but the man in front of him looked completely in tune with what they were doing. A small smile, dreamy eyes, short and excited gasps accompanied by little whimpers and moans bode well.

All he could feel was the hot heat around his cock, the incredible pressure that made him want to explode right at the moment and he wasn't even fully sheathed. Richard wasn't sure he could stand what was coming at him. It was too much, too much emotion, too many sensations. He pressed a bit more.

"Wait... ohh, oh my god, just a moment..." Paul's mouth was lax; the eyes focused inwards, the words falling accidentally like little drops of rain. "This is... shit, oh fuck, this is... goooood, oh, god, more... please... do something."

Richard released the breath he'd been holding. That sounded perfect; he was so willing to do something. Slowly he moved his own body, feeling the tight ring of muscle pressing him. Paul's ass was warm and slick, it felt perfect. The hitch in Paul's breath told him that he rubbed his cock over the right spot. With deliberate moves he did it again and again. The moans and whimpers that filled the room added to his excitement. Richard's eyes stung, it was so perfect. He was in love with Paul.

Paul's world had found its center. It was his groin. The fullness of his ass was only rivaled by the bursting pressure in his balls. The slow torture on his prostate made him crazy. His only wish was that this would continue for the rest of his life. But he knew he wouldn't last much longer. He felt the tingling in his balls. Another hit on his sensitive spot and with a loud scream he came. Cum erupted from his cock and sputtered all over his skin. His whole body contracted again and again and again.

He heard Richard's hoarse groan, felt the man's penis grow a bit more and twitch inside his ass. The hands holding him cramped, then after a few more jerks Richard released him again.

“Oh my god.” Richard leaned closer to kiss him. “That was awesome.”

Paul’s body went limp, utterly spent. Only the connection to Richard above him anchored him, kept him in the real world. He closed his eyes and felt the hotness of one single tear in the corner. Damn, that had been a revelation.

Richard nuzzled the crook of Paul’s neck, searching for closeness, warmth and the very special taste of his skin, salty and sweaty. This had been nothing like any encounter he had had before. This had been so much more, an eye-opener, a life changing moment. Was he cheesy? And what if? For him it had felt like coming home, finally finding the place he belonged. That hadn’t been only sex, no way. He shuddered and pressed Paul’s body even closer to him.

“Hey,” Paul tried to get some air, “I need to breathe.” Richard was lying heavily on him; Paul could feel the spent dick slipping slowly out of his hole. Wetness followed, and the strange feeling of losing something precious. But Richard was heavy and nearly suffocated him, holding him in a very tight embrace. And he was still struggling with the emotional impact. Had this been so very intense because it had been his first “real sex”? He thought not. This had been special because Richard was already special to him. God, yes, he had known him now for less than two days but he felt more comfortable, happy and just real and right around him than around anybody else in his life, even Lisa.

“Richard?” The man above him finally slipped to his side, keeping his body still as close as possible, not lifting his head. “What’s wrong?” Was it time to get worried? Did he do something wrong, Paul wondered, he had thought this had been unbelievably good but he was the inexperienced one. Kisses on his neck reassured him. If Richard was still kissing him, it couldn’t be bad, true?

“Nothing’s wrong,” Richard mumbled into Paul’s skin, “I’m just kind of emotional.”

“Hm, me, too. It’s scary, isn’t it? I mean, we met yesterday morning and now we...” Paul wasn’t sure how to continue. He wanted to say “we are a couple” and he wasn’t sure if that was really true.

But Richard hoisted himself up on his elbows and pinned his grey eyes on Paul: “And now we are what? Do you have second thoughts? Because Paul,

I'm not sure if I've made this clear enough. I want you to move in with us, live with us and be my man. Forever. Don't you want that, too?"

Weren't these the most important words in Paul's life? He thought he would explode from joy. "Yes," kisses scattered over Richard's face and every piece of skin he could reach, "yes, yes, of course I want that, too." He pressed his eyes closed, bit on his lower lip and grinned: "I think I'm going to burst."

Richard's smile was huge: "Please, don't. I have no idea how I would explain the mess to the maid." The fist that bumped his arm was not so subtle.

"You are a spoilsport."

"I'm not, I'm a responsible grown up."

Paul's eyes swept lower: "Oh I can see that, especially the grown part."

"You're going to complain?"

"No, but I'm going to wonder if I am moving in with a sex fiend."

Richard laughed and kissed him, slow and languid kisses that made Paul's toes curl and his dick very interested. Still, he put his hand on Richard's chest: "Do you think it's going to work? And how are we going to do this?"

Richard paused with his kisses: "Yes, it'll work because we both want it. And we are going to do this very carefully. I think we won't tell anybody, only Therese. She'll be okay with it. But for the rest of the world I'll be the widower who has lost the love of his life. And you are her brother. People will think that I took you in because of her, because I loved her so much that I don't want to lose the connection to her twin brother. And for you my love, we'll find another story."

Paul scowled; he wasn't happy but he already saw the benefits. "What kind of story?"

"Maybe a lost love, someone killed in the war. Something like, you always were in love with some girl who died during a bombing? People don't ask names when you hint a sad story."

"That could work, you are right. But what about William?"

Richard thought for a moment: "Maybe we should wait until he is old enough to understand and not accidentally going to blurt out that Dad and Uncle Paul are kissing."

“This will require some restraint. But I agree. It’s dangerous to be queer.”

“I think,” Richard paused for effect, “I want a house with two bedrooms next to each other and a door between them. Of course,” his voice got formal, “the door will be closed.” His eyes sparkled.

“Sure. And I’m going to make you knock in a secret code.”

Richard laughed and lunged at Paul, tickling and cuddling him at the same time.

“Mercy, mercy!” Paul gasped for air from the assault. “I give, you’ll get a key.”

“Damn sure. And now,” all motion stopped, Richard brought his face so close, so close that Paul could feel his breath tingling over his lips, “kiss me.”

And he kissed him, with all the love, all the joy and all the hope he had in his heart.

Summer 2012

Paul took his book from the garden table. It opened at the bookmark, a laminated picture of him and Richard, taken in 1955 during their first weeks at their new home. Therese had captured it with his camera. Neither he nor Richard had noticed her do it, so it had been a surprise when he had developed the film. Their daughter-in-law, Kessy, had seen the pic a few years ago and had laminated copies made for him as a surprise present. She even had hung a huge copy in her own hallway. She was a good girl, a great mother to all their grandkids and a good wife to Will. And a mouthy little piece, oh yes.

The pic had been the first one of them together and showed them in the garden, enjoying the sun. It had been the afternoon of his first day of teaching after the summer holidays. He had been spent and tired. He was snuggling close to Richard, his eyes closed, a satisfied smile on his lips. Richard was looking at him with the most tender and loving expression. It still made his heart ache, he missed him so much. The last year alone had been nothing but empty. Oh yes, he was loving his family and his grandkids were his pride and joy, all five of them. But it wasn’t the same without Richard. Thank god he had lived that long. Getting to ninety-four and then just passing away in his

sleep was a blessing beyond words. Although it now meant that he had to drag his sorry eighty-one-year-old ass a bit longer, and one day they would be together again. Until then, he'd be the grumpy old man.

Voices drifted to his hiding place on the patio and Paul recognized Carson's deep bass immediately. The sound still startled him every time he heard it; it sounded so much like Richard. Their youngest grandson was the spitting image of his granddad Richard, voice and face, body and movement. It gave Paul a jolt of longing every time. Another voice he didn't recognize discussed something in a hushed tone with him. So, Carson was bringing a visitor? The two came around the corner, his handsome grandson, so tall and manly at the age of twenty, and a slightly smaller built man, blond bangs over one eye. Paul knew the look Carson gave his friend, oh, yes, he knew that one. This was going to be interesting.

"Opaul? Hey." He got a hug from Carson, a handshake from—what was his name again? The young man had been here once or twice before. Eric, yes, that was the name.

"Hello boys. Take a seat."

Both sat down opposite to him, a funny expression on their faces. Paul played innocent even though he had a good idea what was going on: "What's wrong?"

Carson smiled, looked sideways to his companion and took a deep breath: "Maybe you have already guessed it, maybe even before I knew..." He made a pause as if not sure how to continue.

Should he give him time or help him, Paul wondered. He decided that time was overrated, grabbed his book from the table and opened it. The picture was there and he handed it to Carson, who took it and glanced with a questioning look back at Paul. "Opaul?"

Good, he loved this name, Opa and Paul combined. It never had mattered that formally these kids were his grandnephews and nieces. William was the son of his heart, and so William's children were his grandkids.

"Carson. Take a look at Granddad's face. What do you see?"

The boy was puzzled, not knowing where this would lead, and it showed.

“I know the picture; you know that mom has a copy hanging in the hallway. It’s you and Granddad.”

He handed the pic to Eric, who studied it as if he hadn’t seen it before. Then Eric looked up and beamed at Paul.

“I think Carson, you can save your breath. Your Opaul already knows everything.” His smile was wide.

“What? Why? I mean, I haven’t even...” Carson was flustered.

Eric leaned forward and kissed Carson on the lips, ignoring his shocked expression: “Look, I see love on your Granddad’s face.”

Paul chipped in: “And I saw the same expression on your face just a moment ago when you looked at Eric.”

“Oh shit, you mean I was nervous for nothing?”

Paul couldn’t suppress a grin: “Carson, you have known your whole life that Granddad and I were a couple. Do you really think that there is anything about being gay that you should feel nervous about? I knew it all the time. And I know you are in love and Eric is the one for you.”

“He is. I love him. I just didn’t know, I mean, it took me some time to realize that I’m gay, too.”

It was moving, the look they gave each other. Paul felt a little twitch in his heart and he wished for the hundredth time this day that Richard was still alive and could see those two together.

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with being in love.” He missed Richard so much. “And it really doesn’t matter if it’s a boy or a girl, as long as it is the right person. Respect what you have and never treat it as a matter of course.”

“Thanks Opaul. I know.” Carson leaned towards Paul, resting his forehead on his bony shoulder.

The kiss he gave the unruly hair felt comfortable, familiar and yet not. It wasn’t Richard, it was Carson and he should go and be young, not sitting with his old opa.

“Go now boys, I need my nap. This old man isn’t as fit as he used to be.”

Both young men stood up immediately, said their good-byes and left.

Paul picked up his book with the laminated picture and made his way back to the house. A nap sounded really good. Sleep was the only time these days when he could see his love again; in dreams Richard was there and Paul would touch him, feel him, smell and taste him. Maybe one day he just would sleep forever and be reunited with his love.

Until then... a nap was his new love life.

THE END

Author Bio

Sunne Manello fell in love with m/m a few years ago while listening to Keeping Promise Rock. Since then she hasn't looked back. During her long walks with her beagle, who is the cutest and best dog ever, she writes the most interesting and sexy stories in her head. Unfortunately most of the time they stay just where they are: in her head. Only parts find the way in files that still need to be put together to complete stories.

She is no native speaker but has more and more discussions with her hubby and her teenage sons about the words she uses. The last debate was about the word "intense". She was convinced that it is also a German word. Duh... it is not a German word, they were right.

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NO BOUNDARIES

By Alex Mar

Photo Description

A half-mast erection being weighed down by the octopus that's wrapped around it, little tentacles clinging to hairless skin.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Okaaaayy... So we ended up in bed. Hot. Very hot. Felt like he had his hands everywhere. But when I woke this morning, I couldn't see him anywhere. There was something in bed with me, though.

(Anything goes!)

Sincerely,

Juni

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, futuristic, paranormal, post-apocalyptic

Tags: psychic/medium, military, shifters/non-wolf-cat, interspecies, tentacle love

Content warnings: sex involving tentacles, minor bondage

Word count: 3,945

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NO BOUNDARIES

By Alex Mar

It felt like Jack had something caught in his throat. Sort of like those times where he'd tear into a package with his teeth and accidentally swallow a piece of plastic. Yeah. Well, that, and there was a queasy roll to his stomach that had nothing to do with the throbbing of his temples or the way the roof of his mouth felt like it'd been swabbed with cotton.

That's what he felt like as he sat in an unfamiliar bed, in an unfamiliar room, staring at the octopus that was very much attached to his dick.

What. The fuck.

He wet his lips as he blinked down at it. His entire body was tense and he kept still, unsure if even the smallest movements would trigger some kind of unpleasant reaction.

See, Jack could remember—with embarrassing clarity—that the large number of Draconian Vodka shots hadn't done anything for him but envelop everything in a dreamy haze. A dreamy haze with a lot of sensory detail.

This was Commander Inna's room.

With whom he'd left the bar last night, to have the kind of sex that he already knew he'd spend months jerking off to.

In other circumstances, he'd be panicking about the fact that he'd fucked his Commander, maybe worrying about the awkward morning after. Except his Commander wasn't there.

No.

He took a deep breath, gearing himself up to actually reach forward and touch.

The knock on the door had him flinching back, but before he could do anything else about that, he made a strangled sound as the tentacles coiled and dragged along the length of his dick.

He remembered suddenly, in stark relief, the hands all over the place—too many hands—the overload on top of the alcohol that had him coming with a

gasp within seconds of being pressed against the door of the Commander's room. He could still remember the slick grip of something around his dick sliding away, leaving him limp, and with knees on the brink of giving out. Both of the Commander's hands had been pinning his wrists to the door at the time.

And now, the knock on the door with someone calling the Commander's name from the other side had Jack scrambling on the bed, panic closing fast and thick around his throat as the creature attached to him contracted, tentacles coiling and dragging and making him gasp, before the shift happened, right in front of his eyes.

Jack stared openmouthed, heart in his throat, as slick limbs lengthened, the creature slowly morphing in a way that made Jack think of medics sliding their hands into rubber gloves. Joints and corded muscles stretched under near-translucent skin, and tentacles coiling delicately as they retracted, leaving nothing but the line of the Commander's spine.

And then, while Jack still sat there, stunned, thighs still spread, the Commander straightened his back from where he knelt on the bed, doubled over, his breathing fast and audible in the silence of the room. His hair brushed the pale blue standard-issue sheets. Jack had had vivid dreams about that hair. It usually fell to the Commander's hips in pastel colours ranging from green to pink to blue, the roots and tips white-blond. Not unusual considering most Mers had the same type of hair colouring but, at this length it was even more stunning. He'd had his hands buried in that hair last night.

The Commander lifted his head. His eyes were a wisp of blue. In training those eyes had always made Jack feel pinned, like the slightest move would trigger a strike. They had him pinned now, Inna's face passive. His face was all sharp angles, illegal cheekbones and regal eyebrows. His mouth was a little on the thin side, but that top lip was so perfectly drawn.

Despite the fact that he was still reeling from waking up with an octopus on his dick, and watching a Mer honest-to-god shift in front of him, Jack could feel the rise of a blush, stark and warm, spreading up his throat.

The Commander's face was so striking.

The knock on the door came again, this time accompanied by a muffled

voice from the other side. “Commander Inna, there is an urgent message from the Academy.”

Commander—Inna—looked away from him and shifted off of the bed, the roll of his shoulders relaxed as his hair fell to cover the whole length of his body, strands clinging to his inner arms and hips. He strode to the door without a stitch of clothing on, long, lean thighs on display and the hint of balls right there and...

Jack snapped out of it when the Commander opened the door, casting his eyes around the room.

The blinds on the windows were shut, but there were little slivers of light that slipped through, leaving pale white lines on the floor between the bed and the window. He couldn't see his clothes, and had to wrap the sheet around his hips before getting off the bed, hissing at how cold the floor was against the soles of his feet.

He glanced at where the Commander stood at the door. He hadn't opened it all the way. Jack could hear the soft murmurs of the conversation going on, and there was a slight nudge in his mind, smoky red tendrils that spoke of the Draconians. No blocks though, so probably a fighter.

He glanced around at the sparsely furnished room. A small desk next to the only other door in the room, and a chair. There was a com on the bedside table but no particularly personal effects. The bed was bigger than the usual standard, enough to comfortably fit two people. Not that that had been needed.

Jack swallowed as he remembered the weight of the tentacles, the brush of them against his balls, and he felt the blush climb even higher as the memory made his stomach roll. He wasn't sure what it was, if it was arousal or reliving the fear of waking up with something unknown in bed with him.

With another glance at the Commander, he made another sweep of the room and headed for the only other door available. A bathroom.

He ran his hand along the wall until he found the light switch and flipped it on, leaving the door ajar behind him. He took care of his full bladder first, having only been half aware of it. When he was done, he let himself look in the mirror hanging over the sink.

His eyes were bloodshot; the red lines a sharp contrast to the murky brown of his irises. He braced his hand on the sink and sighed, rubbing a hand over the back of his skull. His hair was growing out; he'd have to go for another buzz cut soon.

He couldn't have been more different from the man on the other side of the door. Why Inna had even paid attention to him was a mystery. Several inches shorter and no discerning features: slightly upturned nose and a birthmark at the left corner of his mouth, like a wine-stained thumb had pressed there and left a mark just at the tip of his lip. As a Psy, he didn't have all that much muscle, either, though he was in shape. His skin was a dark tan that came from his mother's side of the family.

Yeah. He didn't exactly see what had landed him here in this room, other than too many drinks—which he was going to kill Maurice for—and perhaps a lapse of judgement on the Commander's part. God, but the night before had been intense. And after his wake up call he was starting to see it with new eyes; filling in the blanks of their encounter the night before and the bits he'd figured alcohol had smudged up.

He narrowed his eyes at his reflection and tilted his head back a bit further. There were marks all over his neck and shoulders. A few lower down on his abdomen, on his hip, where the sheet hung low from where he'd tied it. Little mottled stains on his skin, pink and purple. He stared. They probably went lower down.

“I apologise. I can get a little... over enthusiastic.”

Jack jerked back from the mirror, hand slapping instinctively over one of the marks, which was ridiculous considering the amount that covered his skin. Inna leaned against the door frame, having pushed the door open enough for him to fit through. He was standing there as naked as he'd been when he'd answered the door. Jack couldn't help running his eyes over the taut stomach, the sharp grooves of Inna's hips or the heavy hang of his limp cock, thick against his inner thigh.

Inna's gaze dropped to where Jack was covering the mark before his eyes flicked back up to meet Jack's. From outside the bathroom, Jack heard the

familiar beep of his watch signalling the hour and he heard the faraway sound of a ship heading towards the Tejo port.

“Will this be a problem with your sync?” Inna asked with a tilt of his head, making that incredible fall of hair spill down over his shoulder.

“Maurice?” Jack frowned and shook his head no, distracted. He let his hand fall away from the mark and took a step back, unsure what to do with himself. “We’re not like that.”

“Most synched pairs share an intimate relationship; some would even say it’s part of the bond.”

Then why did you pick me up at a bar, he wanted to ask. Instead, he just shrugged, rubbing a self-conscious hand over the back of his neck. The light in the bathroom was harsh and he didn’t really want to think about how he looked in it. He probably wasn’t making the most flattering picture. “We’re close, yes. But like brothers. We’ve been together since we first entered the force.”

“I see.” Those eyes didn’t waver from his face. “I’m making you uncomfortable. I won’t take offense if you’d like to leave.”

There was something else there, hidden in his tone. Jack was used to hearing this voice, all calm and soothing. Matter of fact. It was what they often dealt with during all training sessions with the Commander.

He crossed his arms too and leaned back against the sink, unable to keep the stare down going. It was disconcerting and he could feel a headache building. Too much drink always messed with his abilities, and in the aftermath, made him hypersensitive to the psyche of others around him. It wasn’t always a good thing.

He couldn’t sense Inna, though. Understandable considering his rank. The man had had plenty of experience in learning to block Psys out. It helped that he was a Mer. The entire race seemed to have an instinctive ability for locking their minds away from prying Psys.

Still, Jack could sense something. Not discomfort—but something similar, something that was making Inna treat this like another training session.

“I’m not uncomfortable. Just—this morning was unexpected. I’ve never—I just—People don’t know much about Mers so—I didn’t expect—” Yeah. He was doing a great job of explaining everything. This time, the red mottling on his throat had nothing to do with arousal. Maybe he should go. What was he expecting here anyway? Bad enough he’d slept with a Commander. The best he could hope for was that Inna would just ignore him in training and that things wouldn’t get awkward.

“The shape-shifting?”

Jack looked up, lost in thought, and startled when Inna spoke again. Inna was watching him with an arched eyebrow. “What?”

“You were saying it was unexpected. I’m asking if it was the shifting. Or the actual sex.” He smiled, mocking, “I don’t expect you’ve experienced it quite like that before.”

There was a chill in the bathroom and it was starting to get to him, settling into his skin and raising the hairs on his arms. “Did you... while we were...” Jack clamped his mouth shut.

The smirk stayed in place. “Yes. I held back, I assure you.”

Jack snapped his head back up, eyes wide, incredulous. Held back.

Held back.

“Oh.”

Inna started back towards the room. “Your clothes are on the bed.”

“What do you think I’m going to do?”

Inna paused, turning just enough that Jack could see his profile.

“You think I’m going to do something.”

“There is a reason why Mer’s don’t often have relations with those outside their own race. Most people, once they find out, are rather eager to get started in spreading the rumours.” There was that mocking edge again. “People from your planet don’t handle different very well, Cadet Mills.”

Now see, that there, that pissed him off. He straightened away from the sink and walked towards the door, not bothering to sidestep Inna and

practically pushing past him on his way back to the bed. When he got there, he sat down on the corner, hands gripping the edges and glared up at him.

“Show me different.”

Inna narrowed his eyes on Jack for a moment. Then he stepped out of the bathroom, switching the light off and pulling the door closed behind him before walking to stop in front of Jack, looking down at him.

When Inna slid a hand under his chin and tilted his head up, Jack had to force himself not to look away.

“All right,” Inna said. He didn’t wait around. He bent low, fingers tightening on Jack’s jaw to keep him in place. His moves were deliberate, eyes open and staring right at Jack when he pulled Jack’s top lip between his, teeth grinding lightly over the soft flesh, tugging in a way that made Jack’s mouth go slack, made his breath hitch a little. Jack’s hands clenched around the edge of the mattress.

Inna thumbed over the line of his jaw, hands fitting around Jack’s throat and holding just tight enough that he knew to stay still.

“Open your mouth.” The words were murmured over his lip, a hint of tongue, soft and insistent, tracing the seam of his lips. Jack did as he was told, remembered even as he did it, similar kisses from the night before. Except they hadn’t been as calm as this, as slow, as thorough.

Tentative, made unsure by actually being stone cold sober this time, Jack released his hold on the bed and curved one hand over Inna’s hip, slid his other up and into the fall of hair he was obsessed with. It smelled like rose water and Jack took it in, let it fill his head and intoxicate him.

He couldn’t help the shudder as Inna continued to tease, flicks of the tongue barely there, making him open his mouth wider, his grip tightening on Inna’s hair. All that did though, was make Inna move to the corner of his mouth, where his birthmark was.

His lips closed over the skin there and started sucking.

Jack groaned, spread his thighs a bit more, belly clenching.

Inna tilted his head then, closed his mouth over Jack’s and fucked into his

mouth nice and slow at the same time that Jack felt that familiar, slippery touch at the inside of his knees.

He closed his eyes, pulled away from Inna with a loud wet sound, and turned his face into the long stretch of Inna's neck. He shuddered again as the touch on his legs continued to slide up, curling around the muscles of his thighs with a ripple. Jack pressed his face harder into Inna's neck even as he felt Inna's hands sliding down his shoulders, down the length of his arms to curl around his wrists, mimicking what he'd done the previous night.

Jack took a few breaths, tried to calm the thudding of his heart. It felt like it was in his throat right now. When he finally opened his eyes, it was to look down into his lap. He watched, his head tucked against Inna's now, his hands being lifted and pressed back down into the mattress.

There were two tentacles, bigger versions of the ones he'd woken up to, curled around his cock. They were sliding, wrapping around his thighs. He thought he could feel the suction cups clinging to his skin even as his thighs were tugged further apart.

"Does it feel different yet?" Inna asked, voice low as he pulled back to look at him.

"Yes." Jack's voice was a rasp, and barely made it past the dryness of his throat.

"And?"

"Keep going."

Inna's smile this time was different, softer. It made his eyes crinkle at the corners, the pale colour deepening for a second before he pressed close again, nipping at Jack's lips, as the tentacles spread his thighs more, until Jack could feel the stretch of it in his muscles. He let himself be pushed back down on the bed, as Inna came down on top of him. Jack could feel the heat of Inna's balls pressing against his skin, felt the brush of his cockhead against the coarse hair at the base of his own erection.

"Did you know that I can taste, just like this? Without putting my mouth on you? All I have to do is wrap myself all around anything I can reach, and I'll taste everything." Inna nosed at his throat, rutted against Jack, dick hot and

silky in a way that made him writhe on the bed, try to get closer. The tentacles on his thighs slid lower again, curled around his knees instead, tips slipping down to cradle his ankles. Inna was making him hold his legs open like that, spreading him completely.

When Inna let go of his wrists, another tentacle slid around them, just as gentle as the first ones, but firm too. It kept his wrists together, the tentacle coiling around and around until it covered his arms from elbow to wrist.

“It’s a special kind of torture, watching you in training, Jack,” Inna said, as he ran his hands down Jack’s torso now, the sides of his thumbs bumping over each rib until his hands were clamping down on his waist, pressing him deeper into the mattress. “I have imagined this quite a few times.”

“Me too.” Fuck. He’d imagined it. And when Inna had walked into the bar the night before in a T-shirt and jeans—things he never wore—Jack had come close to popping a boner on the spot.

“Unfortunately, I’ve been called away and we’re going to have to keep this short.”

Jack tensed, eyes flashing open. “Now?”

Inna shook his head, lips still curled in that soft smile. “Soon. But when I go, I’ll expect you to stay exactly as I leave you, ready and waiting for when I return. Am I understood?”

Jack groaned, jerking up, trying to grind himself against Inna. The tentacles around his arms contracted; a reprimand in the brief, discomforting in squeeze of his wrists.

“Understood?”

“Yes.” He licked his lips, wondered briefly how the hell he was going to explain this to Maurice. “Exactly as you leave me.”

“Good.” Then Inna leaned down to peck him on his birthmark once more. “Now, just let me take care of you.”

“F-fuck,” he breathed out. There, right against his hole, slick and soft. It was blunt as it tried to push in, butting up against that first ring of muscle. His thighs were spread wider though, and Inna’s hands canted his hips up. When it

slipped inside, it did it in a rush, the tip easing in and then just pushing through. His hips jerked from the sensation. The stretch was sudden, and he felt the ache it left behind—tightened around it. Jack pressed his head back into the bed with his teeth gritted as the alien limb moved inside him, probing.

Inna was breathing hard now, he'd rested his head on Jack's shoulder and he could feel him, mouthing at the curve of his shoulder, small moans vibrating over his skin.

"You feel..." Inna didn't finish that sentence, just reached down, flattened Jack's dick against his belly with the palm of his hand. He didn't wrap his fingers around it, just pressed it down. A thumb slid along the underside, passing over his balls and then behind.

Jack couldn't help the hitch of his hips, lifted up without any rhythm to fuck himself back onto the thing in his ass; he could feel himself clenching around it as rubbed along inside him, the soft ridges of the suction cups catching on his prostate. It filled him completely. Fuck.

When he came, he didn't make any noise, just gasped and gasped. His body arched even as it clenched down tighter, and he tuned out.

It was the feel of the tentacles withdrawing from him that brought him back around. Jack blinked at the ceiling, eyes following the cracks there absently before focusing back on Inna who was rocking against him almost leisurely, his dick sliding along Jack's skin easier than it had before. It wasn't until he glanced down that he saw the come on his stomach, his belly button.

Inna looked wrecked. There was a fine sheen all over his body and his hair clung to his skin. Despite the dead weight of his limbs, Jack wanted to curl his legs around that waist and just let Inna collapse on top of him.

He was in deep shit.

Slowly, as if his entire body hurt, Inna sat back on his knees. He left his hands on Jack's legs, rubbing down them to curl fingers around his ankles. His chest was heaving with the force of his breath. Despite the way he seemed relaxed, Jack thought there was a touch of wariness to his gaze.

So Jack forced himself to lift a leg, wrapped it around Inna's waist just like he'd wanted to and jerked Inna down until he was resting completely along his front. Then he gave him a small smile.

“I don’t see what the problem is with different,” he murmured, catching a handful of hair. He shrugged a shoulder at him. “I kind of like it.”

Inna stared down at him for a second. Then his lips curved again and he leaned down to touch his mouth to Jack’s.

“Good.”

THE END

Author Bio

Alex Mar lives in London and dreams of owning a cat and a dog so that they can play with her when she procrastinates from writing. She writes contemporary and fantasy/paranormal slash fiction and is tackling her first m/m novel. Alex has a love for first-time stories and is always up for trying her hand at more taboo subjects. She spends the majority of her time drinking tea and pairing up male characters in her favourite TV shows and movies.

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AS HE WATCHES

By Finn Marlowe

Photo Description

A handsome young man, wearing only tight boxer-briefs pulled slightly down to bare his buttocks, stands at a window, hands flat on the glass, his well-defined muscles on display. It's early in the morning, overcast, but the man's not looking outside, he's facing the camera. His expression betrays many emotions, a shy wariness, annoyance, a touch of hurt, and perhaps a little anger. He's stunning. You can't look away. That expression beguiles—what does it mean?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“For now, you stay where I put you.”

That's the first thing he says to me after I undress, when he presses me up against the glass and positions me just so. I'd ask him to tell me more, but he's got a fetish for self-denial, and if I push I might not get to touch him at all. That's the last thing I want.

The thing is, I don't have to listen to him. What we do together, it's completely voluntary and pretty undefined. We set up a meeting, he gives me directions, I obey. He's not paying me, not coercing me, and he knows if he tried to do either I'd be gone. We didn't meet in a club; it's remarkable that we met at all, when we live in two very different worlds. He likes to look, to touch, but he almost never gets off. I like the feeling of his eyes on me, I like doing all the things he says, but I want more. How do I push the boundaries when I barely know what they are?

***Look at the challenge in that man's eyes. He wants something, but he might not even be sure what it is. How is he going to get it, and who is he looking at? What I'm really looking for here, author, is an exploration of power dynamics. It doesn't have to be explicitly D/s or BDSM, you can use your discretion when it comes to the depth of the relationship between the*

main characters, but I'm looking for the explanation of an enigma. Something off the wall, something different. Whatever else it may be, this is not your typical romance. Contemporary is my preference, but if a different genre is speaking to you, run with it. I can't wait to see what you come up with!

Sincerely,

Cari :)

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: athletes, underwear fetish, humiliation, illness/disease, atonement, masturbation, orgasm denial

Word count: 24,889

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AS HE WATCHES

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That couldn't possibly be more icing. Then again, a bunch of hyper eight-year-olds with cake... yeah, it could be. Or it could be something even more disgusting, and that didn't bear thinking about. Erik would check on it in a minute. If he lasted that long. From his upside-down vantage point it *looked* like icing, in fact the blobs were tinted the very same revolting combination of purple and blackish-green that had been on top of the giant birthday cake before it all got devoured. Devoured, or, more likely, discarded in places he'd stick his unsuspecting hand into sometime next week.

Erik tried keeping his concentration on identifying the lumpy substance coating the underside of the table instead of his trembling arms. Yes. Definitely icing. Under the table. Christ. This had to be the worst party yet. No, second worst. Nothing could beat that time they hosted the Parents of Multiples group, but this one came close. At least all those twins and triplets hadn't been stuffed full of birthday cake and running high from sugar intoxication, unlike today's little hellions.

A pair of well-muscled legs appeared in front of him, blocking the view of his next grumpy chore. The distraction reminded him of his bent wrists and blood-starved hands. Despite the muscle tremors now making a quick trip up to his shoulders, Erik spared a jealous thought for those legs as he struggled with his next handstand push-up. Jordan was a powerhouse of tightly-packed muscle, whereas Erik was more the long-and-lean type. Oh, well. Who wanted to look at kid-smearred frosting anyway? Under the table.

No wonder he had a headache.

“Give it up, pussy white boy, you're never gonna beat my record.” Owner of kick-ass muscle definition or not, Jordan could be such an asshole. “Never. Look at those arms just a-shakin'. I give you thirty more seconds before they give out and you find yourself sucking vinyl.”

“And I'll give you ten seconds to get outta my sight before you're licking my sweaty toe-jam after I cram my foot down your throat.” There'd been at

least thirty party attendees. Thirty over-stimulated, sugar-wild, wound-to-the-max boys whose parents had walked in the door and evilly turned the horde loose on him, Jordan, and the new coach, Brittany, who still looked a little shell-shocked. Poor girl. No immunity. She hadn't been hired yet on the never-going-to-be-repeated-in-this-lifetime Parents of Multiples Day.

The muscle burn in his arms morphed into pain. One more—he could do one more. And not because Jordan was watching. His straining shoulders disagreed with one more. Hell no, was the unanimous opinion. Fighting gravity, Erik forced his quaking arms to finish that one last upward thrust while he kept his legs glued at the knees and toes pointed. Jordan might have him beat in overall strength, but Erik knew he was the better gymnast. Summoning some of that inborn grace Jordan lacked, Erik neatly back-flipped out of his handstand and smoothly landed on his feet. *Take that, jerk.* He wasn't showing off. Not one bit.

“Still didn't beat me, Healey,” Jordan muttered.

“Wasn't trying to. Just trying to get rid of the stress headache.”

“Why? Got a hot date?”

Ha—no. “Maybe.” Jordan had a thing for petite gymnasts, the bendier the better, and had once admitted that's why he stuck with the sport so long. While he figured out his next Olympic sport to excel at, he taught gymnastics to kids, same as Erik. They weren't friends, exactly, but they got along, which would change in seconds if Jordan found out he liked guys, not bendy gymnasts. Well, unless they were guys.

“Well, I do, and she is fucking *hot*. And limber—oh, my God. She's gotta be double-jointed. Let's finish cleaning up so I can leave this hole for a better one.” Jordan surveyed the party area. “Looks like every second kid forgot their jacket. On the floor. And how the hell do they get home wearing only one shoe, huh? I wanna know.” That was one of the many mysteries of the universe that would never be solved. “I'll tidy the coat room and do lost-and-found if you put back the extra mats.”

Sure. Just like Jordan to take the easy job. “Fine, but that means you get to clean the table then.” Ha. Payback.

“Whaddya mean, I already cleaned it.”

Erik grinned. “Look underneath.”

Jordan gave him a confused glance and bent to look under the large table. “What the hell! You’ve got to be kidding me. How come nobody saw this happening?”

“Selective vision.” There was just no way to keep a proper eye on the kids on the apparatus if you supervised all the untamed monkeys playing everywhere else. They’d been woefully short staffed for the party. Again.

While Brittany sanitized equipment and Jordan cursed and cleaned, Erik chuckled and stacked the mats and looked for stray children left behind. It could happen. Like it had on Multiples Day. You couldn’t be too careful. Especially with identical triplets. How would you even know when one went missing?

Being dateless, and feeling sorry for a traumatized Brittany, Erik left last and locked up. Not like he had anything else to do, even if tonight would be his last as a carefree twenty-four-year-old. Tomorrow, at precisely 6:15 a.m., he’d hit the quarter century mark. He’d gotten the obligatory birthday visit with his mother out of the way this morning at breakfast, one day early because she had plans for tomorrow morning that couldn’t be cancelled. Or so she said. Kind of odd, her passing on his birthday like this.

So that left another long, lonely, *boring* evening ahead of him. Too bad he didn’t find a spare triplet in the foam pit. They could’ve watched *The Avengers* together—one more viewing and he’d probably get all the lines memorized—or rolled around on the giant exercise balls. Or, ordered pizza only to have it come back up afterwards while they bounced on the trampolines. Erik liked kids. They never expected you to be something you weren’t.

Or, he could seek out more adult-oriented activities for the night. But that would mean making an effort. Finding a club of some sort. A place with dancing? Scratch that—why show the world you can’t dance worth crap? And those tightly crowded spaces... and strange hands grabbing him... No—just no. Bullies seldom grew out of their hurtful ways, they just developed slyer tactics when they grew up. And with the asthma creeping back...

Besides, a man only went to those kinds of places if he wanted to get picked up. Erik wasn't that kind of guy. Too shy. Too socially awkward. Jordan had only been telling the truth when he said that. And actually, there was only one person Erik wanted anyway, only one man with whom he'd dare bare his body, let alone his soul. Better just to go home. Alone.

Because maybe, just maybe, that man would call tonight.

Sure. That was about as likely as Jordan deciding the women's basketball team was the new petite. Nothing wrong with hoping though, was there? And it would be just like him to text out of the blue, when Erik least expected it. He'd been doing it more often lately too, summoning Erik, and the word was *summons*, too, Erik didn't kid himself. He didn't have the guy's home number, and he never arranged one of their hasty rendezvous. Heck, he couldn't call him if he wanted to, and yes, Erik definitely wanted to. But they had a one-sided deal. *He* summoned and Erik went. That's just the way it was.

And just the way he liked it. Which was kind of sick and twisted, but he wasn't going to think about that again today.

Erik never knew when he'd see him again. *If* he'd see him again. He'd never been invited to call. Didn't know where his black-haired mystery man lived. Hell, Erik didn't even know his *name*.

But if those two little magic words—*one hour*—appeared on his phone right now? *Gone*. Erik wouldn't miss that one hour deadline, either. That's how it worked, their crazy, twisted hook-ups. First, he'd get that two-word text. *One hour*. One minute after replying, if he replied, he'd get another message, an address, part of an address, only it would arrive hidden in some kind of code, perhaps be tangled in a strange riddle. Wound in a poem. Scattered in a photo collage of street signs or jumbled landmarks. Or, his personal favourite, an anagram concealed in the lines of an architectural drawing or old blueprint.

Where the hell did the guy find those things, anyway? Erik mentally added city planner to possible occupations for his mystery man.

There'd been a couple times the tricky bugger had almost stumped him with a difficult clue. Once, he'd been late—not even five minutes—only to

find the appointed meeting place empty and the man gone. That had sucked. So he learned not to be late. Not to be stupid. Because being stupid took time, and extra time was never given.

In response to that missed hook-up, Erik upped his game. Thought fast on his feet. Drove fast or ran like hell. Studied city maps over his cereal bowl in the morning and read up on the city's historical sites on the Internet at night so he'd be ready for the next clue. Time spent on Google Earth filled in for the best friend he never had.

Yep. Sick and twisted.

Just the way he liked it.

Very irritating, all that noise. And the hand flapping. Jesus. Douglas spoke more with his hands than his voice. Probably used sign language in his sleep. Winter slouched in his chair and tried to ignore him. No such luck. If Douglas could be said to excel at anything, it was yapping. Totally ruined his concentration, the yammering twit.

Winter had been busy altering the picture on his tablet and almost had it done. As far as clues went, it was an easy one, but fuck, their meeting had gone an hour overtime, and now he had to hurry. Pissed him off, having his plans derailed like this. Especially today.

Douglas's tone turned petulant. "Am I boring you, MacKay?"

"Why, yes you are, Dougie. You noticed." Douglas wasn't worth lying to, although he always got away with it when he did.

"Oh, fuck you."

Not even if he was the last man on Earth. "Yeah? You thinking of switching teams?"

"No," Douglas answered. He had an impressive sneer. Douglas defined the typical uptight, straight man. "Come on, Winter. Why don't you try paying attention? This is important."

"No, it isn't."

"The Shelton deal—"

“Is no concern of mine.”

The folder Douglas had been flapping around during his tirade suddenly flew across the meeting room table and slid to a stop right in front of him. *Hmpf*. Dougie'd always had good aim. But nothing was gonna save the Shelton deal. They'd been outfoxed on that one. No matter, another sweet deal always waited just around the corner, and they all knew that. Winter left the folder untouched.

Blessed silence settled in the room for a few minutes, enough time for Douglas to catch his breath and wring the kinks out of his hands before his next tirade. “You can't just quit,” he finally said, more softly than Winter expected.

“I can, and did. You guys agreed to buy me out.” And with considerable hostility, too.

“You can't quit. We're like the mob. Once you're in, there is no out.”

Felt that way, too. “But I *am* getting out.” Winter stood and straightened his newly rumpled suit. “Look.” He pointed at his perfectly polished shoe. “Got one foot out the door already.” He made an exaggerated step toward the door. Christ, was he never going to get out of here?

In the twelve years of their four-way partnership, they'd seldom quarrelled; they were a well-greased, perfectly-tuned, smooth-running machine of destruction. Winter knew his defection hit the other three hard. Okay, he'd blindsided them. But knowing his partners, his college friends, as he did, a clean break had been necessary. There could be no dragging things out, no giving false hope.

Winter wanted out—*needed* out. Nothing and nobody would stand in his way. Not even their friendship, or the years-long familiarity that passed for friendship. Now that Winter had seen that misconception for what it was, he couldn't *unsee* it. They hadn't truly been friends in years.

“I don't even know why you want out.” Douglas actually looked kind of hurt. *Huh*. “What are you gonna do anyway? You don't know anything else.”

And that, right there, was the reason. Not that Douglas would understand.

Douglas shook his head. “You’ll be bored to death in less than a month. After you’ve spanked or fucked your way through all the boys in sight and twirled all those little umbrellas that come in your drink and grown fat on some private beach somewhere, what are you gonna do? You live for the thrill of the chase. The kill. You know you’re a shark. Arrogant maybe, but a badass, killer shark in his prime.”

True. Couldn’t argue that, most of that, but he’d grown tired of using his teeth to shred all the bleeding fish he could catch. And Douglas, for all their supposed friendship, simply had no clue there was only one boy he wanted to fuck. “You guys will get along fine without me.” Not at first, but eventually. “I’m officially bequeathing my patch of the ocean to the rest of you Great Whites.”

“You’re making a huge mistake.”

The only mistake was not getting out sooner. “I’m late, Douglas. I have to go.” Winter had better things to do than hop aboard their guilt trip—they could mail the brochure. “Forget the Shelton deal. It’s done. Over. My last piece of advice to you is to snap up that Parkview Heights foreclosure while you still can. My source tells me some new sharks are circling the waters, scenting for blood. They’re looking to feed, and Parkview’s a tasty morsel.”

“Enough of the fucking shark analogies, you asshole.” Douglas’s usually restless hands fell still. Something akin to sadness flickered across his face then vanished. “Don’t go. We need you.”

A sliver of remorse stilled Winter’s cruel tongue, a weapon as sharp as his teeth. Once upon a time they’d been close, the four of them, before the feeding frenzy turned them all into something less than human. Winter had to get out now, while he could still wash the blood off. Reaching out, he gave Douglas’s shoulder one last squeeze for the friendship they’d once shared. “I can’t stay. I won’t stay. I’m sorry.”

Before he could weaken, before his shark-like nature had a chance to insert itself into the first smart decision he’d made in God knew how many years, Winter turned away and strode for the door. Regret walked with him, as hot and burning as Douglas’s resentful glare on his back. How had he allowed himself to come to this? How had they all?

Down in the lobby, Winter transferred the data from his tablet to his phone. Everything was ready. He might have red hands now and be unworthy of the touch of someone pure and clean and honest, but damned if he wouldn't change. He'd scrub and scrub until all the blood came off, until he found the decent person he once was underneath.

In a last symbolic act, Winter wiped his feet on the mat at the front door before he left the building. Done. He was done here. Done with this old, no-longer-suited life. Between the door and his car, some of the weight eased from his shoulders. Bright morning sun caught him in the eye, a harbinger of better days. Time for new beginnings. And speaking of time, he glanced at his watch. Almost nine. Perfect.

Like him, Erik rose early and got busy with his day. By now he'd have been up for hours, would have eaten, had that cup of coffee he swore up and down he never drank, would have shaved, showered and gotten geared up to go. Oh yes, he'd be ready for a challenge. Time to put birthday boy through his paces.

Smiling, Winter tapped his favourite two words into the screen and sent his message on its way.

One hour.

God, it would be hard waiting that hour. His hands already trembled in anticipation. Those short interludes he shared with his beautiful gymnast were the only times he truly felt like himself. In fact, it had been Erik who'd unwittingly shown him what he'd become. Not very pleasant waking from a daze and realizing you were a heartless bastard.

If Erik made other arrangements for the morning, he'd kick his ass. He'd planned this scavenger hunt for days, even freeing Erik from family obligations with a few secretive phone calls, one to his mother of the fifty damned questions and one to his boss to ensure he had the day off. He'd staked his claim. Fuelling the excitement already growing in his belly, his phone chimed. Right on time. A one-word reply appeared, and not the usual, almost bashful, "Hi" Erik favoured, but a daring, taunting, "Go!"

Cheeky brat.

The second hand ticked so very slowly around his watch, taking forever as he waited the requisite minute before sending the first clue. Finally! Grinning, he sent the missive on its way with a prayer the boy would decipher it fast. He needed to see him, his beautiful obsession, and soon. Didn't mean he'd let him off the hook. Erik would have to earn his pleasure.

The game was now, officially, afoot.

What the hell? A weathervane? Erik stared at the picture.

A cock.

Someone wasn't exactly trying for subtlety today. Erik had been about to walk over to the organic market for a post work-out stretch and lunch supplies when the text came. Already having his shoes and jacket on gave him a small head start, and somehow, he knew he'd need it. A morning tryst? Never had one of those before. The unexpected daylight summons rattled his nerves, almost like doing a tricky vault used to. His dick, however, liked the unexpected and twitched in approval.

Excitement, both kinds, made his fingers jittery as he twisted his key in the lock and shoved them into his pocket along with his new inhaler. Good thing gymnasts were expert at recovering from stumbles, because he almost tripped down the stairs staring at his phone instead of where he put his feet.

Okay. A copper weathervane with a rooster on top. Which element was the important one? The copper? That meant pennies... or wires or plumbing. Could be any flippin' thing. Who the hell was on a penny, again?

What about the rooster? They crowed. Annoyingly, he gathered. And they serviced the hens. *Yeah, that's so funny, you dolt.* Feathers? Even though he tripped along in full sunshine, Erik shivered. That man could probably do serious torture with a feather. He'd driven Erik crazy with the edge of a credit card once, so yeah, a feather... *damn.* Another tingly shiver travelled downward and stopped at his balls. *Keep your mind on task! Time's a-tickin'.*

So, a weathervane. How did those work? Erik had never been on a farm in his life. *I can tell you the weather right now, Mr. Mystery. It's sunny, warm, and about to get hot.* Didn't those things show wind direction?

Erik yanked open the car door and got assaulted by a stinky blast of damp, dirty gym clothes. No time to shove them in the trunk because some dickhead had parked their huge crew-cab in the small car section, boxing him in. He eased his way into his small car, desperately wishing for more leg room—and fresh air.

Pulling out as fast as he dared, Erik promptly made up the lost time by speeding through the parking lot. Weathervane? Guy was *loco*. Anagrams were much easier. He stopped at the curb, foot eager for the gas pedal.

Which way should he go?

No cars waited behind him. He looked at the photo again. Okay. Weathervanes pointed. But it could be pointing any direction, damn it. He looked again. *This can't be all*. Jesus, he'd already blown eight minutes! He had to be missing something... maybe...? The back half of the rooster seemed to be shinier. Aha. Glints of photoshopped sunshine lit up its back and tail feathers. The arrow pointed the other way. And it was morning... *Devious bastard*.

Alright, then. Head west.

Gunning the engine, Erik did. Fortunately, traffic was thin, the morning rush over. At each red light, he looked at the photo again. The man with no name, well, he had a name, Erik just didn't know it, had never hidden two bits of info in one clue before, but Erik wouldn't put it past him. Possessed a definite ruthless streak, that one. When the next message came, Erik almost rear-ended the delivery van in front of him. *Get a grip, idiot!* He tapped his phone, his foot twitching on the gas pedal.

A horrible song immediately, and loudly, insulted his iPhone. And his ears. Sounded vaguely familiar. And old, like, 1950's-old old. 1960's? Spotting an opening ahead, Erik pulled over and then frowned at the colourful tie-dyed shapes undulating on the screen. Hippy stuff. Mr. Mystery was nowhere near that old. Mid-thirties at most, Erik guessed. Brows furrowed, he listened to the song, ever mindful of the minutes racing by. Silly song seemed to be something about a... *love potion number nine*.

Good Christ. One of them had lost their mind. *And it's not me*.

Panic fluttered in his stomach as Erik forced himself to patiently listen to the annoyingly catchy song a second time. Something about love potions and kissing a cop, wait—where was that, again? On the second replay, the words began to make sense. *Thirty-fourth and Vine*. That had to be the clue. Or did it?

If he was meant to be going west like he thought, then the next street he needed to hit couldn't possibly be Thirty-fourth, now long behind him. Therefore it had to be Vine Street. Right? There was no way he'd have time to hunt up a Madame Rue, gypsy or otherwise, unless tarot card readers were savvy online businesses now.

And crap—the guy wasn't a cop, was he?

Because that would be so hot.

Vine Street was only a few blocks ahead. And kind of trashy. If he wanted a tattoo, he could probably get one there, along with hepatitis, a quick oil change, and an overpriced coffee.

Erik had no idea whether to go left or right at the lights, and that stupid van made it hard to see anything in front of him. Taking a chance, Erik changed into the right-hand lane and peered ahead. Gas stations. Muffler shops. Yep, a coffee place. Two of them, one on each side of Vine. Shoot. He was never going to make it at this rate. Forty minutes from now he'd still be twiddling his thumbs and trying to figure out whether to go north or south on Vine. Mexican restaurant... golf supplies... shoe repairs... adult toy store...

Wait. Adult toy store?

Erik slowed. Un-fricking-believable. *Leather, Lace and Love Potions*. Open for business. Couldn't be a coincidence. *And one of us has definitely lost it*. Erik turned right, pulled a quick left and shot into the small parking lot in front of the store decorated with scantily clad women. *Maybe it's me—I'm the one who's crazy. Mom always says the crazy one is the last to know*.

No way was he going in there. Not in broad daylight.

Just... no.

Erik cast a wary eye along the street for a cop instead. None. Not even at the coffee place. What the hell was the world coming to? And it wasn't like

mystery man ever let Erik kiss him, on Thirty-fourth or Vine or anywhere else. Erik wasn't even allowed to *touch* him. His lips were perpetually lonely. Someone should write a song about *that*.

Was he supposed to stop here? Head up Vine? Go somewhere else?

He would fail this time. Some birthday this was turning out to be.

Planting the GPS tracker in Erik's car had been a really, really asshole thing to do. And brilliant. Shame be damned. If he wanted to know where Erik was at any given time during their game, he simply found a Starbucks or McDonalds, caught their Wi-Fi signal, and tracked him. Clever little imp he was, too. He'd arrived at the store already.

That song had been too perfect. So many possible choices, yet Erik picked the right one, first try. Excellent. Winter admired intelligence in a man. It was so rare.

Time to give birthday boy his first order. Push his boundaries. His eager fingers texted another two-word message. *Go inside*.

Whether Erik actually would or not, he wasn't totally sure. Depended on how badly he wanted the next clue. How badly he *wanted*. For someone who worked with the public, who taught dozens of kids daily, had the brats climbing all over him, Erik hadn't quite grown out of his boyhood shyness. A handsome face, a pro athlete's body, a simmering sexuality, and no idea anyone would look at him twice. What a crying fucking shame.

Winter didn't think Erik got down and dirty with anyone else. Which was good, because just thinking of someone else touching him, putting hands on that beautiful, powerful body, made his inner monster turn green and see red. And that was, theoretically, bad. Rationally, he understood that, but the shark inside wasn't rational. It was territorial.

Winter had felt territorial almost from the beginning. No one and nothing ever took him by surprise, a point of pride. Yet Erik had managed it, and from the very second their eyes met. Not across a crowded room, but a crowded parking lot.

Some genetic experiment had gone horribly wrong, and a teeming throng of identical pod children had erupted out of the gym and swarmed all the

vehicles in a mass exodus that put the disaster management people's plans to shame. Protecting his own unique DNA from cloning, he'd hid out in his car until the experiments successfully escaped.

Winter had never seen such organized chaos. Hopefully never would again. But when the dust settled, there had been Erik standing outside the doors looking stunned, sweaty and edible. Sweaty hot, sexy hot, just plain fucking hot. He'd lifted the hem of his T-shirt to wipe his face and treated Winter to a vision of the most glorious abs he'd ever laid eyes on. He'd stared openly—shamelessly. Erik had caught him at it.

And liked it.

Using his charm, and Winter could be a charming prick, he'd gotten the gym club's owner to loan him the hot gym teacher with the dancing blue-green eyes to show him around not only the premises, but the surrounding buildings and beyond. Creek-front prime land waiting to be rehabilitated. No toxic waste dumps. No endangered birds for the environmentalists to squawk about. Nothing but the two of them and a volatile sexual tension that had blown Winter's mind.

Of course he'd exploited that tension.

What a heartless bastard he'd been. But somehow, later that same night, in a vacant building they'd just sold, he'd given Erik something he'd craved, fulfilled a secret need inside that no one else had ever reached. Bastard he may have been, and bastard he still was, he'd never betray Erik's secrets.

That unforgettable night had also put an abrupt end to the parade of nameless men in his hotel bed, or pushed up against the wall in some seedy club's bathroom, or down on their knees before him, begging. No more settling. He wanted the real thing. When he'd ceased to believe he'd ever find the matching half of his own kinky self, chance had seen fit to put Erik in his path.

Such a risky business, falling for someone. It took balls of steel. Bravery. Unimaginable control. Things that scared the shit out of the shark. Right from the start, he'd told himself to be careful, not to let Erik get under his skin. Ha-ha. *You never stood a chance.*

Their meeting had acted as catalyst to changes Winter had already wanted to make in his life. After that, he'd pushed his timetable ahead. And soon, Winter would be ready to lay it all on the line and tell Erik he wanted more than hurried encounters with too few words spoken. He wanted it all. A real relationship, days and nights spent together, futures shared, lives entwined. Everything.

He'd just needed to finish cleaning up his act first, because there was no way in hell he was ruining another life. Still had red hands from the last time.

Leaving Erik hanging in a parking lot wasn't the way to go about making the man his. Pushing his shy guy this hard could backfire on him if he wasn't careful. But no risk, no reward, right?

Taking a deep breath, he fired off his next text.

Pick three things. Do not think, do not ponder, do not contemplate. Take the item that, the second you see it, you want it. You will not concern yourself with price or propriety, but will put it in your basket and move on to the next item. I've arranged for store credit in your name. Some rules apply, naturally. So:

Of Leather, pick one. Of Lace, pick one. Of Love Potions, pick one.

You have fifteen minutes.

Since it was Erik's birthday and all, he'd be generous. Then again, having Erik arrive all hot, sweaty and frustrated did have a certain appeal... ooh-yeah.

To get Erik out of his car, because he knew damned well he'd be stewing in it, Winter texted a short warning.

I'm waiting.

Go inside...

"I'm not doing it." Talking to oneself in these circumstances was perfectly reasonable. Other people did it all the time. He heard them. In Walmart, especially. "I'm not."

The store didn't look all that seedy. In fact, the front window and entrance appeared neat and clean, almost inviting. Could've done without the half-

dressed female mannequins staring at him. Dredged up all kinds of pervy feelings. All he needed now was dirty fingernails and a trench coat. Procrastinating, Erik spared another glance at the pretty collection of lace undies on the mannequins.

Shit.

Lace.

Of Lace, pick one...

What the hell? Leather, Erik got. In fact, he'd had a boner since he pulled into the lot and read the word *leather* on the sign. Ever since Mystery McNasty had shown up for one of their liaisons wearing skin tight, lace-up leather pants and black boots, Erik had been a convert. The things he'd done down on the floor at the mercy of those boots...

And the love potion part seemed easy enough, although it didn't necessarily have to mean lube. Erik worried his lip between his teeth. They'd never done anything that required lube, although some little packets made the odd appearance. *He doesn't even let you touch him, no way is he going to fuck you.* That suited Erik fine, since he wasn't any good at it anyway. Guys always shoved it in too fast and it hurt, which, apparently, was Erik's fault. *Bet if Mr. Mystery did it to you, you'd like it...*

Stop it! He'd already blown five of his fifteen minutes, and he hadn't even opened the frigging car door. Now wasn't the time to think of what the man would or wouldn't do. Or how much he'd like it.

But lace! Twisting his neck for a better look, Erik eyed one of the skimpy bra-and-panty-wearing mannequins with suspicion. No. There had to be some mistake.

Sure. A mistake. Mystery man didn't make mistakes. Wherever today's game ended up taking him, this play had been meticulously planned in advance. *Quit whining, you know you don't have to do this.* Nameless or not, the man didn't own him. Erik was a free agent. Could quit anytime he wanted. Except... they didn't talk about it, but Erik knew that the price of their continued hookups was his total obedience. That was the way it was.

And you like obeying, don't you? No! I hate it. I hate the humiliating things he makes me do. Erik didn't know why he couldn't stay away. Right—sure,

plead ignorance. *You stay because he drives you crazy, he haunts your dreams, awake and asleep, and just thinking about him gives you a knot of excitement in the pit of your stomach unlike anything else you've ever felt in your life. Admit it, you like having his eyes on you, you love pleasing him... you want more.*

And surely that was the most bizarre thing of all, Erik's all-consuming need to please his dark-eyed tormentor, even if the man never got off himself during their strange encounters. *Forget mystery man, I should call him my ice-man.* Took Erik a while to realize the ice-man's pleasure took a different form than the physical. For some inexplicable reason, he thrilled to watching Erik get off, which for its own inexplicable reason, tripped all Erik's switches. What a twisted pair they made.

And that was just the way he liked it.

But... rules were rules, and ice-man was a stickler for the rules, so if he wanted to get off in his company again, he had to... *go inside.*

Dang it.

Wishing he had that trench coat to hide behind, Erik got out, locked the car with a *beep*, and scowled back at the haughty ladies and the smaller, groin only, male mannequin with the lacy underwear. What? Wait a second. Hand on the door, Erik looked again. Oh-ho. Those definitely weren't ladies undies. They covered a very unladylike bulge between the plastic legs. Christ. Lace panties for men. *This is the last time I'm doing this, I swear.*

Inside, the reek of day-old incense curled his gut more than the humiliation of being there to begin with. Erik took a deep breath anyway and sent silent kudos to the inventor of the rescue inhaler. Time to get his ass in gear. The orders had been clear, and if he had eight minutes left out of this throw of the dice, he'd count himself lucky. As he grabbed a basket from the rack and stepped beyond the entry, Erik's eyes bulged.

Holy shit. So much stuff...

Kinky stuff.

The clerk standing at the till didn't jump up and scream "Pervert!" at him. Instead she smiled at him and his reddening face then went back to unpacking

a box of dildos. Christ Almighty. And people said he had to be nuts to do *his* job.

Fifteen minutes would have been nothing, a blink of the eye in the crammed-to-the-rafters place. How the hell could he find three things in *eight freaking minutes?*

Easy. Don't think, don't ponder. Just pick.

Leather implements covered one wall. Spanking things. Flogging things. They kept the rope collection company. Ah, rope. Erik enjoyed a shiver of fond remembrance. Nothing humiliating about being tied up, at least not the way mystery man did it. The rasp of rough hemp against his wrists, the whispered threats in his ear...

Get back on track—he said leather, not rope.

Maybe they made leather rope? Checking the shelves under the wall of whips, Erik didn't find any. As he sidled down the aisle, the stock took a decidedly masculine turn. Yes! Cuffs? Harnesses? Erik's dick swelled enough to tighten his loose track pants. He wasted a precious few seconds speculating. Not thinking—he wasn't thinking—he was just trying to get this right. While he liked the harnesses, they didn't want to leap off the shelf and land in his basket. He kept going, looking but not touching, and saving his focus for breathing and opening his mind to possibilities.

Chaps. *Nice.* Jackets and belts. Paddles and crops. *Mmm... crops...* And God, that scent...

And those things there... *yes, that's it.*

They were displayed on a buff mannequin dressed as a cop. A very kinky cop holding a strap-on instead of a baton. But that wasn't what made his heart skip a beat. It was the elbow-length leather gloves with laces, buckles and tight braiding on the palms that Officer McSlutty wore. Holy frickamoly—scratch the holy, there was nothing holy about them. To be touched by those things, to have those rough braids slide up and down sensitive, taut flesh... yeah. *Take them and put them in the basket...*

There were only two pairs for sale, and the ones not on the mannequin were, thankfully, large size. The heady scent of leather filled his nostrils,

obliterating the cloying incense. Cold, or warm from body heat, the tanned skin would feel amazing sliding over his skin. Especially if a certain someone's strong hands were inside them. Erik's heart skipped another beat as he slid them off the shelf and into his basket. *Would he let me touch him, I wonder, if I wore the gloves?*

Sure—as if. You know he won't.

And he'll probably just spank you with them—you should take something else... But Erik didn't. He took two big steps backward and unwittingly found the store's fetish section. Too much! His mind couldn't take it all in at once, the vinyl, the buckles and straps, the hoods and gags. Lots of things intended for men, too, like the metal cock-cage artfully pinned to a cardboard cut-out of an underwear model. Who the hell would willingly submit to wearing that thing?

You know who...

Shut up! You're out of time. Stop thinking for God's sake. Find something lacy and get the hell out of here. Those underwear displayed at the front had been... acceptable. The fabric had been a repulsive sky blue, a shade that brought back all sorts of horrible memories of endless hours confined within the blue walls of his childhood bedroom. Surely there had to be other colors—yes, there, on the shelf. Black. *Boring.* Yellow. *Now that's just vile. Nobody looks good in yellow.* Pinkish ones, with a black leather inset at the front that laced them up. Oh, God. *Those ones.* Erik fingered the tag. His size, and not pink—ashes of roses apparently. Christ.

I'm not crazy enough yet. I still know I've lost it.

“There's a fabulous corset that matches those,” the clerk said from behind his back, startling him.

The panties fell into the basket as Erik almost jumped out of his shoes and made an undignified, girly noise. “Pardon?” he choked out.

“Right here,” she said, squeezing past him to rummage through a bunch of hangers. With a clack of plastic, she disentangled one hanger from the rest and held it up.

Holy shit. Fabulous was right. And wrong. Wrong! And dirty, oh, so

fucking dirty. Erik's chest tightened alarmingly. *Not an episode—not now, please not now. Just breathe.*

“You're pretty big,” the clerk said, sizing him up, “you need a larger size.” Slipping the hanger back on the rack, she flipped to the next one, pulled it out and held it up. “Here we are. Isn't it wonderful? I wish they made a women's version. It'd sell out in five minutes flat. It's the sexiest corset I've ever seen.”

“Uh-um...”

With no shame whatsoever, she leaned forward and said, conspiratorially, “You should take it. You're perfect for it. The color alone—*please. You need to take it. There has to be some justice in the world.*”

“I...”

With an evil smile, she slowly eased the stiff bundle of deep pink lace and black leather toward the basket, her expressive brows raised in question. She was giving him the perfect opportunity to say no, thank-you. Only Erik's tongue wouldn't work. Then it was all the way inside his basket and Erik still wasn't breathing. Lace. *For me.*

“He's a lucky guy,” the clerk said, then sighed and turned back to straighten the messy hangers.

Goddamn it. *Don't think! Nothing's left to contemplate. It's already in the basket.*

Fine.

Next thing, then. *Of Love Potions, pick one.* Okay. Easy. Erik re-evaluated that a second later at the glass displays full of... what the frick? How many kinds of lube could there possibly be? His chest still felt tight, like he couldn't get enough air. Patting his pocket, Erik felt for the comforting shape of his inhaler. *You don't need that. It's not an attack. You know what's wrong with you, and it's sitting in the basket.* All his blood seemed to have moved downward. Erik slid the basket in front of his crotch. *Never again. I mean it! This is the last time.*

The omnipresent clerk suddenly reappeared, and in front of him this time. Still scared the shit out of him and Erik jolted, banging the basket against his

inopportune erection. Smiling her sly, knowledgeable smile, she reached up on the shelf behind the counter and pulled down a bottle. “The best,” she commented and handed it over. Dazed, Erik reached out like a fool and opened his hand. “Now for condoms,” she said.

What? Who the hell was this woman? Erik found his voice; it was just an octave higher than usual. “I don’t need—”

“Oh, trust me, honey. In that outfit, you will definitely need them.”

Between all the blood burning in his face and swelling in his dick, there was none left for his heart to pump out a terrified beat. His chest felt so very, very tight. Soon, he’d get lightheaded. Where was his inhaler? A box of condoms magically appeared on the counter in front of him.

“Can I get you anything else?”

Not thinking, not pondering, Erik put the lube, then the condoms in the basket. He shook his head. “Thank you, no,” he managed. “I think... I think I’ll just... *go.*”

A sweet and wonderful laugh filled the empty store. “If it helps, just think of me as your fairy godmother.”

Oh, for—“That’s not even funny.”

Apparently she thought so, for she laughed at him some more, wrapped everything in purple tissue and tucked his purchases into a fancy box, then a bag. “Here you go.”

Almost done—hallelujah. “I think—I’m supposed to, ah, have a store credit. My name’s—”

“I kinda figured you were the one.”

Acute embarrassment set off little tremors in his hands. Hadn’t felt like that since grade school when Davy Smits called him Wheezy the Cheezie in front of everyone. What had mystery man told her about him? Tightness crawled across his chest. Erik didn’t think he could manage another word. Fuck it, and yes, this deserved using the *fuck* word. This was nothing but a big, fat conspiracy designed to humiliate him. He nodded his thanks instead of speaking, because, really, it wasn’t her fault—he did this to himself. Curling

the bag in one big hand, Erik fled the store with what little of his dignity he had left.

Never again.

How could he do that? Tell a stranger about me? I thought he understood...

One last clue. Winter cheated and gave Erik twenty minutes, not the fifteen he'd originally said. Fuck it. If Erik showed up half hour late he wouldn't give a flying fuck, he'd make him strip on the spot before he lost his mind. What the hell had he picked? Should have installed a hidden camera by the register. Next fucking time. That would probably be overdoing it, though.

And it would ruin the surprise.

Some rules were better followed. When he felt like it. And he needed to quit fucking cussing in a hurry. Erik worked with kids and didn't need to catch his potty mouth. Potty? Hell, hardened sailors wouldn't want to be in his head right now.

The clue, a *Snakes and Ladders*.gif had been a bitch to make. Computer shit was his former partner Andrew's specialty, only Winter's name was now permanently inked in first spot on Andrew's shit list. Dougie was right. You really couldn't leave the mob unscathed. Well, fuck. Probably wise to be self-reliant anyway.

Maybe Erik wouldn't even know what *Snakes and Ladders* meant. Yeah, well, that's what the Internet was for. Today's rendezvous point, across from some defunct store called The Snake Pit—and no, Winter did not want to guess what the hell that meant in case some snakes got left behind and wanted to slither over for a visit—should be easy enough to find. Never could tell with Mr. Healey, though. Full of surprises, Erik was.

Against all understanding, Winter had taken a liking to the antique wooden ladder collection tacked onto the side of the brick building he'd bought out from some down-on-their-luck family who'd been in the sign business there for sixty years. Would hunting them down and returning the ladders wash some of the blood from his hands? Would it help if they knew he loved the old building and would give it new and lasting life as his office?

Doubtful. Seven years bad luck for each one? Hell. But life goes on, right? *Not for some people though, does it?* Squeezing his hands into fists, Winter leaned back into the seat, closed his eyes and refused to let the horrifying memory flare to flaming life. *It wasn't your fault! Not yours alone.* Maybe if they'd extended the deadline, hadn't been so fucking heartless, things would've turned out differently... *and maybe they wouldn't. She was already unstable... but Jesus-fuck, why the kids...?*

He'd never know why. But Winter MacKay prided himself on learning from his mistakes. Next time he'd get it right.

Unclenching his hands, Winter opened his eyes and moved his head into the crack of sunshine coming in through his window. Better. Today was Erik's special day. No more of this pointless self-recrimination. And more than Erik's day, this one was also his, because once he signed off at the lawyer's at three, he'd be on his own, his own man, all choices his to make. Course, all the fuck-ups would be his, too. Therefore, he just wouldn't make any.

Best of all, once he walked out of that overpriced, snooty, uptown law office... *Erik will be mine.* Finally. At least he hoped so. For all he knew, Erik would give him a good kick in the chops for his presumption and tell him he didn't stand a chance. No risk, no reward, right? *Right?*

Damn it. Worrying accomplished fuck all, and he had to quit it. Better to be a man of action. In a nod to vanity, Winter finger-combed his wavy hair, smoothed his jacket and straightened his tie. Erik had a thing for a nice suit. Actually, when they were together, Erik had a thing for just about everything. Almost any dark, perverted act Winter could dream up. *God, I'm one lucky bastard.*

Being with Erik brought about great feats of creativity. They didn't fuck—he'd forbidden himself that—and he almost never let Erik touch him, so satisfaction had to come from satisfying Erik, which was perversely satisfying in its own way. Fuck.

Philosophizing and it wasn't even noon yet.

Leaving the car behind in his very own little lot that he didn't have to share with anyone, Winter wandered over to wait by the entrance for Erik's arrival.

Should be any time now, the clever brat. Damn—looked like both the mailman and paperboy had discovered his existence. They'd crammed the old-fashioned wooden box full of useless shit already. While he sorted through the fliers for anything resembling real mail, Erik's piece of crap car skidded across a patch of gravel and entered the lot doing roughly Mach 5.

Shit on a stick.

Time to put a stop to that before he killed himself with that lead foot. This was just a game, not do-or-die. Winter felt the need to beat the speed out of Mr. Hell-On-Wheels. And he'd enjoy it a great deal, leaving little red crop-kisses all over that impossibly muscular butt. That should slow him down. Or not. Probably just rev him up more.

Shifting slightly, Winter moved out of the shadows enough for Erik to spot him. Then he went inside, rushing up the stairs as fast as his pulsing dick would let him. Almost time. *Don't hyperventilate. Get a handle on yourself.* What the fucking fuck had Erik picked out? *I am never setting myself up for another surprise as long as I live. What was I thinking?*

His main office space stood empty except for the new, large couch and wooden-slab coffee table he'd had custom built and delivered. Things could get messy with them, so he'd covered the seat cushions with the handmade throw his sister Autumn had sent for Christmas. Colors went well. Floor to ceiling glass made up one entire wall of the upper floor, with antique leaded panes at the top. Utterly spectacular. Winter sat on one end of the couch, planted one foot on the table and waited, wagging his leg impatiently.

Showtime.

Some form of witchcraft had given Erik all the grace of a cat. He moved silently, weightlessly. Always startled him, that sure-footedness. A faint crinkle of plastic alerted him to Erik's presence only seconds before he was, suddenly, *there*. And damned, if he wasn't the most beautiful man Winter had ever laid eyes on.

Beautiful even in his fury.

Eyeball knives and daggers were thrown. Ouch. Usually, when their eyes met for the first time after being apart, sparks flew. Today, dual sparks. Lust

and anger. Oh, yeah. Taking control of the situation, Winter said what he always said first. “Clothes *off*.”

Glaring, Erik slunk forward and thudded the largish bag, and box inside, on the table. What the hell could possibly require a box that size? Jesus, was he never going to find out? Still glaring—and was that a little bit of hurt creeping in there under the anger—Erik jerked out of his jacket, balled it up and flung it on the floor.

“What? Were you born in a barn?”

A nasty retort burned dangerously hot on Erik’s tongue. If he’d been a less shy individual, no doubt some verbal sparks would have spewed out. But that wasn’t Erik. Instead, he bent down, snatched up the jacket and hurled it toward the couch, narrowly missing Winter’s head. *Temper, temper*. Good thing he didn’t have Dougie’s killer aim.

The silky, quick-dry shirt Erik wore underneath almost fit in his big palm after he roughly yanked it up, and off. Fuck—*those abs*. He’d never seen anything like them. Rock would be envious. In angry jerks, Erik toed out of, then kicked off, his running shoes, flinging them across the newly buffed hardwood.

“Do you need an attitude adjustment?” Should give him one regardless. For fun.

Pausing with his fingers on one sock, foot up, Erik sealed his lips into a tight line. Such balance—God. Not a single wobble, despite the anger, as he removed his socks. A dangerous glint lit his pale eyes as he crushed them in his fist.

“If you so much as *think* of throwing those at me, I’ll knot them together and gag you with them.” Maybe would anyway.

All that remained for the striptease was a pair of very thin exercise pants that would look terrible on anyone who had the audacity to have some body fat. It was obvious Erik did not want to bare himself. Today was not quite going according to plan. Maybe he needed a few minutes to calm down. They did talk, it wasn’t all sex between them. “Are you wearing underwear?”

Erik threw another volley of eyeball darts his way. “What kind of question is that?”

“One that I asked, and therefore, I expect an immediate answer.”

“Yes.”

“Then take off the pants, but leave the underwear on.”

Seething, Erik took a deep breath and shoved at the weightless material until the pants fell to his feet. God in heaven. Boxer briefs. Skin tight.

Those muscles... Unbelievable. But... hmm. Erik had always been lean. Healthy, but lean. Last week, Winter had thought Erik had lost a couple pounds. Today, he was sure of it, and the young man didn't have any to spare. He was so cut, every muscle cast a shadow. Drool-worthy. Definitely drool-worthy. But edging toward not-so-healthy.

Backing up, Erik gave the pants an angry boot.

“That's enough!” Winter was up and on his feet before he thought to move. Erik actually stepped back a pace, startled, then took another and another, until he backed into the window.

“Turn around,” Winter snapped. Where the hell was all this anger coming from? “Hands on the glass.”

For a few seconds, Erik considered disobeying. Winter noted the rebellion in every tense muscle in a body where every flex and ripple showed, but eventually his big hands settled on the glass, chest high. After a moment, Erik's jaw unclenched. He licked his lips and opened his mouth, an argument at the ready. Turning, his long fingers slid along the glass with a cringe inducing squeak.

“No. Don't move.” Not yet. “For now, you stay where I put you.” Brat could just stew there for a minute until he got a handle on his temper.

But damn, did he have to be so stunning when angry? Settling again on the couch, giving them both a minute to relax, Winter did what he liked best. Waited. Watched.

Definitely skinnier. And buffer. If that was possible. How much did Erik have to work out to get muscles like that? Fucking amazing. Those shoulders—oh, man. They'd look incredible with his arms strung up overhead, wrists tied. Would Erik like it? A theory worth testing. “Put your hands up higher.”

Erik's head snapped round, the look on his face startling. Very un-Erik-like, that expression, a strange alchemy of anger, defiance, resentment and... hurt?

Hurt. Not the emotion he wanted to arouse. He'd been aiming for excitement, lust, and a little fear with an undercurrent of humiliation. Birthday presents for his kinky boy. Winter slid his foot off the table, and as he set it down, his toe sent something plastic skittering into the coffee table leg. He reached down and picked up the funny white object. An inhaler. Jesus. When the hell had he starting needing one of those?

Erik might be many things, but liar wasn't one of them. He'd said he'd outgrown the asthma that had plagued him as a kid... yet here was a shiny new inhaler, with a dispensing date of less than a month ago. *Albuterol*. Sounded nasty. Perhaps this had something to do with the lost weight?

Setting the device on the table, Winter rose and walked up behind Erik, whose muscles rippled down that long, powerful back as he stopped behind him. Creating shudders was one of Winter's favorite pastimes. Normally. This second—no. The scent coming off that newly bared skin smelled so completely, fabulously Erik his mouth watered. Winter breathed in deeply, then out against the exposed nape, all hot and worried. A sigh followed Erik's deep shudder.

“Erik,” he said, feeling strangely tongue-tied. “Are you... unwell?”

The tenseness instantly returned to Erik's shoulders and neck. His jaw re-clenched and he didn't turn his head like he normally did, but kept his eyes staring out the dirt-stained glass. “I'm fine,” he finally bit out.

“Are you?” Didn't sound fine. Usually Erik got talkative after sex, or whatever humiliating, sexual thing Winter demanded he do to himself, but today the conversation would have to come first. Seeking to calm unsettled nerves, Winter set his hand between Erik's shoulder blades. The powerful muscles underneath leapt under his touch. “You're angry.”

A faint snort of contempt answered him.

Normally such blatant disrespect would have made Winter contemplate suitable punishments. But Erik wasn't his sub. They didn't have a defined relationship. They simply... *were*. Coaxing instead of chastising, Winter slid

his hand up Erik's spine into the closely cropped hair at his nape. Bristly. *Wonderful*. "I take it you didn't enjoy your shopping trip."

Head lowered, Erik gave it a little shake and ground out an unhappy, "No."

That was to be expected. Shy, guarded Erik would have wrestled with the humiliation versus the need to obey. But that was the whole point. "There's nothing to be ashamed about. Stores like that wouldn't stay in business if people didn't patronize them."

"It was humiliating!"

"And how was that different from everything else I make you do?"

"You... you..." he paused, and smacked his hand on the glass. His voice dropped to a whisper. "You made me feel..." Erik lowered his forehead to the glass and went silent.

"I made you feel... what?"

Erik breathed against the glass. "The things you make me do—no, the things *I* do... sometimes they're really humiliating, but you never make me feel humiliated, you know? You never make me feel ashamed of myself... of what I like. But today..."

Winter could not comprehend how it could bother Erik this much. "It was just a store—"

"You told her about me!"

Ooh shit. Didn't think of that. But really, Winter wasn't *that* insensitive. Most of the time. "All I told her was that I was sending an impossibly hot young man on a scavenger hunt and he'd be picking out three things, and she was to charge it all to my card. I only gave your first name. That's it. Nothing else."

"Really?" Erik asked, sounding desperate to believe.

"I swear it, Erik. And that's the oath kind of swearing, not what usually comes out of my mouth. I would never violate our trust. What happens between us, stays between us. I'm not inclined to share you with anyone, anyway."

Erik shuddered, with relief this time. "It was awful."

Leaning in, Winter rested his chin on top of one muscular shoulder. “It shouldn’t have been awful. It was supposed to be... *enlightening*.” Which was the full and complete truth. “I knew you wouldn’t exactly love going in there, but I wanted to challenge you. Give you a push. And I was curious.” Ha—understatement. “I wanted to know what you’d pick, given the choice, instead of me always choosing for you.”

“I didn’t want to pick anything!”

“No?” Was that true, or a Healey-style misdirection?

A tense silence suggested that statement wasn’t the whole truth. Interesting. Unfortunately, as much as his curiosity was killing him, there could be no examining that large purple box until a certain issue got resolved. “We’ll discuss that further in a moment.” Winter ran his hand back down Erik’s neck, and over the tight muscles of one incredible shoulder. Jesus. Man must sleep with a barbell in each hand. “Right now, I think we need to discuss something else.”

Erik tensed visibly.

“Why did you get into gymnastics?” They’d discussed the *why* before, but Winter was going somewhere with this.

Surprised by the question, Erik turned. Winter cupped the back of his head and turned him back toward the glass. He’d get a better answer if he kept Erik in a submissive mind-set. “Answer me.”

“I already told you! My stepdad thought regular exercise would help my symptoms, expand my lungs and all that crap. And gymnastics was something I could do inside where everything was climate-controlled, because I was always sick. Drove him crazy. For a couple years there, I caught *everything*. And he said if it didn’t help me with the asthma, at least it would toughen up the rest of me so I wouldn’t get picked on all the time. I was kinda pathetic.”

“Sounds like a decent guy.”

With a sigh, Erik rested his forehead on the glass. “Yeah, he is. I like him a hell of a lot better than my real dad. He doesn’t care that I’m gay. Even though him and my mom split, I still talk to him all the time and see him when he’s in town.” Erik shifted on his feet. “And he was right. About the gym. I owe him a lot.”

Winter wanted to shake the man's hand. "But something's changed, hasn't it?"

Touching Erik, while delightful on its own, also had the added bonus of loosening his mouth. As Winter's hands moved, soothed and comforted, Erik leaned into the caresses and waged an internal civil war—*should I trust, or should I keep my troubles all to myself?* Winter understood. He had no one to unburden himself on, either.

Whatever had happened, it must have been bad. Despite Winter's roving hands seeking to calm, Erik fidgeted, switching his weight from foot to foot as his hands worried over the glass. "I—" he took such a deep breath, his chest expanded visibly. "I had... an attack. An acute episode."

Oh. "And? Been a while, had it?"

"Yeah. Years. I can't even remember the last one. Before that, I mean. My teens, I guess."

"What happened?" *Please trust me enough, Erik. Unburden yourself. I can take it. I want to take it.*

"I, ah, well, I went jogging."

Okay. Now there was an activity Winter despised. But a necessary evil since he didn't want to develop a paunch like the one Dougie tried to hide with a succession of sloppy shirts. At least Winter did it like a civilized man, on a treadmill. In a gym. "So. Jogging. Crack of dawn?"

"No." Erik scowled. "I don't run in the dark. It was almost light out. But still really cold. Dry."

Even with Winter's limited knowledge on the subject, *cold* and *dry* didn't sound like the best combination. *I'd probably hack up a lung. Even though I quit smoking years ago.*

"I didn't really want to go out. I was dog-tired, but I'd been slacking since Christmas—and I know what you're thinking, and yeah, my mom's shortbread cookies are to die for—and usually a good workout energizes me. So I thought maybe I'd have a good run, get the blood pumping... you know, that it would wake me up. And after I'd have a long, hot shower... I thought it'd make me feel better."

“Did you warm up first?”

“Sure. Same as I always do. I stretched, walked for the first block and then...”

“You tore off, full speed ahead, like the devil was hot on your tail?”

“Pretty much.” Under his hand, the tense muscles relaxed. “I got about a block before it hit. Never had one like it in my life—my whole chest just seized up at once. No warning at all. Just wham! Couldn’t suck in a single breath. Not only couldn’t I breathe, it hurt like hell, like someone really big was squeezing the crap outta me. Someone with claws. And he’d put a plastic bag over my head first, for laughs.”

“Jesus, Erik—”

“I panicked—and I mean totally freaked out, had a full-blown, fear-for-my-life panic attack. I couldn’t breathe *at all*. I’m told I ran right out into the street. Straight into oncoming traffic.”

“Shit. How did you...?” Survive? Not get turned into road hamburger?

“Do you believe in Guardian Angels?”

No. Because if they existed, those kids never would have... “No, not really.”

“Well, I never used to, either. But someone must have been watching out for me, because not only did the van I ran out in front of not hit me, but the lady driving it had a kid with asthma, and that kid happened to be with her that morning. Skating lessons—no hockey. Something with huge jerseys.”

“Jesus.” So what if he said that already, because, *Jesus*.

“So she gets out of the van—probably to kick my ass—and sees me turning blue and gasping like a beached guppy. I’m lucky she’d seen it all before, and so, unlike me, she didn’t panic. You can’t panic when you’ve got a sick kid to keep safe. She grabbed the kid’s inhaler outta her purse and used it on me right there in the middle of the road.”

Maybe Guardian Angels did exist, they just took human form from time to time. “And that fixed you up?” That easy?

Instead of tenseness in the shoulders, Erik shivered, little bumps breaking out on his fair skin. “No,” he whispered into the glass. “I was too far gone.”

Goddamn-fucking-Jesus-motherfucker.

“But she got enough of the stuff in me to help. Had to spend the night in the hospital. I really hate nebulizers—makes me feel like I’m suffocating and you get this taste in your mouth and the smell...” He wiggled his fingers against the glass. “There were cops everywhere, and I think people watched me from their cars. I never had to go in an ambulance before. I only remember... bits and pieces. But I remember my Guardian Angel—her face... her eyes, how frightened she was, and I remember...”

“Hmm?”

“How much it hurt.”

Right. Winter knew personally that Erik had a pretty high pain tolerance, not that he was a sadist or anything. They played with pain on occasion. So obviously Erik meant something else, a different hurt. The boy had to get to it in his own good time. Private people couldn’t be rushed. Winter was really sick of that. *The world would be a much better place if everyone just catered to my need for instant gratification.*

“I never... I never even got to thank her. That woman. She saved my life, and I never even said thank you.”

“I’m sure she knows.”

The goose-bumps faded into a tight shrug. “I still wish I could tell her.”

Winter smoothed the last of the shiver away with his hand. “You’ll be more careful now?”

“Yes.”

The new inhaler seemed adequate proof, but Jesus. “Was it really awful?”

Winter was patient with Erik’s silence. “It was... I was really scared,” he finally admitted. Instead of his forehead, Erik rested his cheek on the warm glass. “I thought I was gonna die. Alone. Death was so close.” He pinched his finger and thumb together. No space between. “This close.”

This close gave Winter a shiver of his own. Doing something he never allowed himself to do before, he leaned in and pressed his lips on the spot his hand had been warming between Erik’s shoulder blades. A single kiss. It

would be three o'clock before too long—only a minor cheat, really. “Keep your inhaler with you at all times.”

“I will.”

“And listen to your doctor.”

Erik's fingers slid over the glass until he rested his cheek on one strong hand. “He's a twit.”

“No, he isn't. He just doesn't let you get away with any bullshit.”

Erik's eyes popped open, green as emeralds in the morning light. “I listen.”

“Right. Listen. And then go right on ignoring his advice.”

“No, I—”

“Spare me. I know you ignore it, because you've been exercising too much.” Erik probably thought what worked once would work again. That he could somehow force his body to obey, that if he only worked hard enough, trained more, trained harder, it would cure him. “And you're not eating enough.” From too many cookies to not enough. “Working out until you drop is not going to cure you.”

Erik gave him a confused look. “I know that.”

Winter slid his hands downward and spread his fingers so they caressed over ribs and muscles and landed on the waist band of those delightfully form-fitting boxers. He edged the band down until he could see the beginning of the cleft of Erik's ass—his incredible ass. When the fuck would it be three o'clock? “If you know that, then what's with all the weightlifting?” Nothing else could build the definition Erik sported. Every inch of him was, well, *ripped*. “And you've lost, what, five pounds?” Winter gave the firm ass a smack. Rock hard. “Your body's not betraying you. You don't need to punish it.” Winter rubbed the cheek he'd swatted.

“That's not why I've been doing it—” Erik blurted, then abruptly snapped his mouth shut.

Yeah? If not that, then why? “Then what's been motivating you?”

Erik turned his face into his hand again and covered his eyes with his fingers.

So shy. God, he loved that. “Erik.”

A red flush crept up Erik’s neck. The tips of his ears pinked. Poor guy had no hair to hide behind, everything he thought, visible. “You,” he mumbled into his fingers.

“Me?”

“I do it for you.”

Fuck. Falling for this boy was gonna kill him. “You’re perfect just the way you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

Good lord. If Erik got any more perfect, Winter’d never be able to take off his clothes in front of him, and he’d never been the least bit modest. “Why do you think that?”

With a sigh, Erik peeked out from between his fingers. “Because you...” He re-covered his eye, hiding again. “You know, because you never... you don’t... well... I thought if I... that if I was *more*... that you’d let me... that you’d quit denying yourself...” He trailed off, flushing all the way to the roots of his hair.

Forget plausible deniability. Winter knew exactly what Erik was referring to. He slid a finger under the leg band of those tight underwear. Hard muscle, smooth skin. Best of both worlds. “There’s a certain power in denial, my dear boy.” And that, he’d discovered, was true. Shocked the hell out of him. A kink he never knew he had. “Denying myself while granting you release has been...” What? Torture? Heaven? A place somewhere between the two? “Empowering.” Ah, yes. That was the word. “Denying myself you has been the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” But no suffering, no reward, right? “And the most amazing. Freeing.” Fuck. Surely it was almost three o’clock by now?

“But—”

“Hush, now.” This was not quite the birthday gift he’d planned. They would talk more after, like he always wanted, once the urges had been sated. And there would be an *after* this time, because he was keeping Erik to himself all damned day. And night. “I’ll tell you more about it later, but right now...”

Winter took a deep breath, “right now, I want you on your knees while I take a look in that large, fancy box you brought me.”

“Brought *you*?”

Winter laughed. Felt good to release some of the unpleasant tension and make room for the good kind to come. “Of course, *me*. Just because I let you pick them doesn’t make them yours.” Winter gave the elastic band a snap and put the boss back in his voice. “Beside the couch, now. On your knees, legs apart, shoulder width. Hands behind your back.”

Erik pushed himself off the glass with more of that freakish grace and moved to do as he was told. Winter folded Erik’s crumpled jacket and set it on the hard floor as padding. A gymnast was nothing without his knees, after all. Erik settled into his submissive position like was born to it. What a treasure. And growing hard, too—those shorts hid absolutely nothing.

“So sexy,” Winter said, because Erik was that, and more. “Time for me to deny myself one last time.”

One last time...

Not like Erik hadn’t been expecting it or anything. So why did hearing it hurt so much? Ached in ways he hadn’t imagined it would, a strange tightness that pulsed over his sternum and inched up his throat where it squeezed, somehow more painful than that horrible asthma attack had been. *If you hadn’t been so stupid and thrown your jacket on the floor, your inhaler would never have fallen out and eagle-eyes wouldn’t have spotted it... and realized how pathetic you are.*

Sure. Like the man didn’t already know.

No wonder he didn’t want to tell you his name.

Who’d want a sickly, socially awkward nerd who got along better with eight-year-olds than grown men? *Why did you have to go and blab everything?* Erik squeezed his eyes shut so tight they hurt, too. He always blabbed. Every time—the secrets just burst out when he wasn’t feeling... *himself*. When he was... soaring. *When he makes you soar—the way nailing your best vault used to feel. And you fly because... you trust him.*

And still did.

“Stop that.”

Erik startled at the stern reprimand. *Stop what?* The toe of a shoe nudged his inner thigh, and, like the slut he was, he spread his legs farther apart, purely on reflex. But he kept his eyes lowered, his thoughts hidden.

“Stop fretting and look at me.”

Not yet. Erik hid behind his lowered lashes a few seconds longer. Mystery man was expert at reading body language and that funny pain still lingered in his chest—he’d know how Erik felt, how much he *wanted*. But... one last time, right? When Erik opened his eyes, the man was closer than expected, his face only inches away, and he was staring at him intently.

He was, without a doubt, the sexiest man Erik had ever seen. In the bright morning sunshine his unusual eyes looked even more beautiful. The irises were ringed, dark blue, almost navy, around the outer edge and a bright blue, almost aqua on the inside. Stormy skies with a patch of sunshine. They were stunning. Erik loved those eyes. No wonder he always blabbed.

“You’re troubled this morning.”

You think? The man had no idea how horrible it had been going in that store. *Even though I always swear it’ll be the last time every time I’m with you, I never really want it to be the last time. No one ever sees me, the real me, except you.* This time, he wouldn’t blab. Nope. Because there was humiliation and then there was *humiliation*. “I just feel a little... unsettled.” Entirely true—not even a lie.

The beautiful eyes were also keen with intelligence. “Do you want to stay? Or do you want to get dressed and leave?”

What? Leaving was the farthest thing from his mind. Erik wanted more, not less. “Stay.”

“You sure? Decide right now. Because if you stay...”

Erik knew exactly what he meant. If he chose to stay, he chose to obey. Mystery man didn’t make idle threats, and even though it was a threat, his dick stirred to life in the confines of his underwear, which strangely, he still wore. “I’m staying.”

The toe that hadn't moved from between his legs slid along his thigh. Erik didn't dare look down. It could go anywhere, do anything, that shoe. Maybe he'd be ordered to lick it. Or ride it. Or jack off with it pressed to his neck. Anything.

Mystery man merely smiled and then relocated his foot. Erik jerked, but held position as the buffed leather worked under his balls and rocked up and down. Oh... *frick*. Erik grunted, not in pain—in shocked excitement. Ice-man's toe wiggled and dug in, almost painful, but not quite, that heady place right in between. The very tip of the shoe wormed its way backward until it nudged so very close to his hole that Erik almost lost the interlocking grip that kept his hands together.

“Uh-uh. Hands together.”

Mystery man was, first before all things, a right bastard.

“I think it's time to see what you brought me.”

No—God no. How the hell had he managed to forget that box? And all that was in it? Lace panties. And a fricking girly corset that would tie up the back with silky laces...

Mystery man's lip curled, more of a snarl than a smile. “Oh, I think I'm going to enjoy this.”

No—just no. He couldn't open that box! Erik pleaded the only way he could. With his eyes.

“Oh yeah, I'm gonna open it. Beg all you like. I love that whimpering sound.” The foot, still under his balls, retracted. Slowly. And a little painfully, sliding and digging. Once freed from under his balls, mystery man gave him a lazy smile and dragged the tip right up his straining erection. The dusty ridge of the sole caught him just under the flared head of his cock. Then dug in. Erik gasped. Then the foot moved completely away, leaving both relief and disappointment in its place.

Erik let out his next breath with a heavy sigh. His dick twitched. Why did he like everything that man did to him? Even liked the sound the box made sliding out of the plastic bag, the horrified anticipation of knowing what lay inside, what would soon be revealed, because *he* was doing it.

With his hands behind his back, Erik couldn't curl in on himself and hide. Which of course, was why he'd been put in this position. Devious bastard.

Continuing his torment, the cruel man carefully folded the plastic bag into a neat square. *Slowly*. Then he turned the box around on the table until the opening faced him. Erik wanted to look away—*yes, look away!* But didn't. Mystery man's fingers worked the lid up.

"Hold still," he commented, without looking away from the box.

Easier said than done. Erik wanted to crawl under the table. There was sufficient room to fold himself beneath the massive slab and disappear. Despite the jacket padding, his knees hurt. His favorite boxers were too tight. There was far too much light coming in the big windows. In the empty room, his rapid breaths echoed annoyingly.

The lid popped off.

Someone gasped. Erik wasn't sure it was him.

"Interesting selection, Mr. Healey."

Erik spread his legs a little more. Closer to the floor that way. Maybe he could sink into it if he stretched far enough? Did the splits? Erik hadn't lost his flexibility yet, despite his quarter-century-old joints.

Mystery man pulled out the expensive lube first. "Good choice." He broke the seal. Definitely going to be used then. For a second, Erik hoped. *He's not going to fuck you. This is the last time, remember? And you don't even like getting fucked.*

When he pulled out the condoms, Erik expected a glib comment, something like, *no need for these, is there, Mr. Healey?* Instead, he looked at the box, raised the corner of one dark brow, and set them beside the lube. Okay... but no. The man liked to watch. Sometimes touch. Not fuck.

A buckle clanked softly as he withdrew the long, leather gloves from the thin tissue. A rush of heat flared in Erik's chest, and his cock pulsed within the confines of his underwear. Those gloves... *breathhtaking*. Mystery man examined them closely, a secret smile lighting his eyes. "Another fine pick."

The little plastic tie that held them together went *snap* as he broke it. He fingered the lacing. His lips curled into a cruel smile as he noticed the

purposefully rough braids on the palms. “I think I’m *really* going to enjoy these.” He slid his one hand inside, loosened a lace and adjusted a buckle. “Oh, yes,” he purred.

Why the hell didn’t he put those back on the shelf when he had the chance? That purr guaranteed he’d feel that the rough hide marking up *his* hide. Mystery man had a good, strong arm—two of them. Might be ambidextrous. Erik wriggled on his heels and inched his legs back together, a harder task than expected because of the slippery fabric and his stiff dick bobbing everywhere.

“That’s close enough,” the man warned. The devil-shoe tapped his thigh and then nudged it, forcing his legs back apart. “I may deny myself, but you don’t get to deny me. Ever.”

Frick—no, fuck. No one would notice if he swore inside his head. That growly voice reached between Erik’s legs and squeezed his balls as effectively as if it were the man’s hand. The man’s hand in one of those gloves. The soft cotton of his briefs would have a definite wet spot now.

Plucking on the glove’s fingers, mystery man pulled his hand out and set them beside the box. Seemed... *reluctant* to let them go. God, he was so gonna feel the rough side of those somewhere. Would he get... *spanked*? The rush of heat that flooded his groin almost made his hands slide free from their death clasp.

Spanked.

Ooh crap. His mom never even spanked him as a kid. Would he put him over the couch? His knee? That massive coffee table? A shudder of revulsion—and excitement—caused him to almost lose his grip. Again.

“There must be something really interesting tucked inside this last wrapping,” he commented, “You’re a jittery wreck.” His nose wrinkled slightly. “Smells... *leathery*.” The ringed eyes gave him a look of disapproval. “I believe my instructions were quite clear. One of leather, one of lace and one of love potion. Not two of leather.”

Oh, goddamn. Erik hadn’t considered the leather on the corset, he’d only had eyes for the lace. The set was mostly made of lace, though. Pink lace—*ashes of roses*. Did that count? “I—but there is lace. Lots of lace. Look

inside.” *Shoot. I just told him to look in the box. Sweat began to slicken his clasped fingers. Will he leave now because I didn’t get it right? Did I blow my last chance?*

“Then let us see what is, apparently, *not* leather.”

The last layer of paper crinkled as the man unfolded each side, handling it almost delicately. Erik could not look away, but focused his gaze instead on the strong hands, the precise movements, and the twinkle of tiny diamonds on the face of his wristwatch. Shame burned deeply, a molten path travelling from neck to belly. Out of an entire store, he’d chosen women’s underwear. Ashamed or not, his cock throbbed hot and eager and dripping against the already damp boxer-briefs.

Mystery man froze. *This is too much even for him.* The room filled with the sounds of two sets of ragged breaths. *Please say something... anything! Tell me I’m dirty. Or disgusting, sick and repulsive. Anything!* Erik’s legs slipped further apart as he hunched over, curling his shoulders as much as he could without breaking his grip.

“Jesus,” The man finally said.

The corset came out of the box first, ribbons dangling, sunlight passing through the holes in the lace. Mystery man fingered the pink material, then caressed the central panel made from strips of leather sewn together, the part that would cinch him tightly. Erik hadn’t noticed in the store, through his horror and his arousal, that the leather had been embossed, not that he could make out the pattern. Still without speaking, the man laid it across his knees and smoothed it with his hands.

Please look at me... or say something... please...

He did neither. The lovely ringed eyes of sunshine and shadow stayed aimed on the box of shame. When he reached into the tissue for the final item, he made a sound, low and a little menacing. A growl. He hooked the panties—couldn’t call them anything else—on a finger and held them up for inspection.

Erik made a sound of his own, and not a sexy one like Mr. Mystery had made. A whimper.

Just leave... all you have to do is get up and leave. If you go, you’ll never have to see the disgust on his face. His knees remained locked. If this was his

last chance, he'd take what he got. *Just close your eyes and pretend he likes you...*

Startling him badly, the shoe nudged his balls. Gently, though.

“Erik.”

Even breathing hurt as he opened his eyes.

“Stand up, boy.”

Don't think, just obey. His knees cracked as he stood, hands still clasped. For some strange reason, his legs trembled. He felt oddly uncoordinated. Hiding the unaccustomed weakness, he snapped his knees together. *He's probably gonna tell you to go home and play with your pretty dollies.*

“Take those off.” One big finger reached out and tugged on the leg of his shorts.

What? Off? Confused, Erik looked into the face that haunted his dreams. No dark stubble today—too early in the day for stubble. He couldn't count how many times he'd dreamed of touching that face, kissing that cruel mouth, or being the recipient of one of his rare smiles. All those dreams crumbled to join the dust that hung in the air and coated the windows. Coated his life.

Finally remembering the order, he slid the underwear down, disgusted that despite everything, he was still hard. Nothing, but a slut. Naked, he looked his dark-haired watcher in the eye.

“So beautiful,” ice-man said.

Beautiful? Not get the fuck out? “But I thought—”

“Calm down, Erik. I don't know what's got you so bent out of shape this morning, but take a deep breath and relax before I decide to bend you right back into shape.” He set the corset back on the table and crumpled the matching slip of pink lace in his fist. “Talk to me.”

Oh, how he wanted to. No, damn it—would. One last time.

“I—I'm... so ashamed.” Frick. Blabbing again. The rest tumbled out easier. “And scared,” he whispered. Because he was. Deathly. Scared he'd never see him again.

“Scared?” The space between ice-man's brows furrowed. Was that...

concern? “There’s no need to be scared of your desires, Erik. We’ve discussed this.”

“But I’m so disgusting!” Too late to save things now, might as well let it all out. Blab to his heart’s content.

“You think I’m disgusting?”

What? “No! Of course I don’t! Not you. I meant me.”

“But if I like the same things you like, then I must be disgusting too, if you are.”

“You’re not! You’re—you’re... *wonderful.*” There. Said it out loud. *I finally said it.* And he wasn’t the least bit ashamed of that.

Warmth slid up his thigh—a soothing hand. His leg quit trembling. “And I think you’re wonderful, too. Not disgusting. Wonderful. A treasure. *My* treasure.”

Me?

“Yes.” A cold spot instantly formed where he removed his hand. Pink lace flashed as the fingers that had just touched him snapped the price tag off the underwear after freeing them from his fist. “I love these.”

No way. Just... no. He liked them? Panties? “Really?”

“Oh, yes. I can’t believe this is what you picked. Get them on. I can’t wait to see you in them.”

Erik’s fingers shook as he took the little scrap of fabric. “You want me to...?”

“I’m waiting.”

Fitting his feet through the leg holes seemed impossible, like one of those dreams where you can’t get anything right. He shook everywhere. Mostly his fingers. Almost put them on backward. The stretchy strange material felt funny against his skin. Scratchy. Hot. *Incredible.* Ice-man settled against the back of the couch. Spread his long legs. Struck his patented *put-on-a-show-for-me-boy* pose. By the time Erik worked the panties up to his knees, he wasn’t sure he could get them all the way on. His thighs were too big. And his dick too hard.

“They’ll stretch. Undo the lacing a little.”

Fumbling, Erik loosened the black ties at the front. The leather insert eased open a little, but...

“Come on, boy. You know I’m not the tiniest bit patient.”

Careful not to tear the delicate material, he tugged. They did fit over his thighs. Barely.

“And I don’t need to remind you not to come without permission, do I?”

“No, sir.” Erik had never screwed that one up. He jerked the see-through material up higher, worked the back up over his buttocks and the front over the straining, solid rod of his leaking cock. *Don’t come, don’t come...* With one last tug, the lace snapped into place over his erection and the leg-hole seams nestled neatly into the small space between thigh and groin. The leather inset barely contained his cockhead as it butted and surged against the waistband. *Feels so good, so nasty, but don’t come... don’t.*

“Fuck, that’s hot. *You’re hot.*”

Closing his eyes, Erik gritted his teeth. He wouldn’t come. He’d obey.

“Fucking sexy.”

That growl. Erik almost came undone. *He likes them? Likes me in them? Thinks I’m sexy?* Erik cracked his eyes open. Mystery man’s eyes were dark and intensely focused. And filled with lust. Erik recognized that shimmering glint. His trousers couldn’t conceal his massive erection, either. *Maybe he really does like me like this? Maybe I don’t disgust him. Well, more than usual.*

“Lace them up, now,” he ordered, voice gone thick.

Make them tighter? Jeez-Louise. He couldn’t. Any more pressure on his cock and he’d lose it. Fumbling again, Erik pulled on the ribbon ends, squeezing the leather edges together. “Oh, God,” he groaned.

“Like that, do you?”

Yes. “No, I—”

“No lying. Not to me. Ever.”

Why had even bothered trying? “I—yes, I like it. You know I like it.”

Flashing his pearly whites, he grinned in agreement. “Tie a little bow with the ribbon. Make me a present.”

How he managed to do it, Erik had no idea. His fingers had lost all coordination. He was so close to orgasm, he was scared to move and trigger what he’d been forbidden.

“You look stunning. Show me the back. Turn around.”

Being careful how he turned, and where he put his hands lest they rub on anything, Erik turned.

“God, I love your ass. And those panties...” Mystery man’s voice had gone all deep and husky. “I want to rip those off and fuck you into the floor.”

Holy Christ. Fuck. Floor. *He wants to fuck me?* Erik wanted him to do it, even if he was rough. If this was to be the last time... then maybe? “Please?” he whispered.

“Not this morning, gorgeous.”

Of course not. What those words meant, was... *never*. Their time together was almost at an end. The couch scraped the floor as mystery man stood. His body heat hit Erik first, then his hot breath on the back of his neck. Delighting in the closeness, Erik shivered.

“I fucking love you like this.”

Erik had no idea what *like this* referred to, and didn’t care. He liked it too. Imaginary wings sprouted from his back. Soon, he’d get airborne. One last time. Hands settled on his ass and slid across the thin material, hot—so blissfully hot. “Ohhh,” he groaned. So wonderful, being touched. So rare. He leaned back, chasing more contact.

“Spread your legs.”

Without hesitation, Erik did. Whatever the man wanted. He loved it all. Even the sharp pleasure of pain sometimes meted out. No pain this time though, just a big hand stuffing itself down the back of the panties. The addition of the hand removed any slack left in the front, causing the lace, and leather inset, to pull snug against his cock, “Stop!” he cried.

“Does this make you want to come?”

“Yes,” he gasped. Fingers invaded his crack. Oh, fuck. “Very close.”

“Not yet. You want to come, you’ll have to work for it.”

Devious bastard always said that. Meant it, too. “Whatever you want,” he whispered.

The pad of a finger brushed over his hole. Erik jerked and almost ruined the panties and his perfect record with a huge spray of spunk. Mystery man chuckled, low and dirty. “On the couch, baby. I want you to amuse me. Show me a good time.”

Even though the couch was only three steps, Erik almost didn’t make it. The urge to climax was becoming impossible to resist. Walking forced the tight fabric to rub in unaccustomed ways. Delicious ways. *Dirty ways.*

“Lean back against the arm and spread your legs nice and wide for me.”

Erik scooted back. His legs fell open. Any relief he found in not moving was short-lived when ice-man picked up the gloves and tugged one on. Keeping his eyes more on Erik than the leather, he adjusted the buckles, then the buckles on the other glove, worked the lacings and pulled the second one on—two hands of dark promise. They had hidden zippers he hadn’t noticed in the store, so once adjusted, two quick zips and they were on.

Ooh.

“Like these, my horny little slut?”

No more lies. “Yes.”

“Me too.” He grinned. “Now touch yourself.”

Oh, no, no, no. He couldn’t. If the man so much as looked at him hard enough with those pretty eyes, he’d come. Touching—no. Just. No. Erik shook his head. *I can’t, really, I can’t.*

“Come on. Just a little stroke. Show me. Start at the tip and slide your fingers down to your balls. I want to see it, wanna see you touching that pretty lace and your cock at the same time. Come on, dirty boy, give me a proper show.”

Dirty boy. Hot tingles of pleasure spread over his skin. Though he shaved everywhere, even his pits, kids hated gross, sweaty pits, any missed body hair

rose up, felt alive—electrified. The slight movement of his arm to his thigh shifted the material of the very tight lace, a tug and caress on his oversensitized cock. Erik gasped, and closed his eyes. He couldn't do it. The edge. He'd stumble.

“Look at me.”

If he opened his eyes he might see the gloves. Or those beguiling eyes. Or pretty pink lace. “I can't. I'll come.”

“No you won't. I haven't given you permission. So look at me, sexy baby, and touch yourself.”

Touch myself. As he watches. Erik's favorite thing. Mystery man touching him would be better, but he never did. Now, never would.

Touching the edge of the panties, Erik opened his eyes. His lids felt leaden. His hips jerked, his cock eager for the attention of his fingers. One stroke. He could manage one. Like doing that one extra push-up in front of Jordan. Willpower. It simply took willpower. Praying he had enough, Erik moved his fingers across the lace to fondle the head of his cock. A slippery wetness oozed through the tiny holes, slick on his fingertips.

“Yes...” his lover of unknown name said, barely louder than a whisper. “Stroke down the shaft now—go slow—and then grab your balls. Gimme a thrill, boy.”

If he made it that far, he'd be okay. Playing with his balls alone never made him come. But today... it might. Keeping the ordered touch feather light, he did as told. His back arched up off the couch as his slick fingers glided over delicate lace and stiff flesh beneath, almost like an unzipping of his soul. *Don't come... obey.* Curling his fingers, he grabbed his balls, the orbs swollen and full in his hand.

“Squeeze them. Hard.”

Erik squeezed, unsure how hard was *hard*.

“More,” he was ordered, “enough to throttle down that racing engine of yours.”

Hurt himself on purpose? Down there? Even as the idea horrified him, his hand tightened. Until it hurt. Because those twin pools of aqua and navy were focused on him, ordering him to do it, watching him with a crazy intensity, his

engine remained stuck in overdrive. The pain simply made the sensations brighter, and the day's worries duller.

After a few painful seconds, mystery man said, "That's enough now." The cruel smile reappeared for a second, then vanished. "So gorgeous, hurting for me."

The exiting pain stung more than the pain of active squeezing, and Erik sucked in a breath, holding himself still everywhere else. The edge wavered right in front of him—so damn close.

"Slide those slutty panties down for me. Not too far, just until your cockhead pops out. Show me how much you like to strip for me. How much you love me watching you in your tight, slutty, girl panties."

Mystery man had lied. Now he was closer to coming than he ever was, the pain a distant memory. "I want to, but I..." Erik paused, afraid to even speak. The stretchy lace felt incredible under the pads of his thumbs. And his skin underneath felt hot to his own touch, searing, as he hooked them under the waistband. What had he been saying? Putting on a show, because he loved to be on display for this man, Erik slowly pushed down on the fabric, panting away the climax that still haunted his every move.

"That's it, baby boy. Show me your cock."

Trembling now, Erik wiggled slightly, enough to free his straining erection caught under the curling elastic. The head popped out and bounced free, his cock impossibly hard. A startled gasp escaped from his lips.

"A work of art, Mr. Healey. You look pretty in pink."

Wasn't anything special, but the praise created a nice, tingly shiver all over. The muscles on his chest rippled, and his nipples ached for a pinch. This was his last tingly shiver—better enjoy it. How could this be the end? How could he live without more?

"A little lower now. Show me the rest of you. I want to see all you've got. I paid a fair price for my ticket to Erik's naughty burlesque and expect to get my money's worth."

The material rasped and thrilled as Erik pushed the waistband lower, purposefully working his abdominals, showing off all those hours spent in the gym for this man. In hopes of... winning him. Not that it mattered now.

“You are blowing my mind here, gorgeous.” Then mystery man did something he’d never done before.

Instead of just watching, he touched. With those damned gloves.

It was just *one* hand. On Erik’s knee. Hardly cheating. Right?

Not cheating at all, actually, considering Erik was definitely blowing his mind, along with everything else, including his shaky resolve. *You’re spoiled rotten, you do know that? Dad is right.* But no fucking way was he breaking his vow. No! The gloves didn’t hide the red hands, and there was no way he would allow himself to have Erik until he signed those damned papers—not until he dotted every ‘i’ and crossed every fucking ‘t’.

He hadn’t suffered the denial all these months for nothing. And oh, how he had suffered.

Just a few more hours...

But those panties! Goddamn. He’d never seen anything sexier, and he’d been privy to lots of sexiness in his time. Beyond the usual, which, with Erik, had always been thrill enough. Perhaps it had more to do with the man who wore them. The way Erik shuddered and flushed and trembled as he touched them, pulled them on. Then how he revelled in the naughtiness of it all. What a gem.

Never could have imagined in a million years Erik would pick what he did. A corset. Holy motherfucking hell. He’d had to put the thing down before he exploded. Almost lost his cool there for a second. Barely had any cool to spare with just the flimsy undies going on over those muscular legs. Erik had no cause to feel humiliated for liking them, he knew that rationally, but the shark enjoyed his suffering. The power rush... ooh, yeah.

His naughty boy was putting on the show of a lifetime. Almost time to let him come. He’d earned it. Winter earned it. Watching Erik come was... fucking fantastic. “Pull them down all the way now.” Pink lace. Jesus. Erik was going to make *him* come. In his ridiculously expensive trousers. “Dirty little sluts come with their panties around their ankles.”

Erik was so far gone, all he managed was a deep groan.

“Are you my dirty boy?” And his eyes. Blown.

“Uh-huh.”

“Then show me.”

Teasing him—no, seducing him—Erik pushed them down. That pinkish color suited his paleness, and the leather inset suited his maleness. Exquisite. Erik should wear lace all the time. Especially around his ankles. Fuck—no, *frick*. He had to quit thinking like that. Made his control go four directions frickered. When was it gonna be three o’clock?

The gloves were insane. No, they trumped insane. Tonight, he’s spank Erik with them. Surely the boy expected it—wanted it—picking gloves designed for that purpose? Hand to rock-hard ass. About damned time for some serious touching. And then maybe fucking.

Because someone brought him condoms. And lube. *Thank you, Erik.*

Reaching out, he grabbed the bottle from the table. He popped open the top one-handed. Good invention, those pop-top caps. “Give me your hand.”

Wild-eyed and desperate, Erik held out a shaky hand. Erik loved the humiliation of being made to finger himself in front of Winter. And it was his birthday, after all. Since it was very good lube, he’d only need a small squirt. Aiming carefully, he slicked up Erik’s fingertips.

“Do you know what I want, slutty boy?”

Erik nodded.

Today it had taken forever to push Erik into the realm of subspace. The half-there, half-gone gaze indicated he’d arrived. His skin had that lovely flush bringing it to life, and those muscles... fuck. Just fuck. They rippled, actually *rippled*. *I do it for you...*

Jesus.

Winter could do this for Erik—grant him release. And not just sexual, but from whatever troubled him, if only for a short while. Hand still on Erik’s knee, Winter pushed, forcing his leg up. Exposing Erik this way would drive his shy guy mad. “Pull your knees up. Show me that sweet, shaved hole.” Winter liked Erik completely bare. And since Erik never got advance notice of

a hookup, that meant he had to shave or wax *all* the time. Cruelty wasn't a lost art, after all.

Panting and moaning, Erik raised his knees. He really did have the most amazing ass. Especially with his fingers in it.

“Do you need directions? GPS coordinates?”

“No, sir,” he said, voice shaky as his knees.

“Then touch yourself, dirty boy. Stick your fingers in your ass for me. Show me how much you like it.”

Erik's entire body shuddered. Winter tried not to wallow in the satisfaction, but he knew well how to push all Erik's buttons. Which tripped all of his own. What a twisted pair they made. Good thing he'd braved the creepy exodus of the pod-children that day and not driven away like he was going to, or he would have missed finding his better half.

Out of all of Erik's considerable and delightful attributes, Winter appreciated two more than he should. His hands. He had long fingers. Watching him stick one, or more, into that tight opening almost brought Winter to orgasm every time.

Denial—there was power in denial. There was!

Be patient, only a few more hours...

Pulling his balls up for better access with one hand, Erik slid his lubed-up fingers down over his taint and into the crack of his ass, smearing the slippery fluid everywhere. His slit leaked pre-cum all over those spectacular abs. “Ohhh,” Erik moaned as he ran his own fingers across that sweet opening.

“That's it, my little slut, be a naughty boy and stick it in.”

“I don't—I *shouldn't*—”

“Oh, but you want to, don't you? Do it now.”

Obeying, Erik nudged the tip of his index finger in. And gasped.

“Is it tight?”

“Yesss...”

“So nobody's been fucking that hole?”

The sea-foam colored eyes sparked open. “No.” He looked genuinely surprised by the question. Interesting. “No one.”

“So it’s just my hole, then, is it?”

The answer to that question suddenly mattered more than anything. What if Erik said no? What if he’d waited too long? Blown his chance? What if he’d lost his kinky boy to someone with clean hands and a clear conscience?

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yours.”

The tense breath Winter had been holding burst out. Thank God. Or Guardian Angels. “Just mine?”

“Yes... I only want...” he made a small, strangled sound, “it to be yours.”

Oh, God—*Erik*. “Then if it’s my hole, I’d like to see more fingers in it.”

“Oh, no... please no.” Even when writhing, the boy had that strange, fluid grace. He was all over the couch, squirming. “I can’t—don’t make me.”

Ah, dear boy. Winter seldom made Erik do anything. That was the kink in Erik’s kinky. He needed to do... *whatever* to himself. As Winter watched. Matched Winter’s kink perfectly. Although he did like to touch, too. And fuck. Fucking was good. Especially if he got to watch himself doing it at the same time. *Mirror, mirror on the wall... ceiling... change room door...*

Okay, I think I’m losing it. Erik always says the crazy one’s the last to know.

“I want to see two fingers in the tight, sweet hole that’s all mine.” The digit Erik had in there was sinking deeper. Such *long* fingers. “Fill up that little hole, bratty boy. Shove them in.”

“Are you gonna... watch?”

“Oh, yeah. You’ve got my attention now. Best show in town.” The gloves were driving Winter crazy. Kind of distracting. To wear them and not make proper use of them was, almost, well, sacrilege. What about improper use, though? Winter slid the glove from Erik’s knee onto his bulging thigh muscle. The gloves had left an interesting pattern behind on the pale skin of his knee. *Must spank...* No! Denial was a virtue. Or some such nonsense. Nonsense to be abandoned at three o’clock. “Come on my sexy boy-toy. Finger that hole.”

Always took a little effort for Erik to get that second finger in. Additional proof not many men had plundered that loot. Sharky liked that idea—wouldn't have to go to the trouble of finding an abandoned back yard to bury the bodies in.

Erik had two big fingers lined up, poised to enter. “You bad boy.” Looked so sexy. The lube was good quality, slipperier than hell, and Erik squeezed the pair in. Then went from squirming to utter stillness.

“No coming!”

“I'm trying! Please... I-I can't hold back anymore.”

Didn't look like he could, either. Hot little tremors of desperate need shook his powerful body. “Fuck yourself, baby. C'mon. If I like your performance, I'll let you come.”

Despite Erik's flexibility, that angle had to be awkward. The long fingers pumped in time with Erik's panting breaths—a symphony. But his fingers were slipping. Maybe Winter should help? Could break-in the gloves... The lovely buckles kept rattling softly, like music. Letting the rough palms scratch and scrape over flushed skin, Winter slid his hand from Erik's thigh to his crotch. Cheating had always served him well in business, why not now?

“Hard to... I can't—”

Ah. Damn it. Winter was a sucker for boys in distress. He set his hand over Erik's and guided the fingers deeper.

“Yes, oh yes,” Erik cried. “Like that.”

“Nasty boy.” And that was the best kind. An improper use for the gloves flitted in and out of Winter's mind. It was Erik's birthday, for Christ's sake. “Want my finger in there with yours?”

With a gasp so hard Erik almost choked, he sputtered, “What?”

“There isn't really room for so many... but you did pick these gloves. I should do it.”

Winter stole some of the lube from Erik's fingers and swirled it on the tip of one gloved finger. The leather wasn't going to go in easily. Oh, well.

“Please...” Erik moaned.

Yeah? “Please what? Want me to finger *my* little hole with the glove on? That what you want?”

“No!” he cried, shuddering, every muscle rippling. “That’s so dirty!”

“I know. But you’re a dirty kind of guy, aren’t you? Sprawled there like a whore with your undies around your ankles. I think I’ll finger-fuck you with these gloves on. Make them smell like you. *Taste* like you.” Although maybe he should have some decency and let Erik pull his fingers out first. Birthday boy, and all that. “Pull out now. I want mine in there.”

Erik gulped in air as he slipped his fingers out. He was a panting, shaking, sweaty mess. What a way to break in the couch. Teasing and tormenting, Winter wound a leisurely trail down Erik’s perineum until he reached the small, puckered entrance. He’d never actually inserted anything into Erik before. He always let Erik to do... *whatever* to himself.

Taking his time, he wiggled the leather-encased tip of his finger into the small opening, and then worked it further in, inch by almost-painful inch. Tight. Warm. *Amazing*. One hell of a way to cheat. “Like that, boy?”

“Ah... huh.” Erik had almost moved beyond words. But then, Winter was in a fine state of need himself. Heat travelled from Erik’s body through the glove, the leather channeling the warmth up his arm and into his chest. *Three. O’clock. Three...*

Enough slick finally coated the fine leather that his finger slid in and out without dry resistance. The buckles scraped the inside of Erik’s thigh, a gentle rasp. Winter liked the sight of the lacing on the inside, it reminded him of bondage. Of dreams of Erik in bondage. Now that he’d made it all the way in, he pumped—no, he *fucked*. The muscular body he loved to watch more than anything else contorted wildly in response.

“Please,” Erik moaned. “I have to... may I... come?”

“Soon,” he replied. “I want to watch two of my fingers filling your tight ass first.”

“No,” he gasped. “Not two!”

His eyes had gone glassy and wild. Perfect. “Definitely two—you asked for this, picking those undies. Gonna drill you good, baby. Those are really slutty panties, and they look so very good on you.”

“The leather, it... it—”

“Looks beautiful fucking your ass. Such a dirty, dirty boy you are. Wish you could see it.”

Fumbling and losing coordination, Winter reached for the lube. If he wanted to play with Erik more later today, he couldn't have the leather ripping delicate tissues. Hallelujah for pop-caps. Never would have gotten it open otherwise. He squirted a liberal shot on his gloved fingers. *I'm not going to make it to three p.m. I'm going to come. Damn you, Erik.*

Two leather-covered fingers going in wouldn't be very comfortable. *Then don't do it. There'll be other times.* Better to share this first time with his wilder half, anyway. “Come on, boy, give me your hand. Wanna see one of your long fingers in there with mine.” Erik slipped his shaky hand down beside Winter's. “That's it.” Winter pulled his finger almost out of Erik's ass, making room for two. “Stick it in with mine.”

As they worked their two fingers in together, Erik whimpered and clawed the couch with his unoccupied hand. When his climax came, it would be intense, and Winter didn't know what would happen then. Flames? Fireworks? Screaming... *God yes, please scream.* Unfortunately, the loss of sensation to his fingertip meant he couldn't finesse Erik's prostate like he wanted, but then, he wouldn't have to. The boy was done. *Ting.* Like dinner.

And not just done, but soaring. No, not soaring. *Vaulting*—a double-front half-turn. A two-and-a-half-twist Yurchenko. Something high and incredible that took your breath away just watching. Forgetting about the glove's spanking-rough palm, Winter reached for Erik's hard, leaking cock as it bounced against the abs of stone, smearing pre-cum everywhere. Winter wrapped his fingers around the hot shaft. Not tightly, not jacking, just... waiting.

Erik's eyes snapped open. Brilliant green this time and lost in excitement. “Yesss...” he hissed. “Touch me.”

“With pleasure.” What the hell else could he say? Erik's cock looked stunning wrapped in his hand. Wet. Engorged. Winter glanced down to their conjoined fingers, his of black leather, Erik's pale and shiny with lube, thrusting deep into his ass. Winter had never been more turned-on in his life.

Firmly, but not cruelly—Winter only used pain to heighten pleasure, not for the joy of it in itself—he squeezed, and dragged the rough braided palm of the glove up the straining, hot length of Erik’s magnificent erection. “Now,” he panted. “Do it now.”

“Thank you!” Erik shouted, thrusting his cock upward into Winter’s fist. The first few unintelligible words became raw, incoherent cries as Erik climaxed, the sounds echoing sweetly in the old building. To keep from coming himself, Winter tried to focus all his attention on Erik’s face and the pleasure consuming him, and not the spurts of cum spattering on those glorious abs, or landing on the dull sheen of leather. Still working their fingers in the tight grip of Erik’s ass, Winter prolonged Erik’s orgasm for what seemed like minutes.

When he couldn’t force more sensation from Erik’s shuddering, jerking body, Winter slowly worked their twined fingers back out. Jesus-fuck. Every time he hooked up with Erik, he swore he’d just seen the sexiest thing ever. Every single time. And then the next time, every single time, Erik did him one better.

What the hell was going on?

You know it’s because you’re in love with him.

Motherfucker. In love? No I just... I just...

Okay, I am.

Winter slumped against the couch and sucked in a deep breath. In love. No wonder he’d accomplished so much in such a short time. Lately, he’d been feeling like he could do anything. Be anything! Still lots of wrongs to be made right, some that couldn’t be made right, blood that would never wash away, but he’d make amends to the world somehow.

Shifting uncomfortably in his aching misery, Winter looked over at Erik’s face. Absolutely beautiful. Winter was so aroused he could hardly suck in a breath. Parts of him hurt physically. Once again wrestling with his post-orgasm shame, Erik had his face turned away, his eyes closed. Still a work in progress, the getting him past that ridiculous emotion. “Hey, gorgeous,” he said, voice shaky.

Back to feeling shy, Erik covered his face with his forearm. “Yeah?” he mumbled from underneath the corded muscle.

“Happy birthday.”

What the—

How the heck does he know it's my birthday? Were none of his secrets... secret? At the moment, Erik didn't give a crap. His forearm wasn't nearly big enough to hide under.

Dirty boy.

He'd really out-shamed himself this time. Worse than all the other times. The pink panties were still tangled around his ankles, and every few seconds, whether he thought of them directly or not, another bunch of aftershocks hit. An especially copious amount of cum coated his chest. Yep. Dirty.

You sure put on a show this morning, you slut.

Maybe it was because mystery man didn't just watch this time. He *touched*.

Heck, not just touched—put his finger *inside* him. Finger-fucked him. With the gloves on! And oh, how incredible that had felt, the thrust, the possession. Leather. In his ass. *With my finger in there at the same time...*

Sick and twisted.

Just the way you like it.

Why'd he save the best humiliation for last? Was this really it? Even humiliated to the core, Erik wanted more time with his dark-haired stranger. *No one else ever sees the real me, they just see the Erik they want to see.* That strange pain in his chest crept back for a repeat visit and really hurt this time, ripping away pieces of his heart with every inhalation.

No more scavenger hunts. No more fun clues to decipher. No more arriving breathless and excited at whatever secluded—or sometimes wide-open and risky—spot the hunt lead him to and finding someone waiting for him. Someone who liked the *real* him. The things that followed afterward were... *wow*. Scary, embarrassing, amazing, liberating and thrilling all at once.

It was going to be so lonely without him.

“Erik, please stop that.”

Sure. Stop hurting? Ha—no. But it was time to stop hiding behind his arm and get the hell gone. The cold cum on his belly had already gelled into a sticky mess. Ew, but at least he didn’t have to scrape it off with his finger and lick it. This time.

Erik shifted slightly, testing his capacity for coordinated movement. Nope. Not yet. The panties rubbed against his ankles and reignited a fresh round of abdominal spasms. “I’ll go soon... I just... can’t get up, yet.”

“I don’t recall saying you were allowed get up.”

What? “But...” *You’re done with me.*

“Shh. Be still for a minute, okay? Just... *be still.*”

Erik tried to obey. That deep growly voice made him tremble more. His legs kept twitching, not bound tightly enough by the panties around his ankles. What did the guy want, anyway? The last few times they’d met up, he’d acted kind of strange. Like today, with more talking than usual, and questions, endless questions. Erik wondered if he’d failed some secret test by being his nerdy, stupid self.

Or was Mr. Denial waiting for the right time to say goodbye? It wasn’t something that should be hard. In fact, he didn’t even have to say it. *Just don’t text me anymore.* Simple.

“That’s better.”

No it wasn’t. Nothing had gotten better. Now that he wasn’t panting and horny, Erik heard the zippers going down as his favorite mystery peeled the gloves off and tossed them on the giant slab of wood. God, they were a dark delight. But they were now on the table. Guess that meant he wasn’t going to get spanked. Ever.

Mystery man reached between his feet and tugged off the lacy underwear. Not the—damn. Then he smiled, opened his suit jacket and tucked them into the inner pocket. Erik’s hips gave a little lurch. Dirty! Dirty panties in his pocket.

Straightening his legs back out felt weird. His ass had a thing or two to say about the rough treatment. Leather—ouch. Should probably move soon. Or better yet, drag out the remaining minutes, not just because he was still a little shaky, but because that final goodbye was coming far too soon.

“Erik.”

Like now.

“I’d like to talk to you,” the man said, and brushed a lock of inky hair behind his ear. Erik was going to miss that hair, too. Had always wondered what it felt like. Stretching his dress shirt across what looked like a finely-chiselled chest, the man bent down and picked up his discarded boxers. It was part of the game. Play dress-up. He often helped Erik with his clothes—after. “It’s a little distracting, though, seeing you like this. Naked and sweaty, and I don’t want to be distracted. This is important.”

Instead of handing them over for Erik to put on, his mystery man, well *his* for a precious few more minutes only, swiped the soft material across his abdomen, wiping away the congealing mess. Ew. Now he’d have to wear those home like that, smelling like sex and sticky with illicit pleasure. His dick twitched to life at the thought. Yep. Twisted.

Even if Erik found another man to play twisted games with, not that it would ever happen, it wouldn’t be the same. Some people were simply irreplaceable. Despite the amazing orgasm, this birthday would go down in history as the worst on record.

“There.” The boxers sailed by and landed near his tangled pants. What the heck? He needed those. “Sit up.”

Sure. He could do that now, would do *better* than that now. Erik swung his legs off the couch, planted his feet, and stood up. Feeling a little wobbly, he kept his balance by sheer force of will. The corset, that strangely alluring mix of masculine black and lacy pink, caught his eye. Pretty. Too bad he never got to wear it. Or touch it.

Inching around the table, Erik sighed. Birthdays sucked.

“You’re still fretting.”

“Yeah, well…” Goodbyes sucked worse than birthdays. And what the hell, might as well say what he wanted to say, even if he’d be humiliating himself

in the worst possible way in front of a man who at least had the decency to say *adios* in person, and not simply fire off a lousy text. Didn't mean he had to look at him. Taking a deep breath, Erik admitted, "I... I'm really going to miss you."

"Miss me?" A questioning furrow formed between the black brows.

Humiliation had many levels. Coming while someone had their leather covered finger in your ass rated pretty high on the scale. Maybe an eight or nine. Definitely a nine for coming while licking their boots. Crying—that had to be an eleven. The sting of unshed tears threatened regardless. Just one more minute—he could hang on that long.

"Something you want to say to me, Erik?"

"I already said it." Said more than enough. Erik had crept far enough around the table that his toe made contact with his pant leg. The patch of aqua had come to the fore in mystery man's eyes as the sun brightened the room. Erik couldn't help gawking. Of all the expressions he's seen on mystery man's face, confusion wasn't one of them, but there it was, plain to see. "I know I shouldn't ask—I know you have your reasons—but I was wondering if, before I go, if you would..." Erik paused. Maybe it was better not knowing. "Never mind," he mumbled. It could stay a secret to the end.

Mystery man stepped closer. He was so handsome. And untouchable. But it wouldn't have mattered what he looked like, his appeal lay in his decisiveness, his power. Should've taken a picture anyway, before he'd lost his chance.

"Never mind what?" A tiny spark of anger glowed in the blue depths. "After everything we've done together, you can't talk to me?"

Sure. Talk. More humiliation, but fine, he'd talk. "We haven't done anything together!" Except today. But that was just another one-sided thing. More denial. Pants forgotten, Erik stepped back. The two of them were the same height, but mystery man seemed, somehow, bigger. Larger than life.

"Haven't we?"

What?

"Haven't we had fun together? Or are you going to tell me you didn't enjoy all the scavenger hunts? Figuring out all those clues? That you didn't

find them a challenge, and that you don't love a challenge? I know you liked it. You raced through the door excited and happy every single time, and it was because you knew you'd won. That you did it yourself. That you earned it. Are you going to try and tell me otherwise?"

"No, of course not." The game was the best thing in his life—no, it was the opponent he played against who was the best thing. As he stood there naked in the morning light, the truth hit him. Yeah, they'd actually done a lot together hadn't they? In a round-about sort of way. It just didn't seem like it, because he'd been so focused on what happened after, the sex part. Because the man had seen him at his most private, Erik could tell him how he felt. He deserved the truth. "You're right. I did love it. All of it. Even when I didn't make it on time and you weren't there. I loved it even when I failed." Erik blinked away the burn behind his eyes. "Thank you. For doing that for me."

"You're welcome. But you know, I loved it, too."

"You did?"

"I like a good challenge just as much as you. I think I need it. I can't stand being bored. I make spectacularly bad decisions when I get bored. Keeping you on your toes never bores me. Watching you never bores me."

"Don't you get tired of, you know, just watching?"

"Never."

Maybe we're both crazy. Yep. That's why we can't see it in each other. "I wish—" Erik took his eyes off the floor and looked him straight in the eye, "I wish you'd let me touch you. Just once."

Mystery man smiled and it lit up his whole face. "Once would never be enough."

"But does it have to be only once? What if we—" Jeez. Making a mess of things already. "I don't understand why you don't..." *Just ask and get it over with, it won't kill you.* "Is it me?"

The smile faded from the man's lips, but not his eyes. "No, it's definitely not you. It's because it's not three o'clock yet."

Right. That made sense. "What happens at, ah, three?"

“At three, I sign my life away.”

“And that’s a good thing?” Not that he’d ever heard.

“Oh, yes. Better than good. Because once I get rid of the old life, I can begin again with a new one, and this time, I have plans to do it right. I’ve been waiting a long time for this day to come.”

Now Erik knew what his mother meant when she called people cuckoo-bonkers. “Well, um, congratulations?”

“Don’t congratulate me yet. Wait until after three.”

But three was hours away. Erik would be long gone by then. “I, um... you want to... text me? At three?”

“Text you? Hell fucking, no.” Mystery man closed the space Erik had managed to put between them. “I want you to come with me.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I don’t see anyone else here, do you? Since you’ve had a lot to do with helping me get this far, it’s only fitting you be there. I want you there with me.”

“What do you mean? What did I have to do with... whatever?” And why did he have to be confused and naked at the same time? His pants were around here, somewhere. He took a step and found... wet and sticky. Ew.

Ice-man thawed a little and sighed, looking almost as confused as Erik felt. “Let me tell you a little story, and then maybe you’ll understand what I’m talking about.”

Erik let out a sigh of his own. A story would be good. Anything to steal a few more minutes from the weirdest goodbye ever. Ignoring the cum-smearred boxers under his toe, Erik bent down and retrieved his pants.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Startled, Erik dropped the pants. *Tippy bastard.*

The huge slab of a coffee table wasn’t going anywhere without six more men to move it, so mystery man shoved the couch back instead, flipped up the throw that had felt nice under his back, and took off the cushion from the far

end. He set it on the floor, sat on the remaining cushion, and sprawled out like the world owed him everything.

Does he expect me to sit there? On the floor, at his feet? Erik stared at the cushion. Then at mystery man's finger as he pointed at it. He had to be kidding.

"There's nothing to think about, Mr. Healey, nothing to fret about. Just do it. On your knees."

I'm not fretting. He wasn't. This was just weird. Except his dick was growing hard again at being ordered about. Which was twisted, but he wasn't going to think about that again today. Conscious of his mostly erect penis putting on a rather enthusiastic display, Erik crept over to the cushion and knelt. And instantly relaxed. Much more comfortable than the floor. But what should he do with his hands? His icky, sticky hands in desperate need of a wash?

"Put them behind your back."

"Oh." Erik clasped one hand around the opposite wrist.

"Better?"

Yeah, it was. Which made about as much sense as kneeling for a man sitting on a couch above him. He nodded.

"Do you have any idea what I do for a living?"

God please, not another test to fail. Did he get a clue to decipher this time? But he only wanted one if it had nothing to do with weird-ass board games or dumb songs that got stuck in your head. "Uh... no. Something with land, I think. Assessments maybe? For the city? Or do you just buy and sell property for profit?"

"I knew you were a smart guy."

Ha—no. Jordan had only been truthful when he said Erik wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed.

"I do, in fact, buy property. Not me, actually, the company buys it, I just find the right deal, and if it's not the right deal and we still want it, I make it the right deal."

Ha. There. Got something right.

“But not just any property will do, we’re very selective. We only want the properties where the owners are in distress. We hunt for the sinking ships, the failing businesses that can’t hang on, the builders who can’t sell what they’ve scrimped and saved to build. We buy foreclosures. Or we buy property that we will immediately foreclose on without notice.”

That didn’t sound very pleasant, but then, somebody had to do it, didn’t they?

“I can tell what you’re thinking, and it’s the same thing everyone thinks. It’s just business, and if we didn’t buy it, someone else would.”

“How did you know that’s what I was thinking?”

“You have a very expressive face.”

I do? Oh, no.

“Take a breath, Erik. I happen to love your expressive face.”

“But that way you can—”

“Yes.”

“Shit.”

Mystery man smiled and leaning forward, touched his cheek. “Now you know why I love to watch you so much.”

Heat raced up Erik’s back and went straight to his forehead. Okay, that just took the number twelve spot on the humiliation scale. Erik resisted the urge to brush the finger off his flaming cheek. Because, yeah, humiliation had many varied levels.

“I love it when you pink up like that.”

So did Erik’s dick, but he tried to ignore it brushing against his thigh, even as the finger brushed down toward his bottom lip, a touch he’d craved for months. Now might be a good time for a judicious change of subject. “So you snap up good deals? What’s wrong with that? You must have made a killing during the recession.”

“As a matter of fact, we did.”

Erik looked up at the slight change in the man's tone of voice.

"We got greedy. Me and my partners, we... *competed*. With everyone. With each other. Viciously. To see who could work the better deal, make the bigger kill, make the most money." The aqua patch vanished once again from the man's eyes, leaving only stormy skies behind. "It got really ugly."

"Yeah? Like, ugly-ugly? How bad?"

Some of the color—no, life—seemed to drain from mystery man's face. "The ugliest. As you've probably guessed, I'm naturally competitive. Even as a kid, I had to rule the world. If I played a sport, I got hellish aggressive. I ran slower kids into the ground and loved doing it. I lived to make them eat my dust. I had to get more A's than anyone else. If me and my friends made a tree fort in the backyard, guess who had the nicely painted one with the real shingles on the roof? I wasn't deliberately mean, but if my parents didn't keep my busy, I could turn into to a total tyrant."

You don't say... "Well, you know, you're still kind of... *domineering*."

"And don't you forget it."

Nope. Not possible.

A wavy lock of black hair fell over mystery man's forehead. Maybe if he just reached out and touched it for a second—damn. Too late. The man leaned back into the chair and pushed the hair back into the messy tangle. "So because I'm competitive, I usually won our group's little contests."

"Did that piss off your other... what do you call them? Partners?"

"Hell, no. I made us disgusting amounts of money."

"Then what was so ugly about it?"

"Because sometimes when you have your sights set on one goal, you can't see anything else. Soon, nothing else matters. *Nobody* else matters. And that's what started to happen to me. I could only see that I was winning. I no longer saw that someone had to lose so that I could win."

"But if people couldn't pay their mortgages, they couldn't help but lose. I mean, eventually. That doesn't make it your fault. The recession was horrible for everybody. We still can't afford to hire more help at the gym, and we're getting by okay. Still. I know I'm lucky to have my job."

Mystery man had always been a tad restless. As Erik watched, he began wagging his leg back and forth. “But there is such a thing as being allowed to lose gracefully. And that’s what I lost sight of. I wanted to win. My partner Douglas, he’s pretty good at what he does, and I both admire and hate him for it. And about a year ago, he was giving me a run for my money, and I do mean big money. His quarterly tally was going to kick mine to the curb and well, I couldn’t have that, could I? So I pushed. There was this building we’d bought, only the former owner wouldn’t get out. She seemed a nice lady, but what was nice to me? I only wanted to win. She wanted time to make good with the payments, and really she only asked for six months, quite reasonable, actually. She wanted to buy back the building.”

Clouds must have settled in overhead, because the room darkened. Freakishly in time. Erik was starting to get a sinking feeling about this so-called story. He cocked his head—*carry on*.

“But I didn’t want to wait months. I didn’t want Dougie to beat me.” The man’s other foot began to tap in agitation while the other kept wagging back and forth. Uh-oh. “So I got the lawyers to kick her out.”

“Ouch.”

“It was a dick move on my part. And unnecessary. Her husband was a real scumbag. Somebody should shoot him for the good of the world. He got them into the whole financial mess because he thought he was some big-shot gambler, and when he fucked everything up that could be fucked up, he left her to sort it out alone. He just took off and left her with the kids. She was divorcing the sorry sack of shit when all this went down.”

Rules sucked. Like birthdays. So Erik broke one and unclasped his hands so he could set them on the toe of the wildly tapping shoe. Mystery man gave him a cross look, but didn’t chastise him. Maybe he needed the touch he always denied himself?

“I didn’t know it at the time, and I doubt I would have cared anyway, but the lady had recently lost both her mother and her father within a few months of each other, and then that piece of shit excuse for a husband left her with a mountain of debt, and well, she was barely holding it together.”

Erik pressed harder on the shoe. He could feel the man’s leg vibrating through the leather. “What happened?” Because something obviously had.

“She killed herself. In that same building I wanted so badly, just so I could beat Dougie and the measly hundred grand profit he had on me.”

“Oh, God! She killed herself? I’m so sorry.”

“And she took her two little kids with her.”

Ho—fuck. Harsh. The kids too? Why would anyone do that? How could anyone do that? “Jesus—I don’t know what to say—sorry. That’s awful. Those poor kids.”

“Don’t say sorry to *me*. I don’t deserve it. Their blood is on my hands, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“But it wasn’t your fault! You didn’t do it. She did. She murdered her own kids. You didn’t kill anyone.”

“Not directly, no. But if I hadn’t been such a heartless bastard, if I’d just given her the time she asked for, she might not have done it.”

Hindsight sucked. Like listening to Jordan and his stupid insults. “And maybe she would have done it anyway.”

“But that’s the thing. I’ll never know. All I can do now is change myself, since I can’t change the past.”

The toe under Erik’s hands finally quit tapping. Erik let it go and reclasped his hands behind his back. He might not know what to say, but for once he knew what to do with his hands. Which was kind of nice, not having to think about it. “So is that what you meant earlier when you said you were signing your life away? You’re quitting?”

A slow smile curved on mystery man’s lips. “Yep. I am indeed. The partners are buying me out and I’m gonna strike out on my own, be my own boss. I can compete against myself all I want and not hurt anyone. I like to think I can learn from my mistakes. I’m going to take everything I’ve learned and use it to do some good for a switch. I’ll still make money, still win, but it won’t be because I couldn’t let someone else lose gracefully. I’m gonna get it right, Erik. Starting at three o’clock.”

“And you want me to go with you? When you sign everything at the lawyers? Really?”

“Yes, really. It would mean a lot to me if you’d come.”

“Okay. I’ll go.” Kind of a no-brainer, really. Of course he’d go. “And what happens after three o’clock? After you’ve signed everything?”

The slow smile turned into a wicked smile. Frick. No, fuck. “What happens after that? I’ll tell you.” He leaned in so close, Erik could see that the sunny aqua patches had returned to his ringed eyes. “After that, boy, I’ll deny myself no more.”

Just because Erik said he’d go, didn’t mean Winter was going to go easy on him or anything. Hell, no. They both needed a challenge—this was a stressful day for both of them. Part of Erik’s immediate challenge was breathing properly after Winter pulled the corset off the coffee table and onto his lap. Erik, and his abs of steel, looked positively stunning waiting on that cushion, legs spread, hands behind his back, obeying sweetly. And hyperventilating.

“Do you need your inhaler?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you need me to bend you back into shape?”

“Um... no?”

“Then take a deep breath and relax. I don’t know how you can handle a full scale invasion of the creepy, cloned pod-children, yet go to pieces over a bit of pink lace.”

“Pod-children?” He looked adorable confused.

“Whatever they were, all those kids that looked alike. The ones all wearing the exact same shirt. That day I first met you.”

Erik’s eyes narrowed. “We do not speak of that event.”

“No? What event is that?”

Erik’s left eye twitched. “Parents of Multiples Day.”

“Ah. That explains the cloning. All natural, it seems.” Winter raised one brow. “I must say that I, for one, am rather thankful for this... Parents of Multiples Day you don’t wish to speak of.”

Ducking his head, Erik mumbled something at the floor.

“Pardon me?”

“You took advantage of my stressed-out weakness.”

Erik was so sweet. “Didn’t I just tell you I was an over-competitive, domineering shark?”

“Didn’t you just tell me you were changing your ways?”

Cheeky little brat. “Did I ever mention I was fond of gags?”

The sun had reappeared from behind the clouds, bathing the room in a golden light that made Erik’s big, shocked eyes look bluer. They sparkled. Oh, yes. Definitely had to try a gag out on the boy. Not that he wasn’t also fond of screaming. “Stand up.”

Same fluid grace. Guardian Angels must have a perverted sense of humor, giving him a very flexible gymnast to play with. Really, it was almost obscene. “Since we have oh, I dunno—” he glanced at his watch, “—two hours and a bit to fritter away before my appointment, I think you should provide some amusement while I start unpacking my new office.”

Erik froze. “Amuse you?” He swallowed visibly. “New office?”

Winter chuckled. “Yes, this is my new office. Great, isn’t it? And I think I’d like to see you wearing this pretty little ensemble while I unpack the boxes you’re going to carry down from upstairs for me. In fact, I think you can keep on wearing it when we go visit the Law Offices of Snooty, Snooty and Charge Big Bucks. I think I’ll very much enjoy knowing what you have on underneath that oh-so-thin workout gear you wore over here.” That hadn’t been part of the plan, but Winter could improvise; it was part of his much-sought-after skill-set. “I wonder if anyone else will notice you’re wearing lacy pink underwear and a tightly laced corset under your clothes.”

Horried, Erik almost fell back down to his cushion. Better be careful and not fall on that massive boner—that could hurt. He sputtered incoherently for a moment, before choking out, “No—just *no*.”

“Yes—just *yes*.” Erik didn’t really know the meaning of humiliation. But he’d learn. “First things first, though.” The panties. They were burning a hole in his jacket pocket. They were just that hot. He set the corset aside, plucked

the teensy scrap of lace from his pocket and held it out. “Put these back on. And do it nice and slow, as I watch.”

Doing a reverse striptease with shaky hands and that delightful, hard cock, Erik pulled them on. They barely fit over those bulging thighs. Or the bulging cock. Winter prayed the corset would fit. Erik was so fucking ripped, everything he put on had to fit tightly. Waiting until three o’clock—no, three *thirty*—was going to fucking kill Winter.

But those two dead kids didn’t get a reward and neither would Winter, not until he came clean.

Winter picked up the corset again. Damn those perverted Guardian Angels. “I think this was your best pick of all, Mr. Healey. You ready?”

Erik nodded stupidly, practically drooling. Soaring already. Good thing carrying boxes didn’t take that many brain cells. But how to get the thing on... that was the dilemma. It wasn’t going to go over those wide shoulders. No way. Maybe if Erik stepped into it...? Winter eyed Erik’s incredible legs. Nah. Those thighs. *Huge*. Putting the corset on was going to take longer than taking it off. *Guaranteed*. “I’m going to have to take the laces right out and put it on you before rethreading them.”

Erik’s body gave an involuntary little lurch.

“You won’t be coming for *hours*, boy. So don’t get overly excited.”

“I won’t come. I promise I won’t.”

“Excellent.” Lacing Erik into the thing took forever. He couldn’t seem to get his fingers to work properly. At about the half-way point, Winter wondered if he’d need to use Erik’s inhaler. Then he had to undo two sets of holes because he’d mislaced it in his haste. Before he tied the ends off, he tightened each section, like he would do up skates, until it fit around both Erik’s trim waist and his muscled chest and back. Winter spun Erik around since he didn’t think he could do it himself without stumbling.

God. So fucking hot. “You look beautiful.”

“Y-you... like... it?” Erik’s voice hitched on every word.

“No. I don’t like it. I *love* it. Love you like this.”

“Really?”

“Definitely, my slutty boy.” It was crazy tempting to reach out and give that straining lump under the lacy panties a firm squeeze, but no. Later. After three. He’d made a vow, and he wasn’t breaking it. Winter stepped back to admire Erik better from a little distance, but Erik’s hand followed him. He didn’t touch him, just yearned to do it—Winter felt the ache. Understood it. Cheating a little, because it would be heartless not to, Winter twined their fingers together.

“Is this... this isn’t the last time, is it?”

Ah. Shit. No wonder Erik had fretted away all morning. Winter would have to be more careful with how he said things. Sometimes he had a thoughtless tongue and not just a cruel one. “No, Erik. This isn’t the last time.” Winter steadied himself for what his shark had been very much afraid of. He squeezed Erik’s fingers tightly. “I’m hoping there’ll never be a last time for us.” The time had come to speak of what he wanted. Winter took a deep breath. No risk, no reward, right? “Is... *forever* something I might interest you in?”

If Winter thought Erik was gorgeous before this moment, he was dead wrong. The smile that lit up Erik’s face made the sun seem dull and impotent. Pale in comparison. “Yes, Sir. I might be interested.”

Winter closed his eyes. *Yes!* He finally won the one contest that mattered. Kind of embarrassing how it took him so long to figure everything out. Or maybe it just took Erik.

“But I do have one question.”

Only one?

“If we’re going to do this—you and me, then I should probably ask—”

“I’ll tell you anything, Erik. Anything you want to know.” Winter’s heart was Erik’s for the taking. Whatever he wanted. Feeling like he was soaring to new heights himself, Winter opened his eyes. He was ready.

Tilting his head, Erik gave him his best, shy smile.

God, how he loved that smile. Winter waited to hear Erik’s question.

“What’s your name?”

THE END

Author Bio

Finn Marlowe is a paralegal by day and erotic M/M romance novelist by night. She believes daydreaming is a vastly underrated pastime and probably spends way too much time at it. Her kids no longer ask what's wrong when they spy her staring off into space—they just assume she's writing a scene from her next novel and they're probably right. Finn calls British Columbia home and when she's not enjoying the beautiful outdoors, she's inside reading or resenting the fact her kids are better video game players than she is. If there were more hours in the day, she'd like to become a better artist and a greener gardener. Since she believes all dreams are possible if you don't give up on them, she expects to regain her video game hi-scores, naturally vanquish all garden pests and finally paint what lives inside her imagination.

Contact & Media Info

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ONE WEEK

By K. Mason

Photo Description

There are two men on a bed. One man lies on his back. His eyes are closed and one arm is held up over his head. The other man, who has a well-trimmed beard and a rosebud tattoo on his chest, leans over him, as though he is about to kiss him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please take inspiration from the song "[Flaws](#)" by Bastille. I hope it's okay to be so vague, but I would thoroughly enjoy a piece that embodies the heart of the song. Bonus points for any scenes involving dancing at a club or sports. Additionally, I would love to see some of these flaws perhaps being one of the characters denial, perhaps even involving the fact that he may have a girlfriend/wife when he feels attraction to the other? HFN/HEA preferred.

If any further clarification/suggestions are needed, please just ask! :)

(And here's to hoping I did this right! First time requesting.)

[Lyrics for the song Flaws are written of Dan Smith of Bastille]

Sincerely,

Samantha

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: infidelity (not *between* main characters), friends to lovers, gay for you, accountant, project manager, mutual masturbation

Word count: 16,804

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I would like to offer a huge thank you to the members of the YA GLBT group on Goodreads for all their help, support and encouragement whilst writing this story, particularly Elci and Kat for beta reading for me.

ONE WEEK

By K. Mason

My eight-year-old, mud-splattered Ford Focus looked completely out of place as I parked amongst the pristine, top of the range Land Rovers and BMWs in front of the red brick office building. In worn jeans, T-shirt, and bright yellow high-vis jacket I felt very much the same way as I walked in the opposite direction to the 5:00 p.m. rush of professionally attired office workers who were heading out of the building into the warm sunlit evening. The immaculately dressed doorman gave me a polite nod and an amused look as he held the door open for me; the glass front of the building made the reception area feel like being in a goldfish bowl.

I headed towards the bank of lifts to the left of the main desk and hit the call button. My scruffy appearance gained one or two disapproving looks from those exiting the lift when it arrived.

“Lawyers,” I muttered under my breath as the doors closed behind me. It was a running joke that the law firm that occupied the first four floors of the building disapproved of us turning up to the office in our work wear. Although I, like the other project managers at the firm, worked mainly at the job sites and spent very little time in the office, it still annoyed them. Monday morning would, no doubt, bring another terse letter to my boss complaining of how unprofessional it was. The lift quickly rose to the fifth floor, where my employers, Anderson’s Architects, were based.

“Simon! Happy birthday!” A pair of arms were flung round my neck before I could step out the lift, the leather handbag she held in one hand clipping me on the back of my head.

“Hey, watch it, Amie! I haven’t got my hard hat on.” I laughed as I returned the hug briefly before she let me go and stepped back.

“What are you doing here? Why aren’t you getting ready?” she demanded.

“Getting ready for what?” I said with a slight shake of my head and what I hoped was a confused expression.

“Oh stop it, you know exactly what. You’re here to collect Nick?” she asked.

“Yeah, he’s stopping at mine tonight. Michelle is away visiting her parents this weekend, so it’s easier to go to my house to get ready and crash there afterwards rather than having to get a taxi to and from their house.”

“Well good luck dragging him away. When I stuck my head round his door to say I was going home he was giving someone a right bollocking about sticking to their budget. I don’t think he even noticed me.”

“That’s probably a good thing. If he’s really wound up about it he’d probably have made you stay and rework the figures.”

“Not a chance. I may be his assistant, but come five o’clock on a Friday he’s on his own. The table at Salvatore’s is booked for half past seven,” she said as she stepped past into the lift. “Don’t be late,” she warned as the doors shut between us.

The heavy steel toe-capped work boots I wore made my footsteps echo through the deserted open plan space as I headed towards the small office on the far side. The only other sounds were the background hum of the air conditioning and a single raised voice. Reaching the open office door I leant on the frame and waited.

“Thirty thousand pounds!” *Nick* paced up and down behind the desk as far as his headset would allow him to move, all the time his arms gesticulating wildly. “You call that a little over budget? Tell me, did you even look at the costs before you okayed the purchase?”

There was barely time for whoever was on the other end of the phone to answer before he started ranting again. I couldn’t conceal my smile. Whoever believed the stereotype that accountants were dull, boring, mild-mannered number crunchers had never met Nick.

“Fine, you go enjoy your weekend,” he snapped angrily. “I’ll just spend mine recalculating the entire budget, and whilst I am at it break the news to the client that their project has just leapt in cost.”

With that Nick ripped the headset off and flung it on the desk, *his angry* pacing coming to a sudden halt as he caught sight of me standing in the doorway.

“Why is it of the ten project manager’s we employ, you are the only one who can ever stay within budget?” he demanded.

“Quite possibly because I am the only one you’ve ever threatened to castrate with a rusty spoon if I should go over it.”

“Very true.” He nodded in agreement. “And never forget, it’s not just an empty threat.”

It was an old joke between us. I’d been working for the firm for three years as an assistant project manager when Nick first started as a trainee accountant. Although we’d spoken occasionally, the first time we’d worked together was when a large potential contract to convert a set of industrial buildings into modern apartments had been offered to the firm. We tendered for the contract on my plans and Nick’s budget. Six weeks of long hours arguing back and forth about the costs and what was needed had started a friendship that, despite our differences, five years later had only grown stronger.

He had made his infamous rusty spoon threat as we sat in the pub celebrating my promotion to project manager. In a round of congratulatory toasts, Nick had stood up and with a completely straight face told me what he intended to do to me if I ever went over the budget he’d set. The memory of the shocked silence from our colleagues that followed this announcement still made us laugh today.

“You finished?”

“Yeah, just let me switch off and get my stuff together.” He started to log out of his computer and gather the papers that were spread around the desk. “Looks like I’m going to be working this weekend!”

“Poor overworked thing,” I said with mock sincerity.

“Shut it, you, or I’ll make you help me with all this tomorrow.”

“You’d really let me near your budgets?” I raised my eyebrows. Nick was extremely territorial about his work.

“Not a chance. You can supply me with coffee and biscuits.” He finished sorting the papers into his briefcase, shut the lid, and clicked the locks shut. “Ready,” he continued, coming round the desk towards me.

My mouth went dry as I looked him up and down. The pale blue shirt under his navy Cerruti suit was tight enough to accentuate a set of defined pecs. The jacket, although unbuttoned at his narrow waist, hid an abdomen I knew to be marked out by just shy of a six pack, the slim hips led to long, well-muscled, legs. In the suit, he was as sexy as hell. In my mind though, I slowly removed the suit to reveal the body underneath.

“Si!” Nick waved his hand in front of my face. “Anybody home?”

“Yeah, sorry.” I shook my head slightly to clear the mental vision. “Miles away.”

I really had to stop thinking about him like this. Not only was Nick my best friend, he was also straight and had been in a relationship for as long as I’d known him. Anyway, even if he wasn’t straight, I wouldn’t want him to become a one-night stand, or a friend with benefits. As I didn’t do relationships, and that would be the best I could manage.

“Come on then.” He picked up the sports bag next to the office door and led the way out.

Thankfully, traffic wasn’t heavy and just thirty minutes later I pulled into the quiet, unadopted road where I lived. The car bounced over the uneven road surface as I drew up to park at the kerb in front of my mid-terraced house. On the low wall between my red painted front door and that of my neighbour, my large, occasionally grumpy, cat Roger paraded impatiently up and down.

As I unlocked the front door, Nick put out his hand to stroke Roger, only to withdraw it quickly as a large paw—claws extended—swiped at him.

“Evil critter,” Nick muttered under his breath. The cat, taking no notice, pushed his way in front of me as I opened the door and ran in the direction of his food bowl complaining loudly.

“The taxi is booked for seven,” I said over my shoulder as I followed the cat. “Do you want a drink or anything, or do you want to grab a shower first and get ready, I’ll jump in after you.”

“I wouldn’t say no to a beer if you’ve got one.” Nick dropped the bag on the bottom of the stairs and followed me through to the kitchen. “I need to

unwind. This week has been one thing after another.” He removed his jacket and loosened his tie. Stretching his arms above his head, his shirt rode up, coming free from the waist of his trousers, and let me catch a glimpse of the smooth muscles of his stomach. My fingers itched to reach forward and touch.

Instead I turned to the fridge and dug out two bottles of Peroni. Stepping back from the fridge I found myself standing flush against Nick’s body, where he’d silently walked up behind me.

“Steady,” he laughed, putting his arms around me. I could feel the hard planes of his chest against my back. A hot flush crept up my neck to my face at his touch. What I really wanted to do was twist round in his arms and hold him, but I stepped quickly away.

“Sorry,” I muttered as I turned, holding out the bottles in front of me like a shield.

“No problem.” He smiled easily as he took one of the bottles from my hand. “Opener?”

“Top drawer.” I pointed across the kitchen before ducking down to another cupboard and fishing out the cat food.

I heard the bottle tops come off with a slight hiss of gas and my bottle being put on the table before I stood up.

“I’ll take mine up with me,” Nick said as he left the kitchen whilst I finished emptying the revolting, smelly pouch of cat food into Roger’s dish.

I heard him cross the landing above me, the boiler on the kitchen wall kicked on just seconds before I heard the first splatters of water hitting the bottom of the bath. Looking up, my imagination went into overdrive as I pictured Nick stripping off the rest of his work clothes in preparation for getting in the shower. I growled at myself and tried to force my thoughts elsewhere. Grabbing my own beer, I took a large mouthful of the cold liquid. Maybe a drink or two would take the edge off. It was either that or trying to pick someone up tonight for some relief.

“Shower’s free,” Nick yelled from upstairs as I finished my second beer. Placing the empty bottle into the recycling box I headed up to get ready.

At the top of the stairs I pushed open the door to my bedroom, pulling my T-shirt off over my head as I did.

“Nice!” Nick said unexpectedly from in front of me.

“What the hell?” I asked tossing the T-shirt into the laundry basket. “The guest room is the other side of the landing.”

“Yeah I know, but Roger’s in there.” My eyes wandered up and down his body. Little rivulets of water ran down from his wet hair and across his chest, before being absorbed by the towel that was wrapped loosely round his hips.

“Sorry?” I shook my head.

“Your cat, the stropy one, he’s in the guest room and he won’t share,” Nick said with a smirk. “Anyway, it’s not like I’ve got anything you haven’t seen before, we share a changing room at football every week.” With that he turned his back to me and opened the towel from around him, before lifting it to his shoulders to reveal his smooth, biteable arse.

I stood and stared at him, unable to move as the blood rushed south from my brain to my dick.

“So are you going to shower?” he asked, turning his head over his shoulder to look at me.

“Yes,” I snapped, turning on my heel and heading across the landing. Shutting the door behind me I leant heavily against it trying to catch my breath.

Stripping off my jeans and boxers was hampered by my hard-on. Leaving the discarded clothes in the corner of the bathroom, I stepped over the edge of the bath and under the soft spray of water from the shower. I let the hot water fall over my head and shoulders, trying to relieve the tension, but even after I had washed my hair I knew there was only one way that my cock was going to go down.

Squirting the shower gel into my palm I began to wash myself. Tracing the muscles in my arms and chest I imagined that it wasn’t my own hand but Nick’s that caressed my body. Moving my hands down, across my hip bones I knew where this was heading. Leaning forwards, my left hand braced against the cool tiles of the wall, I wrapped my soapy right hand around my cock and started to stroke. Gently at first, teasing the foreskin back and forth across the glans, twisting my wrist to rub around the corona. As my need for release increased so did the pressure I used, moving my hand up and down the entire

shaft, squeezing and pulling as I went. Looking down I imagined Nick on his knees in front of me with his mouth wrapped round my straining cock as he sucked and licked along my length—his sparkling eyes looking back up at me through his long dark lashes. My breath came faster, my hips rocking back and forth as they followed the motion of my hand. My nuts drew up towards my body and I turned my head to my left, biting into the soft tissue under my arm to prevent me calling out as I came in short spurts that covered my right hand and splattered on the rim of the bathtub.

My knees trembled as I caught my breath in the aftermath of my climax. Removing the shower head I quickly washed any trace of my spend down the drain before finishing my shower and stepping out the bath. Pulling the bath towel from the rail I dried myself carefully before poking my head out the bathroom door.

“Nick?” I called, hoping the coast was clear for me to finish getting ready.

“You’re safe, I’m downstairs.” I could hear the laughter in his voice.

I legged it across the landing in the nude, not daring to look down the stairwell in case Nick was looking up, and shut the bedroom door behind me. I laid out my clothes on the bed: black fitted jeans that I knew would draw attention to my backside, green Armani polo shirt that matched my eyes, and my favourite worn black denim jacket. My vintage Doc Martens boots would finish the outfit.

“Taxi’s here,” Nick shouted from downstairs as I finished running the styling wax through my hair.

Grabbing my jacket I headed to the front door where he was waiting. As I stepped into the front room the sight of him took my breath away. He was wearing skin-tight leather trousers the colour of rich cinnamon, a cream shirt hung loosely over the top, and a deep-chocolate-brown leather jacket finished the outfit. He looked totally edible, and a greater part of me wanted to stay home and peel him back out of those trousers.

“Will I do?” he asked, a quirky smile playing across his lips, his eyes alight as though he were dying to laugh.

“Yep.” I nodded, not really sure what else I dared say out loud.

“Bye Roger, have a good evening,” he called back over his shoulder as I followed him to the front door and down the path to the waiting taxi. A gentle breeze blew the scent of his aftershave in my direction, which didn’t help the battle I was having with my libido.

The taxi dropped us directly outside Salvatore’s. Pushing open the door of the restaurant we were assailed by a gust of warm air, scented with garlic, basil, and tomato. Most of the tables were already filled with diners enjoying the home-cooked Italian food the restaurant was renowned for.

“Good evening, table for two?” the hostess asked as we stood in the entrance.

“No, we’re joining another party. There should be a table booked in the name of Shaw,” Nick replied.

“Of course. This way.”

We followed as she wove her way through the tables towards the back of the restaurant. The other members of our party were already seated, leaving two empty chairs, side by side, with their backs to the rest of the diners.

“Finally!” Amie grinned at us. “We were about to send out a search party.”

“We’re only a couple of minutes late,” Nick replied as I pulled out one of the chairs and offered it to him. As he slid into the seat he patted my hand where it rested on the back. “Si’s fault, I’ve never known anyone take so long getting ready.”

Shucking off my jacket I draped it over the back of my own seat, before taking my place at the table.

“All lies. Don’t believe a word of it.” I shook my head as I replied, trying not to blush as I remembered why I’d taken longer than usual in the shower.

Aside from Amie, around the table were her boyfriend Jai, my sister Paula, her husband Mark, and my oldest friend James with his partner Harry. They had already started on a selection of antipasti, olives and breadsticks whilst they’d been waiting.

“Well you’re here now.” Mark picked up one of the open bottles of red

wine from the table and offered it in our direction. Both Nick and I pushed our glasses towards him to be filled.

“So how does being thirty feel?” James asked with a smirk.

“You can tell me in ten days time,” I replied dryly, reaching for a breadstick before taking back my now full glass.

“Sadly true,” he conceded, as he lifted his own glass in mock salute. The ten days that separated us had turned into something of a joke, with him always finding the most insulting age-related card he possibly could for my birthday.

“Anyway, they say thirty is the new twenty,” Amie added cheerfully. Both James and I groaned.

“Oh God, I hope not,” James replied darkly.

“Well, it’s either that or admitting you’re old,” Jai added philosophically.

“I’m not old,” James protested with a sly glance at his partner. “I will never be old in our house.”

“Okay, rub it in,” Harry replied with a laugh. “Just because I’m officially the old man at the table. You can all sit around and moan about getting older, but it does have its good points. And I am sure the saying goes you’re only as old as the man you feel up.” He ran his hands over his partner’s shoulders. “See, I’m only twenty-nine now too.”

Our waitress returned to the table, handing round four overly large menus and reeling off a list of the evening’s specials. The table fell silent as we considered what we wanted. Nick leant towards me as we read from the same card, our shoulders brushing together, our heads almost together. His closeness distracted me completely. I scanned the menu but nothing was registering at all. Giving up trying to make a decision, I sat back and, without thinking about it, laid my right arm along the back of Nick’s chair.

I needed to focus. I couldn’t afford to let the feelings I had for him get out of hand. Picking up my glass and taking a deep swallow of the dark red wine, I met my sister’s eye across the table where she sat watching me, her head tilted to one side with a quizzical expression on her face.

“Are you ready to order?” the waitress asked as she returned to our table. Quickly we told her what we wanted and ordered a couple more bottles of the red wine.

“About ten minutes for your starters,” she advised before taking the menu cards from the table and heading away. Nick sat up and leant back in his chair, as he did I quickly dropped my arm down behind him. He turned with a slight frown as I did.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“No problem, you could have left it there. I didn’t mind.”

I shrugged but didn’t reply. I couldn’t decide whether I was getting mixed messages from him or whether my own lust was making me see things that weren’t there.

I tried to concentrate on the conversation around the table as we ate, but was constantly distracted by Nick sitting next to me. It didn’t help that occasionally his leg would brush against mine, or our arms touch as we ate. The wine flowed throughout the meal, and by the end of the meal I felt warm and more than a little intoxicated.

“So, are we going on?” Nick asked as we began to split the bill.

“No, sorry, we’ve got to get back for the babysitter,” Paula replied. At the same time Jai said, “I’m working tomorrow.”

“What about you two?” Nick asked Harry and James.

“I’m afraid not; the old man here needs his sleep,” James replied and then ducked out the way as Harry went to smack him on the arm.

“Looks like it’s just us then, Si.” Nick’s look at me held a hint of challenge.

I wasn’t sure if it was the look he gave me or the alcohol that made me take up the challenge.

“Fine by me. You up for going to Honey Trap night at Affinity?”

“What the hell is Honey Trap night?” Amie asked.

“Men only my dear,” James replied in a totally camped up voice.

“Meat market,” Harry added.

“We don’t have to. We can just go grab a pint from The Tap before closing,” I suggested.

“No, Affinity it is.” Nick pushed his chair back from the table and picked up his jacket. “Just off to the bathroom first. Meet you at the door.”

As I put on my own jacket, I watched him head across the room, the bottom of his shirt swinging just above his leather-clad arse.

We headed towards the entrance and Paula tucked her arm through mine, pulling me away from the others as we reached the pavement.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Nick.”

“Nothing, I’m not doing anything with Nick.”

“Simon.” Her tone was exactly the same as our mother used to use when we were kids.

“Sis, leave it. There’s nothing going on. He’s straight. He’s with Michelle. Hell, he might as well be married to her. We’re just friends, enjoying a bit of banter and a night out.”

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow as she asked.

“Yes, really.”

“Just be careful little brother. I’m not so sure he sees things the same way,” she cautioned.

“I’m a big boy now, Paula. This isn’t the playground. I don’t need my big sister to look after me.”

“Oh Si, I will always look after you, whether you need me to or not.” She hugged me and stepped away as the others came to join us. Tucking her arm through her husband’s she continued, “We’ll see you tomorrow at Mum’s for lunch.”

I nodded and shook Mark’s hand. James and Harry both hugged me before heading into their waiting taxi, leaving Jai and I together whilst we waited for Nick and Amie, who had gone to fetch her coat.

“Ready?” Nick said as he reached us.

“Have fun boys.” Amie grinned mischievously and then winked. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Both of us laughed at that. Jai took Amie’s hand in his and asked, “Does that go for me too?”

“Yes, you can take me home and ravish me,” Amie told him as she started to pull him towards the taxi rank.

Nick and I walked down the cobbled side street towards Affinity, neither of us speaking. Paula’s caution played in my mind and all of a sudden I wasn’t sure this was a good idea.

“Are you sure you want to go clubbing?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said definitely. “I don’t get a chance much; it’s not Michelle’s thing, and well, I’d really like to.” He laid a hand on my arm as he spoke.

“Okay.”

“Good.” He smiled as he tucked his arm through mine and pulled me towards the entrance of the club.

Two bouncers stood on either side of the doorway. They made no move to stop us as we passed them.

“I guess we look too old to ask for ID,” I said, somewhat ruefully.

“Well, you are thirty, are you sure you aren’t too old to be clubbing?”

“Wait till we get on the dance floor, then I’ll show you who’s too old for clubbing.”

I pulled my wallet, phone, and door key out of my jacket pocket and tucked them, with some difficulty, into the pocket of my jeans before handing the jacket through the hatch to the cloakroom. Nick’s leather jacket followed suit, then we headed through the double doors into the main part of the club.

Inside it was both hot and noisy. There wasn’t a seat to be had among the dimly lit booths that surrounded the packed dance floor. I could feel the soles of my boots sticking to the floor as we threaded our way through the crowd of clubbers towards the bar. To make himself heard, Nick stood on the metal rail

that ran around the base of the bar and leant forward over the counter top. Standing behind him, my eyes were drawn to his leather-clad backside. I wasn't the only one looking. The bloke next to him at the bar gave him a once-over with lingering eyes. Jealousy flared and for a second all I could think was "mine." I moved up behind him and placed a hand on his back, glaring at his admirer. Nick turned his head briefly at my touch and grinned at me. Seconds later he stepped back into me and straightened up. Turning, he held two bottles of lager in one hand, in the other two shot glasses filled with at least a double measure of clear spirits. Taking a drink from each hand, I carefully sniffed at the shot glass. Tequila.

"Down in one?" He shouted as he raised his own glass in a toast. Nodding I tossed back the drink, the raw alcohol burning my throat.

"Cheers," I coughed as I watched him down his own drink. He shuddered as he ran his tongue around his lips. I had to fight the urge to lean forward and chase his tongue with my own, tasting the alcohol on his lips. This wasn't good. My attraction to him was getting out of control.

We pushed our way out of the crush of bodies around the bar. I pointed to an empty section of wall to one side of the dance floor and headed in that direction. It was too noisy to talk, so we leant against the wall side by side watching the mass of heaving bodies on the dance floor. I'd thought earlier when Nick had suggested going clubbing that I would see if I could pick someone up—not to take home, but to at least relieve some of the frustration I was feeling. Looking round the club, despite the amount of naked flesh and handsome faces, my mind was made up. The only person I wanted was the man next to me.

"Dance with me?" Nick asked suddenly. Without waiting for my response, he removed the almost empty bottle from my hand and leant over to put it with his on a nearby table. Taking my hand in his he led me out into the crowd of gyrating bodies that packed the dance floor.

The lights overhead were brighter, the electronic beat of the music louder. He didn't drop my hand as he closed his eyes and started to sway rhythmically to the music. I could feel the beat vibrating through me as I began to move with him. Slowly the moving crowd around us pushed us closer together until

our bodies came in contact. Being a couple of inches shorter than me, one of his thighs nestled against my crotch. It seemed only natural to slip my free arm around Nick's waist as we continued to move.

I could have tried to blame the music, the alcohol, or the testosterone-fuelled atmosphere of the club for it, but I knew it was my attraction to Nick that caused my dick to rise as his body pressed against mine. I tried to pull away, unsure what his reaction would be to my arousal, but rather than let me go, he dropped my hand and reached up to hook his arm around my neck, pulling us closer together. Unconsciously, my hand roamed over Nick's back, from his shoulders to the curve of his arse. As we swayed together he turned slightly and pulled his hip tighter against my crotch. I was slow to realise that I wasn't alone in my arousal as I felt his hard length digging into my hip. My own erection hardened fully in response.

Cautiously I looked down, trying to gauge whether he'd realised how turned on I was, or whether he knew that his own attraction had been noted. He was looking up at me, his expression uncertain but at the same time hopeful.

Leaning down until my mouth was level with his ear, I whispered, "What do you want?"

One arm uncurled from my neck, but he didn't step away. Pressing his forefinger to my chest he kept eye contact and said simply, "You."

I nodded and tightened my hold on him. His head turned slightly until our mouths met. Gently at first, he pressed his lips to mine. Still swaying to the music, our kisses deepened, mouths opening and tongues dipping in and out of each other's mouths. As the song ended, I pulled away.

"Home?" I suggested. He nodded and I led him across the dance floor towards the exit.

As we waited in the queue for our jackets I kept my arm around his shoulders, whilst his roamed over my back and arse. Outside though we let go of each other and headed towards the taxi rank.

Ducking my head to get into a black cab, I settled on the bench seat and gave the driver my address as Nick climbed in next to me and shut the door. The lights in the back went out when the driver pulled away from the kerb.

Nick's hand slid over my hip and into my lap, gently stroking my denim-covered crotch. In return I nudged him forward, my hand sliding up the back of his shirt and caressing the smooth, warm skin, dipping my fingers into the small gap at the top of his trousers and gently teasing the crack of his arse.

Moving my hand round to his front I quietly unzipped his trousers. Parting the fly and running my fingers up and down, teasing his erection through the thin cotton of his underwear.

He hissed an indrawn breath, letting his hand fall from my lap and grasping the edge of the vinyl seat. He leant over, bringing his mouth to my ear so he wouldn't be overheard by the taxi driver, and whispered, "Keep that up and I am going to come in my briefs before we even get home."

"And?" I asked, smirking at him. "Surely you can get it up again."

"Yes, but..." He bit down on his lip rather than finish his sentence as I applied more pressure, stroking with the heel of my hand against his length. The damp patch under my hand was spreading as he leaked precum.

"Si!" he gasped, his hips jerking against my palm as he forced himself to try and keep still. Turning my hand I rubbed my thumb over the crown of his cock. He tensed suddenly, twisting in his seat and burying his head in the neck of my jacket as he came. Pulling my hand away and wiping it on the edge of his shirt, I sat back in my seat waiting for Nick to recover and sit up.

"I can't believe you did that," he whispered as he tried to rearrange himself and zip up the tight leather trousers. Despite sliding down in the seat, he couldn't make the zip go up, and resorted to resting his hand across his crotch.

"If you'd have told me to stop I would have."

For a minute he didn't respond. Looking away from me, his bottom lip caught in his teeth and a frown crossed his brow. Without turning back to me he admitted almost bashfully, "I didn't want you to stop."

Nick paid the taxi driver and followed me up the path towards the front door. As he stumbled up the steps I put my hand back to steady him, grabbing the sleeve of his jacket and hauling him closer to me. He pushed up behind me as I tried, without much luck, to get the key to fit into the lock. For some

reason we both found this funny. By the time we got the door open and almost fell through the door way, we were laughing.

I turned to close the door, caging Nick with my arms as I reached over his shoulder with one hand and slid the bolt home. Pressing closer I brought my body up flush against his. I leant forward and captured his lips with mine. His mouth yielded with a gasp as his lips parted, our tongues danced and tangled as the kiss deepened. Nick's arms snaked round my back, under my shirt, caressing the bare skin. I ground my still-hard cock against the open crotch of his trousers, and smiled into the kiss as I felt him harden in response.

Pulling my head away I looked directly into his eyes. "Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes, I've never been surer."

I slid my hands down his arms, past his shoulders and took him by the hands. Walking backwards I headed towards the stairs. Letting go of one hand I led him up the narrow, steep staircase. At the top, I stopped and pulled him to me, stealing another kiss.

"Too many clothes," I suggested, moving him into the bedroom. He shrugged out of his jacket, letting it fall to the ground with a dull thud. My own followed suit almost immediately after. I peeled my shirt off over my head and let it join my jacket on the floor. Nick moved in closer, one hand tracing the muscles of my upper arms and moving down across my chest, brushing my nipple, which hardened in response. With his other hand he reached for the zip of my fly. As he slowly teased it down past my hard shaft, I gasped at the changing pressure. With the zip all the way down, he pushed his hand through the open material and caressed my length.

"Not yet," I whispered, reaching up to run the palm of my hand down his cheek, leaning in to kiss him again. His arms dropped as I reached to peel his shirt over his head, moving forward as I did so our chests came together, skin on skin. Tossing the discarded shirt to the floor I put my arms around him and pulled him closer. Starting just below his ear I placed little biting kisses down the length of his neck. I could feel him shudder, goose bumps rising on his skin. I bit down harder on the cord of muscle between his neck and shoulder, worrying it with my teeth then moving back up his neck. All the while his hands explored my skin. Slowly caressing my back, his hands moved down to

grasp my arse through my jeans, pushing my hips into his and rocking back and forth.

I gradually manoeuvred him towards the bed, until the back of his knees met the mattress. Sliding my hands down to the top of his trousers I began to inch the tight leather down past his backside, taking his damp briefs with them. I took my time to run my hands over his buttocks as I revealed them. As I moved my hands back up his chest to his shoulders I applied a little pressure until he fell back to sit on the bed. Falling to my knees in front of him I was eye level with his groin. His now-free cock pointed upwards, curving slightly to the left, the foreskin drawn back over the crown. As I ghosted a breath over the tip of his shaft his stomach muscles quivered.

Leaving his trousers, I sat back on my heels and carefully removed his shoes and socks. I ran my hands over his bare feet, grinning to myself as he flinched away—obviously a ticklish spot. Slowly I moved my hands up his legs, tracing the muscles through the leather until I reached skin at mid thigh. I sat up and leant forwards over his crotch, running my tongue up the thick vein on the underside of his cock before circling the crown, as I continued to push his trousers down his legs.

Laying my forearms on the bed on either side of his hips I looked up into his face. His eyes were closed, his bottom lip caught in his teeth.

“What do you want?” I asked. His eyes opened and he gazed down at me.

“I don’t know.” His voice shook slightly. I wasn’t sure if it was down to arousal or nerves. “You naked,” he added.

I rose to my feet and turned away from him and took a couple of steps away. Bending at the waist I leant forwards to unlace my boots before toeing them off. With my back to him I slid my jeans down past my hips and wriggled them down the rest of the way, then stepped out of them, leaving my socks with them. Just clad in my briefs, my erection straining against the front of them, I turned back to him and walked slowly towards him. Using my knee to part his legs, I moved between them. My navel was at his eye level, but his gaze had moved further down.

He licked his lips as his hands moved to my briefs. Dipping one hand beneath the stretched material he cupped my balls, rolling them gently in his fingers. The tip of my cock peeked over the top of the elastic, a bead of

precum leaking from the slit. Slowly he slid his hand up my shaft while his free hand began to peel down my briefs. I used my own hand to help lower them from the other side while he continued to stroke, until they fell past my knees to the floor.

He let go, shuffled back up the bed, and lay down; I crawled up over him until our hips were level. Bracing my hands on the bed above his shoulders, I gently lowered my body onto his. As the erect lengths of our cocks pressed together I leant forwards and captured his lips, pushing my tongue between them; our kisses deepened as I began to grind against him. I could feel him rocking his hips against the building pressure, and he groaned into my mouth. Dropping onto my right elbow I moved my left hand down his body, slipping it under his hip and rolling him towards me so we lay side by side.

There was less friction this way, but I moved my hand between us, coating my fingers in the fluid leaking from our pricks before grasping both our lengths and squeezing them together. I started to stroke, finding a rhythm that complemented the rocking of our hips as we thrust against each other. Slowly I began to increase both the pressure and the speed. Nick pressed forward into the kiss we shared, biting gently down on my lip and panting slightly. Suddenly his leg quivered and he pulled away, giving a strangled gasp as he spilled over. I kept stroking, chasing my own release, my hand now slick with his cum.

“Nick!” I gasped as I followed him over the edge.

In the aftermath of our climax we held each other, sharing leisurely kisses as our heart rates returned to normal and our breaths no longer came in shallow pants. Releasing him, I rolled over and grabbed the box of tissues by the bed to clean us up. When I turned back, Nick had collapsed onto his back, his arm raised with the back of his hand shielding his eyes. Gently, I wiped his spend from his stomach and groin before turning my attention to myself. I tossed the used tissues into the bin and shuffled back over to him, lying on my side and running my fingers up and down his chest.

“You okay?” I whispered.

“Yeah,” he said. A tired smile crept across his face and he lifted his hand from his eyes. Looking directly at me he added, “More than okay.”

“Let’s get into bed before we fall asleep on top of it,” I suggested, sitting up and tugging at the duvet. Nick slid sideways so his legs dangled off the bed before standing.

“Whoa!” He grabbed for the headboard, unsteady on his feet. “Head rush!” I couldn’t help laughing as I folded back the duvet.

“Get in,” I suggested as I tucked my own legs under the covers and lay down on my back. He slid back across the mattress, curled into my body and resting his head against my shoulder.

“Night,” he said sleepily, pressing a final kiss to my chest.

I reached for the bedside light and plunged the room into darkness.

Carefully, I leant over him, studying his familiar features. His eyes were closed, a faint smile brushed his lips. One arm was thrown up above his head, resting on the pillow. This was my best friend. My straight best friend. In the cold light of day I should have had regrets at what we’d done. What I’d done. At the very least I should have felt a little guilty; but that was not what I was feeling.

I bent my head lower, my stubbled chin grazing his. I could feel his breath on my skin. Slowly his eyes opened. I found myself holding my breath, waiting for his reaction. He didn’t speak, but his smile widened. I pulled back slightly as he brought his hand down, gently skimming the side of my face and for a second cupping my chin. His eyes remained locked on mine as his hand kept moving down towards my chest, where his fingers came to rest, tracing the rosebud tattoo over my heart.

Suddenly his expression changed. His smile faltered and his eyes widened with panic. In seconds he had rolled out from under me and was halfway across the room, picking up his clothes as he headed towards the bathroom.

As he slammed the door behind him I flopped down onto my back. My stomach churned unhappily. Had last night ruined everything? Lying in the sweat-stained sheets, the scent of him around me, the guilt finally caught up with me. I felt like a complete shit. No matter what I felt about him I should have kept my hands off. Even if he had been the one to come on to me, the one who started things, I should have said no.

A heavy thump as Roger landed at the end of the bed pulled my mind away from the regrets and recriminations that were keeping my mind busy. He stalked his way up my body and stood over me, his whiskered nose against mine, glinting green eyes looking accusingly at me as he meowed loudly.

“What do I do, Roger?” I asked, pushing my fingers into his thick ginger coat. His only response was to meow again. Not getting any further response from me he tucked his front legs under him and settled down, starting to purr as I kept stroking him.

After a while I realised I couldn't hear the shower running, or any other sound from the bathroom. Glancing at the clock I realised Nick had been in there for the last half hour. I dislodged the cat, who gave a disgruntled yowl and glared as I sat up and swung my legs out of bed. Pulling on a pair of boxers and an old T-shirt, I padded barefoot over the wooden floorboards towards the bathroom. Pressing my ear to the door I could hear nothing from within.

“I'm going down to put some coffee on; come down when you're ready,” I called through the closed door. Not waiting for a response, I headed for the kitchen to busy myself with the kettle and then fished about in the fridge to find something edible for breakfast.

As I poured water into two mugs, I heard the sound of a car horn beep in the road. Seconds later came the sound of the bolt on the front door sliding open, followed by the gentle click of the door closing. I reached the lounge window in time to see Nick, bag in hand, duck into the waiting taxi. He didn't look back.

For the rest of the weekend I felt like I was treading water, and not very successfully at times. Somehow I managed to get through a raucous family meal for my birthday, a fake smile plastered across my face. Thankfully, my niece and nephews garnered most of the attention from the older members of the family.

I spent much of my time carefully refusing to meet Paula's eye, or to be cornered by her. After her warning last night and from the expression on her face, she knew something had happened.

The whole time I kept checking my mobile, but it remained silent, devoid of the usual stream of inconsequential texts that Nick and I usually exchanged.

Saturday night was spent sitting morosely on the sofa in the company of the cat, wondering what the hell I'd been thinking. My mood became bleaker as I dwelt on my own stupidity: allowing one drunken night when I couldn't keep my hands or dick to myself to ruin my closest friendship. I must have dialled Nick's number a dozen times that evening, wanting to talk to him, to check if he was all right; but I chickened out each time before placing the call.

Eventually, I crawled into bed. Nick's scent still lingered in the room, despite the clean bedding, and each time I closed my eyes, my mind replayed scenes from the night before. I slept eventually, only to be taunted by dreams of what I'd lost and what could never be.

I woke early, determined to keep Nick out of my head. Throwing on my running gear I warmed up in the back garden before heading out to the park. At that hour my only companions were dog walkers and a group of birdwatchers. I spent the rest of the day in the garden, digging out the lawn mower and tackling the overgrown grass before trimming the beech hedge that separated my house from my neighbours. By the time I fell into bed that night I was exhausted, and slept deeply with Roger perched precariously on my hip.

The drumming of rain on the windows woke me. Opening the blinds revealed a heavy grey sky, in sharp contrast to the sunshine of the weekend. As I headed for the bathroom I glanced at my phone, where it lay on the dresser recharging. Four voice-mail messages all from my sister, which I deleted without listening to. There was nothing from Nick.

As I showered I tried to get myself together. I had to see him today; the working week always started with a breakfast meeting to review the current projects. I needed to hold it together, to be professional.

Monday morning traffic was a bitch, and I arrived just in time to grab a coffee and slide into an empty seat at the long table in the boardroom. Graham Anderson, the company's director, sat at the head of the table, with Nick on his right-hand side. From my position I could see that he looked paler than usual, dark circles stood out under eyes which lacked their usual shine. His hands were in constant movement, either tapping the side of the white coffee cup,

shuffling the papers in front of him or aimlessly twirling a pen between his fingers. At first I kept glancing at him, trying to make eye contact, but he never looked in my direction.

As usual we went round the table, each of the managers reporting on the position with the current projects. I kept my own report short; it was a miracle that I got it out at all. Afterwards, I hadn't a clue what I'd said.

The meeting started to wind down and I glanced again at Nick, who was still carefully studying the paper in front of him.

"Which brings us to any other business," Graham's tone lightened. "I have just one item. On a personal note and on behalf of the firm, I'd like to congratulate Nick on his engagement. It's about time that Michelle made an honest man of you." He paused to smile at Nick before adding, "Now if no one has anything else, I suggest we get to work."

Graham clapped Nick on the back, as he headed towards the door. The other project managers offered their congratulations while they gathered papers and pushed back chairs ready to leave. I sat motionless, my chest felt tight; each breath was an effort.

"Simon, you all right?" Brent asked as he pushed his chair back from the seat next to me.

"Yes, fine," I lied. Rising from my chair I looked to where Nick still sat, accepting the good wishes of the others. I walked over to him and put one hand on his shoulder.

"Congratulations." The single word was all that I could get out, but even that sounded hollow. Insincere.

"Thank you." Nick flushed slightly as he spoke. Although he looked up at me, he couldn't meet my eyes, staring over my shoulder instead.

I headed for the door without looking back.

I'd got as far as the lift when I realised I needed to talk to him. I needed to clear the air between us at least. With a sigh I turned and headed towards his office.

Unusually, the door was closed. Just outside, Amie sat at her desk, partially

hidden by the computer screen. She looked up at me over the top of it with a worried expression.

“Is he in?” I asked

“Sorry Si, he’s busy.” She winced as she said it. “Conference call.” Amie couldn’t lie to save her life. I raised an eyebrow at her and waited. Eventually she sighed and admitted, “I’m sorry, he specifically said he didn’t want to see you.”

“Fine,” I said curtly, turned on my heel and stalked away. I could hear her footsteps as she followed me out of the office. Grabbing me by one hand, she pulled me into an empty meeting room and closed the door behind us.

“What the hell happened?” she demanded. Standing in front of the door, hands on her hips, she glared at me.

“Back off,” I warned. “It’s nothing to do with you. If you really must know, you need to ask Nick. It’s up to him if he tells you.”

“You think I haven’t? I can’t get him to talk to me at all. I only knew about the engagement because Michelle changed her status on Facebook. When I congratulated him this morning he just shrugged, said he didn’t want to be disturbed and that included if you came by. Then he barricaded himself in the office.”

“Amie, I can’t.” I shook my head. “Look, it’s complicated. Just, I don’t know, give him some time.”

“And that’s what you’re doing? Giving him time?”

“Yes, no, he doesn’t want to talk to me at all, I am just going to have to live with that.”

“Si, what happened?” she asked more gently.

“I made a mistake,” I sighed, closing my eyes and rubbing my forehead. “A horrible, drunken, mistake which I don’t think Nick will forgive me for. I’ve probably ruined our friendship completely.”

“Hey.” Her hand gripped my forearm. “If this mistake is what I think it is, then chances are you didn’t make it alone. You can’t turn back time and you can’t undo what’s done. You just have to live with it. Maybe you’re right and

giving him time is the way to go. But, seriously, you've got to remember you aren't responsible for him, he's an adult and he can make his own decisions."

"I know, I just...Amie, what if I've ruined everything?" Not for the first time since Saturday morning tears pricked my eyes and I blinked rapidly trying to chase them away.

"I don't know. It's a mess—that's for sure, but whatever happens you move forward. Now, we've both got work to do. I'd give you a hug, but we both know that's not proper office behaviour." She squeezed my arm again before she left, shutting the door behind her and giving me time to pull myself together before I headed out to the job site.

The week dragged. I didn't go near the office and instead of just supervising the project I got involved with the renovation work, everything from hauling bricks to plastering. I did anything to keep myself from brooding, doing enough hard work to tire myself out so that I didn't even have the energy to think. Evenings were the hardest, and most nights I ended up settled into a silent sulk in front of the television with a beer or two for company. Roger, having gauged my mood, gave me a wide berth, save for his regular demands for food. I'd given up checking my phone. The one person I wanted to hear from didn't want to talk to me, or even text.

Leaving the site on Wednesday evening, Pete, the banks man responsible for ensuring safe movement of vehicles on the site, leant into the open window of my car.

"You're playing tonight aren't you? We've got a pitch at six o'clock."

"Sure," I agreed. The physical exercise would help wear me out if nothing else.

"Great, Ryan's playing, Jim from accounts is in, and Nick. That gives us enough players and a ref. We can have a full five-a-side game with fifteen minutes each way."

My heart sunk; I wanted to change my mind but he'd already pulled away from the window. Before waving me on, he tapped his hand on the roof of the car and called out, "Later."

I cursed under my breath just about all the way home. There was just enough time to change into a clean tracksuit and throw my football kit into the bag before heading back out.

The men's locker room in the sports centre was crowded. A combination of swimmers, those using the gym, and the evening football crowd meant there was little space to change. All the private cubicles were already occupied. Moving to the far corner, I chose an open locker on the lower tier and toed off my trainers before kicking them inside. I pulled out my football kit and began to change. I settled my jersey into place, bent and picked up my boots, then turned as I straightened up.

Nick stood motionless on the opposite side of the changing room, staring at me, like a rabbit caught in the headlights. The colour in his face drained away as his expression changed from his initial shock to something that was a mixture of embarrassment, guilt, and fear. Obviously Pete hadn't told him I'd be playing. For all I knew Pete had no idea of our falling out. For a second I thought Nick was going to turn and run. I wanted to go over, to talk to him, tell him everything would be okay, that we could forget what happened and just be friends, but it felt like my feet were glued to the floor.

The door opened behind him and a hand landed on his shoulder, making him jump.

"Come on Evans," Jim's face appeared over Nick's shoulder. "Get a move on, pitch is ours in five minutes."

Nick was given no choice as he was propelled forwards to the central bank of benches. I turned back and stuffed the rest of my things into my locker. Then I headed, as fast as I could in my stocking feet on the slippery floor, towards the exit that led to the outside pitches and tennis courts.

Outside in the cool evening air I leant with my back against the brick wall of the building, berating myself for my stupidity and cowardice.

By the time the rest of the guys had reached the pitch, I'd put on my boots and was going through my warm-up routine. I barely looked up from where I was sitting on the Astroturf, bent forward with my hands round my left foot, stretching out my hamstrings and calf muscles. Around me everyone else got

on with their own warm-up routines, until Jim, who was acting as referee, blew his whistle.

Pete and Ryan, who were acting as captains, picked out their teams. I was the first person selected by Ryan, and found myself holding my breath waiting to see whose team Nick would be on. Usually I played a defensive role, whilst he played attack. On opposing teams we would be marking each other, which wouldn't be easy for either of us. Pete called Tom, a short and stocky but effective forward with a good turn of speed. As Tom made his way to stand by Pete, Ryan called out Nick's name. He didn't look at me as he came to join us. The rest of the teams fell into place quickly and we headed to opposite ends of the pitch.

“Okay,” Ryan said as we huddled round him. “Square formation. Hitesh and Nick take the forward positions; Si and I will be the back pair. I'll take the right side as Tom's a left footer and will be my opposite number, and he's not fast so I can keep up with him. Dave, you okay taking goal?”

“Yep, fine by me.” Dave accepted his position as the rest of us nodded our agreement as Jim blew his whistle again.

“Good luck team,” Ryan said as we all jogged off to take our positions.

Nick got first touch of the ball and headed up the pitch, passing between himself and Hitesh, trying to dodge the defending players. For much of the first half of the game our team had possession, I only got to touch the ball twice, both times to kick it wide away from our goal. Which was probably a good job as I was spending more time than I should watching Nick play. By the time Jim signalled a five-minute break for half time, Nick was flushed and short of breath and our team were two nil up. Wordlessly, I handed him my water bottle and he accepted with a tight smile. Head tipped back, his Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed, sending my mind to places that I was trying so hard to avoid. I bent down to fiddle with the laces of my boots to stop myself staring.

The second half was very different, Pete had obviously spoken his team at half time and their play was much more aggressive. Ryan and I were kept busy, but it was Dave's goal-keeping skills that kept us ahead.

Jim blew the whistle again and called out that he was adding three minutes of extra time. Nick had possession of the ball, but the other team's defender was directly in front of him and Hitesh was blocked on the other side. Feinting and turning, Nick passed the ball back to me. Looking around I steadied the ball under my foot, before drawing it back to pass it to Ryan who was free on my right side. I hadn't realised how fast Pete was closing in. As I moved to strike the ball away he dived, sliding towards me across the turf with both feet. I got the ball clear before the studs of his boots collided with the inside of my left ankle. The impact sent me tumbling forwards. I flung out my left arm, braced to try and cushion the impact of the fall.

Lying with my face planted in the ground, my legs tangled with the opposing player's, I swore deeply as pain radiated down my leg from knee to ankle. Carefully, I began to push myself up, taking my weight on my left arm. A flicker in the corner of my vision was the only warning I had as Tom, who had been running over, slipped on the artificial grass, his arms wind milling around as he fell. The impact knocked the breath out my lungs as the full weight of another player landed on my shoulder. There was a loud popping noise and then pain, white-hot pain, shooting down my left arm. My vision blurred and everything went grey.

"Can you hear me?" The voice was distant, as though someone was speaking from the end of a tunnel. "Si, open your eyes for me."

My stomach rolled as I tried to sit up, bile rising and burning the back of my throat.

"Gonna throw up," I muttered weakly.

"Okay, lie still. Jim's coming back now with the first aider."

After explaining that the problem was with my shoulder, I was helped gently to a sitting position. Pain radiated out from my shoulder, my left arm hung useless by my side, and even the slightest movement sent sharp spikes of pain down it.

"I think we'll need to get you to hospital," the first aider advised without even touching me. "Your shoulders are uneven and I can see a lump there." She pointed to where the top of my arm met my body. "Can anyone take you up to casualty or do I need to call an ambulance?"

“I’ll take him,” Nick volunteered before anyone else could speak. I wasn’t in any state to raise objections. It was all I could do to stop myself from either throwing up or passing out.

Pete went to get our things from our lockers as Ryan and Hitesh gently helped me to my feet. Nick grabbed his car keys out of his bag as soon as Pete returned and ran off to bring his vehicle round to the pitch. Carefully I was assisted into the front seat of the car. With care Nick reached around me and pulled the seat belt across my body.

“Let us know how he is,” Ryan said as he slung our bags onto the back seat and slammed the door.

“Will do,” Nick replied as he put the car in gear and slowly drove away. Although Nick drove carefully he couldn’t avoid the uneven road surface or sleeping policemen. Each time the car jerked, pain pulsed in my shoulder. I tried to keep quiet but occasionally it became too much and I cried out.

“You doing okay?” Nick asked as we pulled up at a set of traffic lights, and took his eyes from the road momentarily to look at me. I could only manage a weak smile in response. “Okay, couple more minutes and we’ll be there.”

Nodding in a response was a mistake. Pain flared again in my shoulder and shot down my arm.

“Fuck!” I swore. I couldn’t stop the tears that leaked from my eyes.

Nick pulled the car into one of the drop-off bays outside the Accident and Emergency Department, switched off the engine and ran from the car into the entrance. He returned with a porter, who pushed a wheelchair. Carefully they transferred me from the car into the chair.

“I’ll be back shortly. I’m going to go park the car properly,” Nick said as the porter wheeled me into the hospital.

The waiting area was crowded, a sign above the main desk advised there was a two-hour wait and recommended patients attending with non-urgent issues see their own doctor. The porter wheeled me straight past reception to a series of curtained cubicles.

“Triage,” he said, pushing me through an open curtain and parking the wheelchair by an empty bed. “Can you get up yourself?”

“I think so.” Using my right hand to grip the arm of the chair and push myself up, I staggered to my feet. The porter steadied me as I shuffled round and rested against the edge of the bed. It was too high for me to get up on too. “Maybe not,” I admitted.

“No problems, let’s have you back in the chair for now until you’ve been assessed.” I turned back and sank gratefully into the chair.

I wasn’t waiting long until a young nurse came through to examine me. After taking my details he asked me to describe what had happened and how much pain I was in. Then he carefully cut away my shirt and looked closely at my shoulder, but didn’t touch it.

“Okay, we’ll start by getting something for the pain, then we’ll take you to x-ray. I’m pretty certain you’ve dislocated your shoulder. If the x-rays confirm it, then the doctor will manipulate the shoulder to reduce the dislocation.”

If I had had two working arms I’d have hugged him at the promise of pain relief.

Despite the injection of morphine, the trip to x-ray was uncomfortable but confirmed that my shoulder was dislocated. On my return to the casualty department I was taken straight through to a private room and helped onto the bed, the top of which was tilted so that I was sitting upright.

“The doctor will be with you in a second,” the nurse waiting in the room advised. “Do you want to see your partner before they put your shoulder back in?”

“Partner?” I asked vaguely.

“Yes, he’s waiting outside.” The nurse hadn’t noticed my confusion. Instead of waiting for me to reply she went to the door and beckoned to someone outside.

Nick looked uncertain as he approached the bed. There were no chairs, so he stood beside me with his hands bunched in the tracksuit bottoms he’d obviously slipped on over his football kit at sometime between dropping me off and coming back.

“Partner?” I asked raising my eyebrow.

“Family only,” he explained.

“And you didn’t think, say, telling them you were my brother would be a better option?”

He shrugged, looking slightly embarrassed, before changing the subject. “What have they said?”

“It’s dislocated, the doctor is going to reduce it then I can get out of here. The drugs they gave me are working, it’s not nearly as bad now, but I still can’t move my arm. Getting the x-rays hurt like...”

“Si, I’m sorry,” he interrupted with a whisper. He was no longer looking at me. Instead he seemed to be focused on a small area of the bed next to my leg.

“What for exactly?” I couldn’t quite keep the sharpness out my voice, but regretted it immediately when I saw him flinch.

“For what happened.”

“For all of it?”

“Yes—No—Well—” he stuttered. “I just...I can’t.” He looked directly at me, shaking his head. There was a slightly wild cast to his eyes: part confusion, part anxiety.

“It happened. We can’t undo it. We just have to live with it as best we can.”

I would have said more but the doors opened and a small group of people entered the room. Nick was quietly ushered out as they gathered ’round the bed. The doctor introduced himself and explained what they would do. Having determined that the morphine was working effectively, the top of the bed was lowered, and I was rolled onto my stomach with my dislocated shoulder hanging off the side of the bed.

My arm was supported until it hung down, pointing towards the floor. I was asked to turn my head away and a nurse began to babble at me, trying to get me to join in conversation, I guess to take my mind of what was happening. The doctor had taken hold of my arm by the elbow and wrist.

“Relax,” he advised, which given the circumstances wasn’t even remotely possible. Slowly but firmly he began to pull the arm downward away from my shoulder. The pain—which had dulled to a throb—began to build again as he

did. Suddenly there was a popping noise and the pain eased suddenly. I let out a huge breath I hadn't realised I'd been holding.

Still holding my arm, the doctor bent the elbow as the nursing staff rolled me back over and tilted the bed again to a sitting position. My arm was brought to rest on my chest before being cradled in a sling, which tied behind my neck.

"There you go, now that sling has to stay in place for about four weeks. We'll see you in Orthopaedic Outpatients and arrange for some physiotherapy," the doctor advised. "I'll arrange for some anti-inflammatory pain relief medication and the nursing staff will discharge you."

I nodded in response to his instructions. The lack of pain combined with the morphine was suddenly making me feel very tired.

I must have dozed off. A gentle hand shaking my arm woke me.

"Hey," I mumbled sleepily, squinting through half-opened eyes. Nick looked down at me, a frown creasing his forehead.

"Time to go, are you okay to get up?" I nodded sitting upright and swinging my legs round and off the bed. As I pushed myself to my feet I went dizzy, stars sprinkling my vision as I lurched forward. "Steady!" Nick slipped his arm around my waist, holding me up.

"Head rush." I grinned weakly.

Still holding on to me, he guided me towards the door. Stopping by reception to collect my belongings and sign the discharge forms, the nurse smiled as she handed me my prescription.

"Right, Mr. Sharpe, you've a check-up with Outpatients on Friday morning at 10:00 a.m. In the meantime, that sling stays in place and you don't use your arm." Turning to Nick she added, "He's not to be left alone for the next twenty-four hours." Nick nodded in agreement and steered me away from the desk.

"I'm sure that James or Harry will come and stay with me," I began to make plans so that Nick could go home. "Paula can probably do tomorrow after she's got the kids off to nursery."

“I can stay,” Nick said quietly.

“There’s no need, really, I am sure my friends have it covered.” I felt him tense next to me as soon as the words were out of my mouth. “Sorry, that came out wrong.”

“It’s fine,” he said coldly, clearly lying. “You’d better phone them so there’s someone there when I drop you home.”

He didn’t say another word, silently helping me into the car and digging my phone out my bag on the back seat. As he climbed into the driver seat I could see the hurt expression on his face.

“Nick, I didn’t mean...”

“Si, leave it. You did mean it. You don’t consider me a friend anymore.” He waited for me to call James, who agreed to pack an overnight bag and go straight round to mine. Then without saying a word, Nick turned up the radio and backed out the parking space. I slouched down into my seat and concentrated on the view out the window. The silence between us was painfully uncomfortable.

What I couldn’t tell him was that he was right. I didn’t consider him a friend anymore; I didn’t want him as a friend. I wanted him as a lover, a partner. I wanted what I knew I couldn’t have.

That night I discovered two very important things: it’s virtually impossible to find a comfortable position to sleep in when you are in pain with your arm in a sling; and that the only comfortable position, sitting bolt upright, isn’t one where sleep is actually possible.

When James looked in on me at eight the following morning I was sore, tired and in an extremely bad mood. After my less than polite response to his cheerful greeting and request to know how I had slept, he tactfully withdrew and left me to drink the coffee he’d bought me. I complained to Roger, who had taken up residence at the foot of my bed, about my situation, but being a cat, he just ignored me and carried on washing himself before settling down with a final glare that told me, quite clearly, that I was nothing more than an inconvenience interrupting his sleeping time.

Although it was my left arm that was completely out of commission, I hadn't realised how difficult it was to do the simplest of tasks one handed. When putting on my dressing gown, I settled for tying it tightly round my waist to compensate for the fact that one sleeve hung limply, I headed for the bathroom. I was sweaty and sticky, having not had a chance to shower after the football match. Brushing my teeth, I glanced mournfully at the shower. I thought that I might manage a shallow bath, but what I wanted was to stand under the hot spray of water, letting it help ease nagging pain that persisted in the tightly knotted muscles around my shoulder and neck. I winced slightly as I realised that washing my hair was going to require assistance.

From downstairs I heard Paula let herself in, followed by a muted conversation with James and then the sound of his car starting in the road outside as he headed off, probably with a sigh of relief.

"Simon, breakfast in five minutes," Paula called from the bottom of the stairs in her most no-nonsense tone. Sighing, I left the sanctuary of the bathroom.

"Eat that," she commanded, sliding a plate with a slice of buttered toast in front of me as I sat down at the kitchen table. She'd cut the toast into triangles. I picked one of them up and put the corner to my mouth, taking a small, unenthusiastic bite.

"You can have pain killers after you've eaten." She put the bottle and a glass of water on the table between us as she took the seat opposite. She studied me as I slowly munched my way through the food she'd put in front of me. As I brushed the crumbs off my fingers she took out two of the tablets and offered them to me.

"I'm not one of your kids," I snapped. All I got in response was a slight tilt of her head and a raised eyebrow that told me clearly that in her view I was behaving like a five-year-old.

"Thank you," I muttered, taking the tablets from her and reaching for the water.

"Now, do you want to tell me what the hell is going on with you?"

"Nothing is going on with me." I pointed to my arm. "Football injury, accidental."

“Not what I meant.”

“So what did you mean?” I rubbed my forehead with my good hand.

“Si,” she said more gently. “I spoke to Nick last night. He sounded gutted, did something happen between you?”

The kindness and concern in her voice choked me up. I knew I’d behaved badly, not just by what I said last night, but what happened between us last weekend. But I wasn’t ready to talk about it, it was too raw.

“I need to go and lie down.” Without looking at her I stood up and headed for the lounge. Settling in the corner of the sofa, a cushion behind my back to support my shoulder, I pulled the fleece throw over me and shut my eyes. I heard Paula follow me out of the kitchen and after a rather pointed silence head back to the kitchen, from where I heard the occasional scrape of paper as she turned over the pages of the book she was reading.

Despite the discomfort from my shoulder, the lack of sleep caught up with me and I dozed on and off throughout the morning. Paula woke me at lunch time, insisting I eat the bowl of soup she’d made and take more tablets. She didn’t push further to find out what had happened between Nick and me, but I could see from her expression she wanted to ask.

The afternoon found me back on the sofa, my mind being numbed by the reruns of American crime shows which seemed the best programmes on offer. Just before four, Paula came through and took a seat at the opposite end of the sofa.

“I need to get going in a bit,” she said. “I asked Nick if he would mind coming to sit with you for a bit this evening, but he says he can’t. He’s being as evasive as you are. I’m not sure what happened between you, but I warned you how he felt about you.”

“How he felt about me? He’s my friend, nothing more. Or he was anyway. I might have put my foot in it last night,” I confessed.

“Just last night?”

I nodded. I really didn’t want to tell her how badly I’d screwed up so far as Nick was concerned.

“Will you be okay on your own this evening? I can come back later if you need me.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m going order out for a pizza and relax. I’ll call you if I need anything.”

I never did get ’round to ordering pizza. Instead I spent my evening staring at my phone wishing it would ring, because I didn’t have the guts to phone Nick and clear the air myself. Then I dragged myself off to another night of broken sleep.

I woke on Friday determined to move on. If Nick could put what happened behind him and move on with his life, so could I. My arm was still sore, but the rest of me felt more like my usual self. Not least because I’d managed to have a shower and wash my hair, protecting my shoulder by wrapping my arm, sling and all, in a black bin bag. I had to take the sling off in order to slip on a T-shirt, though. I didn’t think that going topless to my outpatient appointment was a good idea.

The hospital was busy. It appeared that all patients were told their appointments were at ten in the morning, with the nursing staff then sorting out some sort of order on a “first come, first served” basis. It was almost noon before I was seen by a rather frazzled looking junior doctor, who removed the sling and manipulated my arm to check my shoulder was still in place. The doctor advised that the sling had to stay on for three more weeks, in the meantime I’d be referred for physiotherapy but they didn’t need to see me again.

I took the bus back home again, calling work to let them know that with luck I would be able to work from the office on Monday. By the time I arrived home my arm was aching from the doctor’s ministrations. I grabbed a sandwich, mainly so I could take some medication before settling back on the sofa. Unable to face another afternoon of daytime television, I switched on the stereo and picked up my book from the coffee table where I’d left it.

I was woken suddenly by a knock on the door. Glancing at the clock I realised I must have been asleep for at least an hour, probably a result of the

pain killers. My book had fallen, still open, onto the floor beside the sofa. Carefully I rose to my feet, wishing that I could roll my shoulders and stretch out the crick in my neck.

“Hang on,” I called out as I made my way to the door. Pulling it open I was surprised to see Michelle standing on the doorstep.

“Erm, hi. Shouldn’t you be at work?” I blurted out before I could censor my mouth.

“I’m playing hooky,” she replied with a tight grin. “Can I come in? I need to talk to you, and this was the only way I could do it without Nick knowing.”

Part of me wished I could say no and shut the door on her, after all this was the woman who got the man that I wanted. Instead I nodded and stepped back to let her in.

“I was just about to put the kettle on when you knocked,” I lied as I shut the front door behind her. “Do you want coffee?” Without waiting for a response I turned and walked towards the kitchen.

“How are you feeling?” she asked as she took a seat at the kitchen table.

“A bit sore. It’s frustrating more than anything, but at least it’s my left arm.” Keeping my back to her, I busied myself with filling the kettle and spooning instant coffee into mugs as I waited for it to boil.

“Congratulations, by the way.” I spoke simply to fill the growing uncomfortable silence.

“Thank you, it was...” she paused before she continued, “...unexpected.”

“Unexpected?”

“Yes, we’ve talked about it, in the past, but neither of us felt it was necessary. I mean, maybe, one day, if say children came along, but we were quite happy as we were. Something happened to change his mind.”

I had no response to that. I knew full well what had changed his mind. I’d seen the panic in his eyes on Saturday morning, that “what have I done” moment.

My hand was shaking as I poured the water into the two mugs in front of me. I didn’t want to turn back around and face her but there wasn’t much choice.

“What makes you think that?” I asked carefully. Gathering both mugs in my right hand, I took a deep breath and turned around. I put the mugs onto the table, detouring to the fridge for milk before I sat down.

“I know him.” She shrugged. Placing her hands round the mug she looked deeply into the dark brown drink. “You slept together didn’t you?” she asked without raising her eyes.

I suddenly inhaled the mouthful of coffee I’d just taken, spluttering and choking as the hot liquid scalded my throat. My mind was screaming a million things at me, mainly along the lines of “shit, what do I tell her”. Luckily I was prevented from having to say anything as she continued.

“I don’t actually know why I am asking. I know you slept together.”

“You do? He told you? I mean, well, erm...” I trailed off realising if she didn’t actually know I’d just confirmed it for her.

“No, he didn’t say anything about it. I know him Si, sometimes I think I know him better than he knows himself. The proposal, it couldn’t have been a bigger announcement that he’d done something he shouldn’t have, even if he’d screamed it from the rooftops.”

“It’s a big jump, from having done something wrong to, well—” For some reason I couldn’t say what we’d done out loud.

“Not really.” She shrugged. “I knew you were together on Friday night. When I spoke to him on Saturday he was working, but he proposed just about as soon as I got my foot through the door on Sunday evening. He had the ring ready and everything.” She held out her left hand; the ring, a single solitaire diamond set in white gold, circled her forth finger. “He looked so relieved when I said yes. That was when I knew. The other night confirmed it. When he phoned from the hospital to tell me you were hurt. Well, you’d have thought that he was the one who’d actually caused your injury from the way he was acting. Then later, when he came home, he didn’t want to be there. He wanted to be with you; I could see guilt for something written all over his face.”

“But you didn’t ask him?”

“No, I didn’t say anything about it; I just watched him. He’s not happy; he’s not sleeping. He’s barely looked at me, let alone, well, for a newly engaged couple you’d expect some romance. He hasn’t even touched me.”

“I’m sorry...I...just...” I shook my head. “I really don’t know what to do or say.”

“Look, I’m not here to threaten you, or warn you to keep away from him. I just needed to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“Why what?” she asked.

“Why do you want to talk to me? I mean, given what happened, if you aren’t warning me off or wanting to rant at me, I would have thought I was the last person you’d want to talk to right now.”

Her responding laugh was hollow. “I’m not sure how to explain this,” she began. “Just bear with me whilst I try.” She returned to staring into her mug. I picked up my drink and took a large gulp whilst I waited for her to continue.

“Although we’re a couple...more than that he’s my friend, probably my best friend. I just want him happy, but he’s a long way from that at the moment. Looking back, it seems to have been a while since he was happy. He tries to hide it as much he can, but I know him well enough to see it. It’s not hard; he’s always worn his flaws on his sleeve. He throws all his energy into his work. He brings it home in an evening and at weekends, like he’s using it block the rest of his life out. On the surface he seems fine, but even when he smiles it doesn’t touch his eyes. The only time I ever see him properly happy is when he’s talking about you, or when he’s spent time with you. Hell, even when he gets a text from you. I’ve done a lot of thinking in the last week and while I do love him, I’ve realised that I’m not in love with him, and I’m not going to marry him.”

“So what are you going to do, and where do I come in?” I shook my head, finding it difficult to take in what she was saying.

“I don’t want to hurt him, but I’m certain I’m going to,” she continued as though she’d not even heard me. “Right now he’s scared and confused. We’ve been together for eight years and we’ve been through a lot, but I’ve never seen him like this. It’s as though he’s standing at the top of a cliff. Behind him it’s safe, comfortable, and familiar. In front of him is the unknown and he doesn’t know whether to jump. Part of him is telling him to step back, away from the

edge, return to what he knows, but I can see that part of him wants to jump.” She smiled sadly at me as she continued. “That’s why I’m here really. I suppose I am at the top of the cliff with him.”

“And you’re going to stop him falling, keep him safe?”

“No.” She shook her head, unconsciously twisting the engagement ring. Looking directly at me, a hint of a challenge in her expression, she continued bluntly, “I’m going to push him off the cliff. I’m just hoping that you’ll catch him when he falls.”

“Catch him?” I echoed, my mind whirling from what she was asking. Could I do that? Was that what he wanted? Was that what I wanted?

“Yes.” Her head tilted to one side as she watched me. “He deserves a chance to be truly happy, and so do I. In a way I’m as bad as he is. We’re just drifting along because it’s easy, and, well, I’d like a chance to find someone I can be madly in love with, and who can love me the same way in return. So, I am going to break of the engagement and get him to move out. I’m going to suggest that he come here.”

“But he doesn’t want me, not that way. He isn’t gay, for God’s sake. I think part of last weekend was him trying to prove that to himself,” I babbled.

“No, I don’t think he’s gay. Then again, I don’t think he’s completely straight. His parents wouldn’t have approved, and I think the reason our relationship has drifted so long is in part because it’s easy—and he doesn’t have to face the unknown. I don’t know whether it’s just you or whether he’s had feelings for other men, but he thinks of you as more than a friend. That much is obvious.”

“You can’t just decide on what’s right for him. Expect him to come running to me if you dump him.”

“You love him though?” The direct question threw me completely.

Did I love him? I sure as hell had missed him this last week. I thought about him, well, it seemed like all the damn time. I wanted him physically, but more than that I wanted to share things with him—from something I’d seen or heard, to a movie curled up together on the sofa.

“I don’t do relationships.” The automatic response came easily.

“That wasn’t the question.”

“No, but—” I looked helplessly at her. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Why not Si? Look, you’ve made it clear over the years I’ve known you that you don’t do relationships, but you’ve never really explained why.”

“Gay men don’t do relationships; we have sex,” I said bluntly.

“Bull. That’s crap; I know you don’t mean that. Something happened to you—a relationship gone badly wrong, and it’s made you too scared to try again. Instead you hide behind the mantra of having one-night stands or pickups only. You’re the opposite of Nick, he might have all his faults and emotions on show, but you’ve buried your emotions so deeply it’s a wonder anyone can get close to you. It’s time to dig them up Simon. For Nick’s sake and for mine.”

I spent an unsettled evening lost in my own thoughts and memories. Sure I’d had relationships since I’d come out, not serious at first; I mean first loves and teenage flings rarely last. Then in my final year at university I was so sure I’d found “the one.” We moved fast, from dating to living together in a matter of weeks. He was older than me, more experienced in just about every area—including manipulation and lying, as it turned out.

I thought I’d found the person I was destined to spend the rest of my life with; instead, after nearly two years, I came home from work one night to an empty house. He’d cleared out everything: his clothes, all the items we’d bought jointly and, as I discovered later, the joint bank account he’d insisted we needed. In the three months it took me to track him down I was overwhelmed by a steady stream of overdue notices and final demands for loans I’d no recollection of taking out.

He’d used the money to buy a house at the other end of the country and move in his not-so-new boyfriend, who he’d been seeing for at least six months. To say I was gutted would be the understatement of the year. Saddled with what felt like the debt of a third world country and nursing a broken heart, I’d broken the lease on the house we’d shared and gone back to my parents’ house to lick my wounds, swearing that never again would I let someone get close enough to use me like that.

I'd spent eight years with my heart locked safely away. Sure, I'd not been a monk during that time, but no one got close. Until now it seemed. I wasn't sure when my friendship with Nick had become something more, but I'd spent a good part of the evening going over what Michelle had said. Not just about Nick but the few home truths she'd thrown in my direction. At the end of the day it came down to one thing. Did I love Nick, and was I willing to put my heart on the line for him?

My phone buzzed with an incoming text just after one in the morning. Reaching over, I read the short message from Michelle: *He's on his way to you.*

My heart seemed to stutter in my chest. I wasn't ready. I didn't think I could do this. I contemplated just letting him stay as a friend, making up the bed in the spare room and insisting he stay in there. Even as I headed to the airing cupboard to pull out a fresh sheet I knew I couldn't do it. If I was honest with myself I knew I was in too deep already. The moment Nick walked through the door tonight, on my part anyway, there wasn't going to be any going back to just being friends. The rest would depend on him.

It was not much later when he arrived. I watched from the front window as he dragged an overstuffed suitcase behind him up the front path. In the glow from the street light I could see the five o'clock shadow that covered his jaw emphasising how pale his face was. There were dark circles around his eyes, which had lost all of their usual sparkle. His shoulders were hunched over as though he was in pain. He looked completely defeated.

"Hey," I said softly as I opened the door to let him in. He didn't say anything, just followed me through the lounge to the kitchen, leaving his case at the bottom of the stairs. "Do you want a drink?" I asked, heading to the fridge.

"No, I'm fine." He hugged his arms around himself and shook his head.

"Fine?" I raised an eyebrow. "That would be the alternative version of the word then. Fucked-up, insecure, neurotic and emotional."

For a second, his lips turned up in a wry smile. "Yeah, that sounds about right." His voice was tight, as though on the verge of breaking.

Without really thinking about it, I crossed the kitchen and pulled him into a hug with my good arm. “That makes two of us, Nick.”

“Really?”

“Hell yes. Just look at us, you’re not gay and I don’t do relationships, and between us just look at the wonderful mess that we’ve made.”

“I’m sorry,” he said into my chest.

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for, this wasn’t planned by either of us. It just happened. The question is, do we finish what we started?”

“I think I’d like to try.” The wistful sound in his voice made my mind up once and for all where he’d be sleeping.

“Come on, we’re both exhausted. We can talk in the morning.”

I led him up the stairs, bypassing his suitcase, to my bedroom. There was no heat, no passion, as we both stripped to our boxers and crawled under the duvet.

In the dark, we lay, side by side; our hands sought each other’s and held on tight.

“So what now?” Nick asked eventually.

“I don’t know. What do you want?”

“I still want you, but I’m scared.”

“That makes two of us, on both counts,” I confessed.

“This last week’s been horrible. Without you it’s been like there’s been something missing, a hole where you should be.”

Leaning over I pressed a kiss onto his lips. “Sleep now, tomorrow we’ll talk, both of us, work out a way forward, how to make this work.”

Hand in hand, exhausted, we slipped into sleep.

I woke the next morning, on what saccharine romantics would probably call the first day of the rest of our lives. Beside me he slept on as I pushed myself up on my good arm and leant over him. His eyes were closed, a faint

smile brushed his lips. One arm stretched above his head, the back of his hand resting on the pillow. I felt a wash of emotion come over me, an overwhelming rightness of the situation, of having him next to me to wake up.

I bent my head towards him, allowing my stubbled chin to graze his. I could feel his warm breath on my skin. Slowly his eyes opened. Anxiety made my stomach churn as I waited for his reaction. He didn't speak, but his smile widened. I pulled back slightly as he brought his hand down, gently skimming the side of my face and for a second cupping my chin. His eyes remained fixed on mine as his hand kept moving down towards the side of my chest not covered by the sling; his fingers came to rest, tracing the rosebud tattoo over my heart.

His smile widened as he leant up to capture my lips with his. It was then I realised that no matter what the future might hold, perhaps, just perhaps, we had a chance of facing it together.

THE END

(or beginning, depending on which way you want to look at it)

Author Bio

Despite studying chemistry at university and then working in several different jobs within the legal profession for the last seventeen years, K. still hasn't decided what she wants to do when she grows up. In the meantime, the various animals that own her have decided she needs a full-time job to keep them in the manner to which they've become accustomed. When they allow her any spare time she reads (anything that is put in front of her), knits (mainly socks), bakes (cupcakes), and writes (well, argues with the voices in her head as to who controls where the story goes).

Contact & Media Info

[Goodreads](#)

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RED

By Belinda McBride

Photo Description

A muscular young man in a bright red hoodie makes a tempting target. He may be far more dangerous than he seems!

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My name's "BIG Red Riding Hood," or at least that's what everyone calls me. Woke up one morning after a night out with a big WOLF of a man in bed with me. HELP me figure out how I got there, as I drank too much and don't remember. Please?! Thanks.

Sincerely,

Christopher

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, sci-fi, post-apocalyptic, dystopian

Tags: law enforcement, alpha males, shifters, switch/versatile, psychic ability, enemies-to-lovers

Content warnings: Hopefully Ever After

Word count: 13,646

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RED

By Belinda McBride

PROLOGUE

Burning pain ran through Colin Redington's shoulders and back, creeping around to his chest. His breath caught, his muscles shuddered and he gritted his teeth in determination.

"Six more, Red. That's all."

The voice of his torturer was low and brash with a trace of city around the edges. He opened his eyes and looked into the face of a merciless sadist.

"Breathe through the pain."

Obediently, Red inhaled, letting it out as he pushed the barbell straight up from his chest in an explosion of waning strength. He got through two more reps before his muscles surrendered. Frozen, he was caught in the middle, the bar wobbling precariously over his body. A strong hand steadied it.

"Two more, kid. Do it or I kick that skinny ass of yours."

Red blinked, not sure if it was tears or sweat rolling down his cheeks. Hell, it could be blood. His ears rushed with white noise, and over that hissing beat he caught the sound of jeering. Laughter. He set his jaw and pushed through one more. Exhausted and demoralized, he lowered the bar slightly, unable to continue.

The old trainer got into his face. His skin was brown from many suns past. Long lines creased his cheeks and wrinkles webbed out from the corners of his eyes. He nodded at the cluster of teenage boys who congregated around a heavy punching bag.

"Now listen, kid. You came to me because of them." His thick hair was a bolt of white against the grubby gray walls of the gym, and his dark eyes were sharp with urgency. "These here are hard times we live in. You walk out without finishing and they're on your ass before you can breathe."

"They're on my ass anyway," Red gasped. Fuck. He was trying to keep

them *out* of his ass. He hadn't expected a bunch of rich kids to show up at this hole-in-the-wall gym when their daddies' bank accounts offered much better.

The pressure of the weight lifted slightly and, to his humiliation, Red realized that the old guy had slipped his palm under the center of the bar, relieving him enough to give him a rest. "Here's the thing, Red. This world is a hella lot uglier than it was five years ago. A different world since I was a kid. Nowadays, there's predators and there's prey, and you gotta decide which you're gonna be."

There wasn't much doubt which column Red had fallen into, with his skinny shoulders and fragile white skin. The trainer must have seen Red's thoughts play over his face.

"Nope. It's not determined by your size, kid. It's all up there in your brain and in your soul and heart. You can work around weaknesses and make them strengths. You can take your strengths and make them power. Them young ones, all their strength is in each other. They're a pack. Alone, they're nothing. Together, they're frightening and dangerous. They're turning into a rape gang now, I'd guess. Someday they'll be deadly if someone don't break their ties."

Red breathed deeply, not liking the feeling of being trapped on the bench, but he had faith in the old trainer to hold the bar.

"They're kids and won't be much different as adults. Break one, you break them all. Through their egos. Their wallets. Their dicks. Take away their girlfriends..." He looked up at them, then back down at Red. "Don't suppose they have girlfriends stashed away unless their folks made arrangements. Take away their back-alley boyfriends. Find what props them up and jerk it away. That's how you'll bust 'em wide apart."

He lifted the barbell and rested it back in the rack above Red's face. His sharp gaze flicked to the side. "But that one over there... the dark one... don't look, now... he's a stone-cold killer. A hunter." He jerked his chin toward the window where Red caught the reflection of a man. Even in the glass, he was scary as hell. All dark and lean and hungry, he looked out at the world from under the dark hood over his head.

Look away! Look away!

Predator. Red's primal brain screamed, but he calmly looked up at the trainer.

"How do you survive someone like that?" His voice cracked only a little and he didn't try to hide the fear he felt.

"Gimme five more reps, and I'll tell you."

His breath caught in his chest and Red nearly laughed with the wild need to run. He reached up for the bar and the old guy spotted him through his next press. And then another. It seemed easier this time, probably because of the shot of fear zinging through his system. He reached five and nearly lost his grip.

"One more and I'll tell you how to survive that one, and others like him. Because he's not the only hunter out there, boy. And once he fixates, you won't shake him."

Automatically, Red glanced at the plate glass. To his horror, the man was watching. He was seated on a weight bench, doing curls with a massive dumbbell. His teeth were sharp and white as he strained, but he never looked away. His bare arms bulged with muscle and veins stood out in stark relief on his forearms.

Without looking away from the reflection, Red battled through one final press and then parked the barbell, remaining there on his back. The trainer leaned down, whispering in his ear so he wasn't overheard.

"Hunt *him*. Keep getting stronger, and stay smart like you are. You start thinking like a hunter, and someday you'll make him *your* prey. Not yet, kid. You aren't ready and I doubt he's really noticed you. But don't forget his face."

The trainer sat up and extended a calloused hand, drawing Red to his feet. He nodded to the floor. "Sit-ups. Give me a hundred. Now."

Red dropped to the floor and noticed that the old guy had positioned him so he had a perfect view of the dark man. He counted off and focused on a spot just over the stranger's shoulder, and Red learned every line of the predator's face. In that hundred count, he learned other things about the man, and about himself as well. He'd think about that later. Much later. Looking at the hunter

started a burn in his gut that had nothing to do with sit-ups and weight benches, and everything to do with a hunger he never knew existed.

The hunter was... beautiful.

“You finish there and we’ll start on the punching bag. Then you walk me home. Old guys like me need protection.”

CHAPTER ONE

“Hey Red!”

Colin Redington pushed through the door of the pub and shouldered his way toward a table in the back of the room. He wasn't here for social time. Tonight, Red had an errand. He lifted the hoodie back from his head and gazed around the room, sizing it up with every one of his senses, letting the feel of the atmosphere wash over him. Outside, the fog was thick and chill. He slipped out of his jacket but left his brilliant red sweatshirt on, knowing it marked him like a target in the dark room. The color scheme clashed violently with his copper-red hair, but he didn't much care.

He liked red.

The bartender spotted him and lifted a hand over his head, showing five fingers. Red nodded and headed toward a table in the back. He tossed his jacket over an empty chair, then turned it around, straddling the seat and crossing his arms over the back.

“Hey, Avery. Duke. How you boys doing tonight?” He grinned as their nervous glances slid to the single empty chair at the table. It had taken a little time, but Red had found a weak link in the group of former bullies and exploited the hell out of it. That had been long ago but they hadn't forgotten.

Nor had Red.

“Just watchin' the game. 'Niners are up by seven.” Duke nervously peeled the label of his bottle. It wasn't so different from high school—only now, Red was a detective on the raggedy restoration police force. He'd sent Duke's daddy to prison for a money-laundering operation. Duke wasn't a rich kid anymore. And before that, Red had nailed Avery's big brother for pimping his pretty little wife. Women were a rare commodity these days and he'd made a bundle on the poor female. Thanks to Red's investigation, she was in a safe haven with the means to support herself for a long time. Avery's big brother wouldn't be coming back any time soon.

Red looked at the empty chair and smiled, forcing the men to remember their friend Sam, who'd just finished a prison term for assault. He should have

chosen his victim more carefully; Red had learned plenty about defending himself over the years. Sam was more than familiar with rape gangs, only now he'd been at the other end of it. He was back in the family home, being cosseted, no doubt. But Sam would never assault an officer again. Hopefully, he'd never assault anyone ever again.

Maybe it was time to go drop in on old Sammie. Just for old times' sake.

Red had never considered himself a bully and frequently questioned his behavior toward his former tormenters. Maybe he had crossed that line—but one by one, he'd taken them out of action. He'd also done some good along the way. He'd kept others from falling victim to the pack of young marauders.

“Order up!”

He pushed his chair back from the table, pausing to look down at the men. “See ya.”

“Yeah, see you, Red.” Gazes were averted as he left. He wondered if they even realized how transparent they were in their submission.

Red started toward the bar, sensing rather than seeing the front door open. He caught a whiff of fog, the sound of traffic, and then it was just the familiar bar again. He handed the bartender a twenty and grabbed the big bag of takeout. When he turned he came face to chest with a wall. A big, wide wall encased in leather and smelling of the night and other dark things. He looked up into a face he'd memorized long ago. For the briefest moment, he was again a skinny kid doing his best to bulk up, learning to fight.

The world snapped back into place. A dark flame ignited in his gut.

“Scuze me.” He stepped to the side at the same time the other man did. Looking up, he saw the wicked gleam of a smile lurking in dark brown eyes. The man's face was still as lean and chiseled as it had been a decade before. Rich auburn hair trailed out from under a dark red watch cap.

“Hey, Little Red, going somewhere?”

Red stepped to the right, then to the left, dodging around the man. His heart hammered in his chest, old memory overtaking him. He breathed in, catching wild scents on the stranger, as though he'd recently been in the forest rather than the city. Red almost wished he were armed, but he never carried when he was off-duty.

He stopped and turned, facing the man who was watching him leave. Red saw a glimmer of surprise in his eyes and was immediately grounded again. For a long moment they merely stared. Red let his eyes wander the length of the man's body, noting the wide shoulders, narrow hips and the bulge he was packing at the vee of his legs. When his cock responded in kind, he didn't bother to hide it. He just grinned.

And then he turned, stepping through the door and out into the fog. A half block down the street he dodged into an alley and leaped nimbly up onto a fire escape, knowing his pursuer would be unlikely to look up in his search. Not many people did. After a few heartbeats of time, the door to the pub opened and the stranger stood, peering out onto the empty street. He lifted his head, scenting the air, and Red grimaced down at the plastic bag in his hand. The food had left a trail.

To his surprise, the hunter went back into the bar, eventually emerging with a bag of his own.

Interesting.

When the hunter headed off down the street, Red followed at a safe distance, grinning when the man ducked into the stairway of a cheap hotel. He slipped into the shadows of an alley and waited. A few moments later a light went on up on the third floor. At the window, the curtains flicked as though someone was peeking outside.

Much as he'd like to stay and watch, Red had to get down to Frisco's place and drop off his dinner. The old trainer wasn't doing too well these days and was waiting on his bangers and mash.

"Another night, then." He stared up at the window and smiled.

He'd been waiting for this. He was ready.

Little Red was out there in the darkness.

Stephan laughed and turned from the window, digging into his bag of takeout. He popped open the lid of the container and inhaled deeply. Funny that he'd had a craving for shepherd's pie tonight. Funny he'd lost track of that

prime morsel years ago, and just happened to stumble across him in some run-down pub known for its Irish food. He chuckled softly. Sometimes life was just funny.

With a deep sigh of satisfaction, he relaxed into the worn easy chair and stretched out his long legs, digging his plastic fork into the mashed potatoes that topped the pie. Why was it that the first time he'd had a craving for this particular meal, it had led him straight to the same little ginger-haired boy he'd wanted to lap up in old Frisco's place all those years ago? He wasn't one for boys, but the kid had had such an air of determined potential about him. He'd been a skinny kid back then, and hadn't put on much size over the years though he'd filled out nicely.

Especially those jeans. Goddamn.

And he was out there, maybe even looking up at Stephan's window.

That thought propelled him back to his feet, and he dimmed the light to peer outside again. There was nothing but a forlorn streetlight and a stray cat. He'd been there, though, watching Stephan from hidden places, hunting him as efficiently as Stephan hunted *his* prey.

He needed to go back to that bar.

After he ate.

He sat, his cock hard as iron behind the soft fabric of his jeans. He grabbed the cold can of beer he'd popped open and rested it on top of his hard-on, enjoying the chilled condensation that seeped through the fabric to his heated flesh.

He'd have that kid on his knees.

Stephan took another bite of the pie and chewed slowly, imagining those pouty lips opening for him, that sweet ass bared to him.

But then he'd have to kill him afterward, for Red bore the distinct tang of a beast. He'd endanger Stephan and his hunt.

That thought ruined the mood. Stephan sighed and set his food aside, then tossed back his beer. He went to the little fridge and grabbed another, downing it more slowly.

He wouldn't really have to kill him. He could keep him... play with him for a while. Maybe it was time to settle down, stop wandering the country on his never-ending hunt. It was getting old, anyway. Hunters like him didn't have much of a life-span. A decade ago it hadn't much mattered. Life had been a blinding series of fights, fucks and wild escapes. Maybe it was age creeping up, or just that he was growing weary of seeing hopeless terror in the eyes of others.

That's why Red was such a turn-on. He might be afraid, but he stared a predator straight in the eye, then turned his back. That took balls.

Stephan nibbled at his lip, wondering about the red-haired man. When he'd first seen him, his head had been clipped right down to the skull, leaving just a haze to tell him the kid had hair the color of a new copper penny. Now though, it was longer. Straight and soft looking. His own... he dragged off the knit cap and strode into the bathroom, looking at himself in the dull mirror. Thick, unruly waves fell past his chin. He didn't look often but knew that in the sun, it was the color of garnet... or old blood. His chin bristled with whiskers the same color. Lines were starting at the corners of his eyes, and maybe a thread of silver wound through the darkness of his hair.

He snorted in disgust and ran his hands through the wild mop. He couldn't afford to be vain. He dragged the cap back on. The room was cold, since he'd opted not to pay for the weak heating. Pretty much all he did here was sleep, and occasionally eat.

Stephan paced like a caged tiger.

He needed to connect with the kid... the young man again. He was a hunter drawn to his prey, and somehow Stephan knew this one might very well be his fate. This one could break him. Or maybe rescue him.

He shoved a hand into his pocket and fingered the few bills left there. He had money stashed in other places, but this was his budget for now, unless he picked up a bounty or two. There were boards outside the police station littered with wanted posters and skip traces. There weren't enough cops to keep up with all that was going down on the mean streets of 'Merica these days. He'd pick up a job and keep his nose to the ground for his real quarry, and watch for Little Red as he worked.

He could afford a drink or two from the bar.

Stephan picked up the box with his leftover food and carried it outside, setting it on the grubby sidewalk. As he walked away, he heard the scuffle of bare feet on the pavement and knew the container would be gone when he returned.

CHAPTER TWO

Frisco lived in an old Victorian that still clung to its glory days. It had long ago been painted in whimsical pastels and the colors glowed through as a relic of the old man's long-dead wife. Red sat on a comfortable old chair in the small living room, listening to the creak of floorboards above his head.

The only social safety nets in place these days were those a man could wrap around himself. Frisco rented out all the upstairs bedrooms to tenants, men and boys, though the boys were mostly grown up now. There were few children being born lately. Red's generation had been the last. Women who'd survived the catastrophic biological terrorism of the past were cloistered behind the walls of the wealthy or living in sanctuaries where they determined the course of their own lives. Babies were still coming, but their conception was carefully negotiated. Frisco had a granddaughter he'd hustled out of the city using a guide who led groups of women and girls through old tunnels where the trains once ran. He'd not seen her in a decade but they exchanged letters often, so he knew she still lived. He now had a great-grandson.

The old man ate slowly; his hand trembled as he carried the fork to his mouth. Red gazed into the fire and reminded himself to gather more wood on his next trip out of the city. Like most government agencies, the Department of Forestry now existed in name only, and the forests were littered with deadfall. It just took some hiking and a strong back to stock up for the winter.

When Frisco was finished, Red picked up the containers and carried them to the kitchen, tossing them into the trash. He returned and sat again. The old man was quiet these days, undoubtedly depressed. Going to work had been the anchor in his life. Now his legs were frail, his body fragile. He wasn't dead, though, and he needed an outlet. Red decided that maybe he'd bring the gym's paperwork for Frisco to work on till he figured something else out. The business was still running; Frisco had enough friends who volunteered their time to oversee it. Red spent a couple hours there in the mornings, opening and cleaning the place, keeping a watchful eye on the younger men as he worked out.

After five silent minutes passed, Frisco leaned forward. "Something's on your mind."

Red smiled. The old man's senses were as acute as ever.

"The hunter's back."

"Shit." Frisco sat up straight, his eyes brilliant... with excitement? Anger? It was hard to say. "I figured he must have followed his target out of town. Didn't think we'd see him again. He recognize you?"

"Yeah. I figure he did." Red looked away, hoping he didn't betray his own excitement.

"What you plan to do, then?"

"Don't see I have much of a choice. I'm going to hunt him before he hunts me. If he minds his business and doesn't break any laws, he can do whatever he's here for, then go his way."

"You know why he's here." Frisco rubbed his arthritic hands together. "He's after some poor lad."

"Or a rogue. There's been a few grisly killings down by the docks. Not my normal territory to patrol, but if he happens to take out the freak, the department won't complain any."

Frisco gave him a sly look. "So you haven't gone down there to poke around? Not at all? Guys like you are hardwired to go after the sick ones."

Red got up and looked out the window. Frisco's house was on a hill, and there weren't many places for someone to hide out there in the darkness. He didn't see anything, but that didn't mean much. He pulled the curtains closed and turned back to the room.

"How'd it all happen? Not the bioterrorism, I know about that. But what did it do to us? Physically."

Frisco stood up and held his hands out to the fire. "You know most of this, son. The toxins killed a lot of us, men and women alike. After, there was the occasional fellow who dropped into rage, murdering anyone around him. Those guys were eventually caught and if they didn't die, they were killed. For a while there was no justice system. No cops or courts or jails, just vigilantes like the Red Caps. Then that stuff dropped off, and for a few years things looked like they were gonna get normal again."

He turned and faced Red.

“It was when babies started coming that we knew there were problems. Not many girls born, then the boys...” He sighed. “Some were born different. Some were normal as ever. But those different ones... they were all predators. Some grew up and turned. Like movie monsters. Their bodies changed with the moon sometimes. They craved violence and blood. They had a lot of animal in them. Others came up who were just as predatory, but they seemed to prey only on those shifters. That’s where vigilantes like the Red Caps came from. Scary times. And they’re still out there.”

“Yeah, I know.” That explained the fixation he and the hunter had for each other. “You figure the offspring... if I have a kid someday, you think it’ll be like me?”

Frisco shrugged. “Not enough data. I suppose some of the women in those compounds know, but they ain’t talking about it.” He looked speculatively at Red. “You never seemed to miss the females. The more they vanished, the harder men were on them. You’d think we’d cherish them. Instead, we hurt them and drove them away.”

No, Red had never particularly missed the presence of females... not sexually. Long ago he’d had a mother, a few teachers in school. His father had cherished Red’s mother. The old man had been broken when she died. The teachers, he’d liked them. They filled that aching hole in his heart. But his sex had never stirred at the glimpse of a woman on television. He’d never gotten a hard-on when his friends smuggled an old tittie magazine to school.

Fortunately for Red, he wanted men... and many men wanted him back.

“I miss the women. But I’m gay, so I’m not hurting the way some of the other guys are.”

Frisco smiled and shook his head. “Figured you were. Way back then you looked like you wanted to eat that fellow as bad as he wanted to gobble you up. You just be careful where your impulses lead you, kid. Don’t want to hear you woke up dead.”

Red chuckled. “Frisco, you know I’m all grown up now. I can take care of myself. I’ve taken out my share of rogues and crazies.”

“Yeah, but they weren’t guys you wanted to fuck,” Frisco said baldly.

“No, they weren’t.” Red smiled and pulled his coat off a rack. “Gotta get going. I think I’ll catch a beer before I go on home. Morning comes early.”

Frisco snorted in humor. “I remember you dragging your skinny ass into the gym all those years ago. You still fall asleep on the weight bench.”

“Just between sets, Frisco.” He threw an arm around the old man’s shoulders. They were the same height now, but Frisco was frail, so very small. Red squeezed him. “I left bagels in the cupboard, stuff for lunch in the fridge. I’ll be back by tomorrow night.”

“Not necessary, kid. I’m not helpless.”

“No, you aren’t. But you’re good company. Neither of us needs to spend time alone.”

Stephan prowled the waterfront for a couple hours, but didn’t catch scent of his prey. He had a couple simple-looking skip-trace flyers in his pocket, but there was time for that later. The rogue’s rapidly fading trail burned behind his eyes like a brand, tinting his vision in a wash of pale red. His prey hadn’t struck tonight, but he’d be back. His kill pattern radiated out like a sunburst.

The epicenter of that pattern was the noisy pub he’d visited the night before. And a certain wild scent clung to the trail, pulling him taut with arousal. Pretty disturbing, considering the owner of that scent just might be a murderer. No less disturbing was the idea that his excitement might be linked to the lingering violence he sensed at the site.

The fog hung heavily over the wet streets, muffling the sound of his footsteps. Even without the assistance of the weather, he moved silent as a specter, ghosting through the watery shadows. He gave himself over to the hunter within, following his instincts. He shadowed pedestrians as they hurried home or to bars that were open late. His belly rumbled, reminding him that he’d not eaten his entire meal.

Stephan sighed and headed back toward the pub, figuring it might be the best place to watch and listen, and maybe pick up some whispered gossip. He

changed directions, head ducked, hands buried in his pockets and gaze furtively dancing about as he studied the shadows.

“Hey, want a date?”

The voice was soft, husky and alluring. Stephan came to a stop, peering into the shadows where the speaker was half-hidden. Slowly, a pale figure moved forward, seeming to float in the mist. Though he could catch the man’s scent and knew he was merely a human, the skin on Stephan’s arms pebbled and the hair on the back of his neck rose.

Shadows suited him. The prostitute’s long hair was silvery. Perhaps it held some yellow in the daylight, but under a muted streetlight it looked like quicksilver. His skin was pallid, pale eyes were rimmed with black liner. His pouty lips were tinted; they looked black against his ivory skin. His T-shirt was knotted up high, his black shorts hung low on his hips. Black leather belts looped and twined from his torso to his groin.

“I’ve got a place nearby. I’ll be your boy.” He smiled wickedly. “Or your girl, if you’d like.”

The whore’s pretense of worldly sexuality was slightly marred when he shivered. Automatically, Stephan looked for his pimp. No doubt the bastard was somewhere warm and dry.

“How much?”

“Twenty for head. Fifty for ass. Top or bottom.” He licked his lips, looking around furtively.

“You know it’s not safe out here.” Stephan reached into his pocket. “If I pay you, will you go in for the night?” When the kid glanced around again, Stephan moved closer. “If you want, I’ll walk you home. Pay you for the whole night. If there’s a problem with your pimp, I’ll stick around for a few hours. Hate to see someone as pretty as you get cut up into little pieces.”

The kid’s eyes went wide and he started to speak, but jumped back into the shadows when a figure emerged from the fog. Stephan caught the stench of the kid’s fear.

“He’s right, Ash. Bad night to be in a bad place. There’s evil creatures out and about. Why don’t you run on home?”

The redhead looked ominous in the fog. A leather jacket covered his sweatshirt, making his shoulders look bulky and broad. His eyes were barely visible under the hoodie. But his smile was friendly and open. Ash relaxed slightly. He trusted Little Red.

“Hey, Detective Redington.”

Stephan looked sharply at the other man. Detective? Well, this was an interesting twist to the hunt. Might be a problem to explain the disappearance of a cop. He smiled at Redington, showing a hint of teeth.

“Take the cash, kid. Get home and go to bed. Alone.” He handed a small roll of bills to Ash, who snatched it. He looked from one man to the other, and then hurried away. Once his footsteps echoed off into the distance, Stephan looked back at Red. Redington. He still didn’t know the other part of his name.

“You might want to get inside, too. I’d hate to see something happen to a visitor.” The detective stared at him, unflinching. A lot had changed since Red had been a skinny kid in a run-down gym. He wasn’t a tall man, but he gave off the impression of power. Stephan’s inner hunter responded fiercely. With a surge, his arousal rose again and was met by answering heat from the other man.

But that wouldn’t do. And judging by the wary expression in Red’s gaze, he was well under control. Now that he was close, Stephan could separate his scent from that of the rogue. Red had been hunting, too.

“Don’t know who’s luckier that I came along, you or Ash.”

Stephan grinned at him sardonically. “Pretty little crook, eh?”

Red lifted a shoulder in a one-sided shrug. “He’ll give you the best fuck of your life, then snag anything of value. He’s a junkie.”

“Most of ’em are. Guess that means he’ll be shootin’ up the last of my rent money in a few.” Stephan sighed, feeling a touch of melancholy. He’d never had the freedom to fuck up his life. From the moment he was born, Stephan had been driven by the wild urges. Those urges didn’t include the need to shoot up or drink away his pain. He fucked, he fed and he killed. Then he moved on.

“Not likely he’ll score tonight. Most anyone with sense knows there’s a

killer out here. Street business is slow.” Red looked at him steadily, his gaze unwavering.

“Then maybe your killer will move to another location in the city.”

“I’m thinking he needs to move along to somewhere else completely. Like LA or Vegas. Even better... across the country. Let him be someone else’s problem.”

Stephan found himself closer to the other man. He wasn’t sure if he’d moved or if Red was starting to crowd him. “If he leaves, then you’ll miss out on a merry hunt. And I’ll bet that’d rub you the wrong way.”

Anger flared in the other man’s eyes. That was his cue. With a move so swift it could barely be tracked, Stephan gripped Red’s arms, swinging him into the entrance of the alley, pinning him up against the damp brick wall. Their faces were just inches apart and his thigh was wedged between the other man’s legs. He felt heat. He felt solid, rigid flesh. “How very lucky I found you again, Little Red.” He leaned in, pressing his teeth to the throbbing vein in Red’s throat. The smaller man groaned, struggling slightly against Stephan’s powerful grip.

He nuzzled Red’s tender throat again, dragging his whiskers along the fine skin. “Who’s the other man I smell?” He inhaled deeply. “The scent reminds me of... boxing gloves and punching bags... it’s the old man. So he’s still alive and around? Still your daddy, maybe?”

“Fuck you!”

“Oh please... I’d like that so very much.” He dragged a tongue along Red’s bristly jaw. “But I’ll do the fucking, cub.”

He pressed his mouth over Red’s, stifling the other man’s curses. For a moment they wrestled, teeth smashed against lips, and he tasted a hint of blood. He pulled back and eagerly lapped at the cut on the perfectly shaped upper lip, then returned to the kiss, his tongue piercing deep and savage. Suddenly, Red was meeting him, hips echoing the fierce rhythm of their tongues. While his hands were still pinned, Red twisted and thrust, his hard cock grinding against Stephan’s aching dick.

With a groan, he released Red’s wrists and fumbled first at his own pants, then at the other man’s, gripping their cocks in one rough hand, pushing back

the sweatshirt hood with the other. He fisted Red's hair and held him in place while he pumped their flesh together. He grinned when Red grabbed his ass and wrapped his fist over Stephan's clenched fingers.

"I remember you back then, Little Red. So small and frail. Just a pup... a snack waiting for a big bad wolf to gobble you up."

"Not anymore," Red snarled, his bared teeth close to Stephan's ear.

"No, you grew up. Nice and tasty." He jerked his head away as sharp teeth snapped just fractions of an inch from his jaw. When a rough tongue laved down his throat, Stephan shivered in the sort of anticipation that accompanied danger. Covering his hand, Red's fist gripped tightly, his nails digging into skin, coming dangerously close to the tender flesh of their erections.

Stephan was rising to climax, his balls drawing up, his breath growing ragged. He watched Red's face, drinking in the rough beauty along with the extreme idiocy of what they were doing. Two animals fucking in an alley, just feet from where a killer had left his earlier victim. Sex was the only time he was defenseless. The only time that Stephan lost all control and immersed himself in the sheer bliss of sensation.

His palm was wet with their combined fluids, and he caught the musky scent of Red's pre-come. The ache built in his balls, his back... pulling him taut from neck to toe. He pressed an almost-kiss on Red's vulnerable throat, feeling the ache in his teeth, the need to bear down and break skin, to taste blood.

Red wasn't so restrained. The leather of Stephan's coat squeaked as Red bit hard into his shoulder, stifling his panting breath.

When it broke, the orgasm washed over Stephan, seed bursting past his fingers, wetting both their hands. He came with a loud groan, and the sound echoed through the alley. Stephan melted against Red, who pumped frantically until he also came, his seed hot and silky, his shout echoing Stephan's.

Except the shout didn't come from Red. It took Stephan long moments to realize that the detective's sharp teeth were still bearing down on his coat. Panting, he rested his chin on the cop's head.

In the distance, men's voices rang out in panic. Red blinked, obviously as

undone by the sex as Stephan had been. It took only seconds for him to gather his wits and make sense of what they were hearing.

Red's eyes went wide. "Oh, fuck. Ash."

They jerked their clothing into place, but they were too late.

CHAPTER THREE

He smelled the crime scene well before they arrived.

Red ran at top speed, aware that the hunter kept pace with him easily. Two blocks away, he could smell the pungent scent of blood and urine and the stench of abject terror. One block away he could hear frightened voices and prayed the crime scene was undisturbed. This was the closest he'd been to one of the killings and the murderer had to be near by, perhaps watching from a doorway or window. He needed a clear scent to track the beast.

When they rounded the final corner, they saw two men hovering in the vicinity of Ash's fallen body. Their faces were white with horror and fear; their scents mingled with the miasma that hung on the air. Immediately, the hunter began casting about, walking in a slow, wide circle. His gaze worked from the body outward, showing his experience not only in preserving evidence, but in finding a trail. It wasn't the standard operating procedure for police work, but then, the man wasn't a cop. Red was, though, and despite what the predator inside his gut urged him to do, he was compelled by law to remain at the scene.

"He's alive."

Red looked over at the hunter in shock. He'd avoided looking at the poor, broken mess that had been Ash, but now appraised him with a critical eye. Blood splashed the pavement, his clothing shredded, and his flesh was torn and flayed. But his chest moved slightly, and when the stranger moved closer to Ash, he didn't protest. Now Red could make out a weak, raspy breath and saw the slight beat of a pulse at his throat. The leather belts that advertised his profession had saved Ash, protecting his tender belly and groin. If he and the hunter hadn't been interrupted, though...

Red dug into his pocket for his cell, calling for support and medics. There were two towers in the city and only the precinct and the hospital had working numbers. Red then dropped to his knees and quickly scanned the damage, afraid to touch... to hurt the young man even worse. The hunter was distracted. He was sorting scents, separating the pungent smell of body fluids from the faint trail left behind by the killer.

Closing his eyes, Red also dissected the trail. He caught the tang of cabbage and tobacco, lube and semen.

The latter scent rose from his own body... his hands and belly. The other man scented it too and looked at Red with a heated expression. It was a promise that things weren't finished between them.

The hunter stood, backed away from the fallen man and lifted his head to the night air, letting his eyes drop closed.

A soft sound drew Red's attention, and he looked down at Ash. The pain of loss arrowed into his heart. Ash was gazing up at him, calm and unafraid.

"Is she safe?" His voice was barely a whisper.

"Who? Is who safe?" Red stared down at Ash in confusion. In the distance, he heard the wail of a siren.

"The girl. Little girl. We were—" He coughed. "We were moving her to the dock."

"And you were keeping the path clear."

"Yeah. Hell of a job I did. He's been after her for weeks. No matter where we hid her—"

He put a hand over Ash's pale lips. "You'd move her and the killer followed."

Ash gave a slight nod. His eyes began to grow unfocused.

"Don't leave us, Ash. Help's on its way."

The prostitute's pretty lips curved. "My guts are hanging out."

"Flesh wound. Just a scratch." He stroked Ash's cheek. "One of those crazy-ass hunters is out there now, tracking the bastard."

"You go, too. Help him. This one wants to breed. Eventually he'll find a sanctuary—" Ash coughed and gasped in pain.

Red and blue lights flashed off the streets and wall, casting eerie shadows over the fallen whore's face. Cops were finally on the scene. The ambulance should be coming, too. Red stood, trotted to the car and showed his badge. Briefly, he updated the other cops on the situation, leaving out the lone hunter's involvement and the girl who'd been the killer's target. They were

gone and the cops didn't need to know. More than one criminal had operated out of the department in the past. Red wouldn't risk the safety of a little girl.

Red jogged off into the darkness, catching the scents of life and death: blood and semen. It drew him like a magnet. Breaking into a run, he dodged down alleys and leapt over rusted-out cars, his passing almost silent in the darkness. He was barely panting when he arrived at the waterfront, spotting a decrepit boat laboring slowly out into the bay. Two figures struggled on the dock in near silence, just feet from the water. One figure was human. The other was not.

Pale figures, slender but strong, moved efficiently about the boat's deck, watching the fight even as they protected a young girl whose eyes were huge with terror. The boat's engine caught, then died again. One woman wrapped her arms around the child. Their hair looked white in the darkness; both bore more than a passing resemblance to Ash. This was his family, perhaps the girl was his sister.

Or perhaps she was Ash's daughter.

Red's head pounded, and shock ran through him. A young girl, and she'd been living here, hidden away in the city. She'd been born after the war, after the toxic poisonings. She'd been born in some grubby apartment somewhere, long after baby girls were no more. She'd probably never seen the sun or breathed fresh air. He'd known an underground network still existed for women, but never expected to see a little girl. And Ash had risked it all for her.

Pulling himself together, Red turned back to the fight. The killer struggled with the hunter. He'd morphed into his bestial form, towering over his opponent. His naked body was covered with blood, his erect phallus gleamed, and Red felt a brief moment of sickness when he recalled that most of the victims had been brutally raped. He prayed that Ash had been spared that torture.

He watched in horror, realizing the child had been the beast's target the entire time.

Moving closer, Red caught the hunter's attention and slipped in smoothly, striking the killer in the back of the knee, dodging, then darting back in as he

went down, armed only with bare hands and speed. In his shifted form the creature gained many inches over the average human male. When he was human, he probably passed unnoticed on the street.

He could even be someone Red knew.

He danced about, using kicks and strikes, drawing the creature away to give the hunter a break—but the idiot didn't take the hint, diving in and grappling again. The brute toppled, scrabbling along the wood of the dock, desperate to reach the boat. The engine finally caught with an oily cough. Smoke clouded the air as the boat motored away slowly... too slowly.

As one, Red and the hunter dove for the killer—one on his belly, the other pinning his legs, grimacing against his frenzied screams.

“Mine! Mine!” His clawed fingers shredded the wooden dock and he drew his legs up, scrabbling for purchase.

“Hold him,” the hunter grunted. Oddly, he still wore that knit cap. Blood spattered his face and smeared his hands. He strained against the beast's unnatural strength, groaning with the effort. “Another minute... two...”

Because if they let go, the brute would kill them both. Kill them and go to the water, and God only knew he might catch the women on their puny little boat. Hopefully, one of the great sharks in the bay would get him first. Red took a fist to his thigh, grunting with the pain. *Fuck!* It felt like a sledge hammer! Another blow landed right in his gut, and he couldn't breathe. Gasping, he struggled to hold on, but the creature's skin was slick with sweat and blood. He writhed away, dragging the hunter with him. They rolled again and he wrenched his body from the hunter's grip, his massive body crashing into the dark, oily water with an explosive splash. Desperately, Red looked toward the boat, but it had vanished into the darkness.

With a snarl, the hunter scrambled out of his own clothing. Before Red could think or react, he vanished into the water, leaving behind his coat and worn boots, and the frayed knit hat he habitually wore.

“Shit!” On his hands and knees, still choking and panting from the final punch, Red finally found the strength to lurch to his feet, seeing nothing but ripples in the water. He growled, cursing his own feral drive to follow his

quarry into the frigid bay, where only death waited. Five minutes passed, ten... and he remained in place, the stranger's clothing bundled in his arms. He pressed his face to the fabric and inhaled, and part of him grieved.

CHAPTER FOUR

He had a beer. Maybe he had more than one. The empty bottles vanished as soon as he set them down, and Robbie at the bar watched him carefully.

There was a reason cops didn't carry when they were off duty. Red rose carefully, and finally found his balance under the intoxication. He tossed a bill on the scarred wood of the bar and bundled up the clothing, carrying it outside. Without thought he walked toward the hunter's rented room and stood outside, looking up at the dark window on the third floor. After a moment's consideration, he decided it probably wasn't a terrible violation of privacy to break into a dead man's space.

Red quickly picked the locks, smiling at the thread that fell to the floor, a low-tech but effective security device. He stepped inside, pausing, letting the feel and scent of the place waft over him. He smelled old cigarettes, long-ago sex, and hundreds of meals and bodies all jumbled with the newer scent of the dark-haired hunter.

With a sigh, he hung the black leather coat on a peg by the door and dropped the boots by the ice-cold heater vent. He walked further into the room and stared out of the single window. It looked onto the alley where he'd hidden just hours ago. So much had happened since then... a decade of want had culminated in a single, hurried encounter in an alley.

And then he was gone.

The room held a combined kitchen and living space; the bedroom was tucked away with a tiny bath and shower. He flicked on the bedroom light, surveying the neatly made bed and the tiny open closet that held spare clothing and carefully folded sheets.

Nothing here told Red who the hunter was or where he had come from. He'd vanished into the water, and now he'd simply vanish from the broader world. Would anyone care?

With a sigh, Red flicked off the light and paused at the door, rubbing his cheek against the worn leather of the long coat. It smelled like the lost hunter. Red couldn't stifle his groan, remembering that brief, fierce coupling in the alley. He wrapped his arms around the garment, inhaling deeply.

Deep inside, he knew damned well he'd chosen the man all those years ago. He'd known the hunter would come back, he'd known they'd couple like a pair of beasts, mating and melding in a raw, primal fuck. Now the hunter was gone and Red had never even learned his name.

Amazing that he'd never actually been part of Red's daily life, only his thoughts and dreams. When the man had blocked his path in the bar, Red felt as though he'd known him forever.

He settled the coat into neat folds, running his fingers over a spot that was slightly thicker... heavier than the rest of the garment. Carefully, Red searched the lining, feeling a small tear in the old silk. He reached in, finding a hidden pocket with a thick folder inside. He extricated it, carrying the folder to the tiny table in the kitchen, turning on the cheap table lamp to examine the bundle. It wasn't a wallet—it was too long. A leather cord kept it secure and he unwound it, opening the packet.

There wasn't much there. Cash from several different regions, including the West. Letters and contracts. Red squinted, surveying their scrawled signatures.

Stephan Le Pierre. There was an old, yellowed birth certificate from a city that no longer existed. An ID card. A photo of a young man, laughing, his arms wrapped around the shoulders of a lovely woman. Stephan, but much younger, perhaps in his early teens. A pretty girl with hair the color of wine leaned against his shoulder.

She looked just like him.

Carefully, he tucked the papers back into the folder and returned it to the coat. Having seen the hunter's name... glimpsed into his life, Red felt a sense of peace. At least he knew that much.

It explained Stephan's heartless avocation.

Stephan dragged his weary body from the frigid water, draping himself over a horribly uncomfortable rock. He lay there panting, feeling even colder now that he was out of the water and into the foggy air. He'd lost the beast but that hadn't been his undoing. He hadn't expected the wickedly powerful currents under the still surface of the water.

The killer had outpaced him before he'd even hit the water, and it hadn't taken long before his precarious situation registered. On top of that, Red was back there on the dock, still smelling of musk and sex and Stephan's come. For the first time in his life, instincts warred within him and he'd found himself torn away from the hunt. His infatuation with Red had probably saved his life.

Still, every time he remembered the look on that girl's face, his heart went tight.

God. She was a child. Just a child and most likely a miracle at that. He hadn't seen a female in years. His mother was long dead, his sister cloistered away in a safe haven far from here. She'd been born during a time of turmoil; after the wars, but before the diseases that had taken so many mothers, sisters and wives. Getting her to safety had been a sacred task and he understood why the prostitute, Ash, had risked everything to help move the girl to the boat.

Stephan rolled off the rock, landing hard on wet sand. He grimaced at the feel of drenched denim on his legs and shivered, wishing for his hat and coat. His feet were bare, his skin white and puckered. Somewhere out in the water he'd lost his stockings. The walk home was gonna be a bitch. It was as cold as a witch's tit out here.

He sat up and squinted northward, searching for a landmark to guide him. He was still in the city, just north of the pier he'd leapt from. The roads were rough but passable, so he might make it back in under an hour. Not likely, but he could hope. He figured he'd drifted a mile or so. Not a bad walk if he was dry and had shoes. Nasty as hell with wet clothes and cold fog.

Well, hell. He got up, wincing at the rough ground under his feet. One foot after the other, he began his journey. He slogged from the beach, to the docks, to the roadway. He didn't want to think about being cold and footsore so he thought about Red instead. He thought about the other man trapped in his arms, biting down into the leather of his coat to stifle his shout as he came. He recalled the warmth of Red's muscled body, the scent of his lust. His cock stirred, then gave up, discouraged by wet denim and convulsive shivers.

Stephan eventually recognized the street he'd turned onto and within moments was approaching the Irish pub. He dug into his pocket, praying for

some cash, and dragged out a wad of damp bills. Enough for a couple shots of whiskey. He started in through the door, glanced down at himself and laughed ruefully. He didn't exactly cut an intimidating figure. He carefully backed out, heading those last few blocks to his rental. In a world of predators, it was never safe to show weakness.

A hot shower would go a long way toward bringing him back. He could huddle under the thin blankets and catch some sleep. He'd even spring a couple coins to turn on the heater.

Barefoot, he moved more silently than usual. He paused before his door, looking down at the thread he'd stuck in the doorway. It was roughly a half inch away from where he'd placed it. He dug the key from his pocket and opened the door, closing his eyes to listen... to sense who'd been in his space.

It didn't take long to figure it out. To his eternal gratitude, his coat hung neatly on the peg, his boots lying below it. The scent of Red still hung in the air, alluring and heady.

Suddenly, he was no longer cold. Stephan scrambled from his wet clothing, jerking on dry pants and a T-shirt. He finger-combed his hair, letting it curl wildly around his head. For once, he left off the watch cap, shoving it into the pocket of his coat. Once he was fully dressed, Stephan rushed down the stairs, retracing his route and pulling open the door to the pub.

Inside, the crowd was thin. Red sat at the bar, his head bowed and a beer in front of him. Stephan saw the moment Red became aware of his presence. His body straightened and he slowly turned, gazing at Stephan, the expression on his face shut down. Stephan took a step, and then another, sliding onto the stool next to Red's. He gestured for a whiskey and downed it quickly, nodding for another.

"That doesn't really make you warm." Red tipped his bottle, taking a shallow sip. Judging by the way he smelled, he'd had more than one already.

"Yeah, well, I like the illusion." Nevertheless, he savored the drink, letting it burn slowly down his throat.

"That wasn't the brightest move, jumping off the dock like that." He glanced over. "Stephan."

“Going through my stuff, eh? I should be pissed as hell.”

Red shrugged. “Wanted to see where I should send your possessions.”

Stephan grinned, knocking back the rest of his whiskey. “Did the whore survive?”

“Ash is still hanging on. He’s not talking, though. Figure I’ll go visit him later tomorrow. Today. Hell, it’s dawn in just a few hours.” He stood and stretched, and Stephan felt himself grow hard with arousal. Red’s belly was flat and lean, and he had a pretty good idea of the muscle that he’d find under that shirt. The cop tossed a bill on the bar and turned away. “I got it.”

“That’s good, ’cause I left my cash in my other pants.”

They left the bar and walked together in the darkness. Though the streets were dark and quiet, Stephan could hear the skittering of rats and the rustling of street people as they sought comfort against the cold.

“What happened back there... between us—”

“I liked it.” Stephan grinned wickedly. “I want more.”

Red caught his breath, and then continued, “I can’t trust you.”

“You shouldn’t. I’m the bad man. I hunt cubs like you.”

They continued on without speaking, and the atmosphere became charged. Stephan was now fully erect, even though he’d come in a magnificent climax just hours earlier, followed by that brisk swim in the ocean. He should be home in bed, dead to the world. Instead he was trying his level best to seduce a man far too young and far too good.

Far too wrong for a cynical, hard-hearted hunter with a distinct lack of ethics.

“I think you underestimate me.”

Red’s voice was slightly breathy. He was excited. Aroused. But tempted as he was, Stephan wasn’t going to shove him into the wall and fuck him out here in the cold. He wanted a bed big enough for them both. Running water. He kept walking, and Red stayed right at his side.

“What’s your name?”

“Redington. Colin Redington. Red for short.”

Stephan grinned. “So I had it right all this time. Little Red.”

“Hard to get it wrong.” Red glanced at him, giving Stephan a glimpse of his face under the red hood of his sweatshirt. Here in the night he looked hauntingly beautiful, a ghost with his pale skin, the red hair overwhelmed by darkness. Stephan kept walking. When they came to his rental he hurried up the stairs, nearly groaning with each step. He unlocked the door, noting that the thread was still in place. He stood back, letting Red into the room so he could follow.

He planned to take the kid down, press him to his knees and get the party started, but that’s not what happened. Red was so fast. So strong. Stephan wasn’t sure how he ended up face to the wall, pinned there by a powerful body. He heard the sound of clothing rustling, boots dropping to the floor. Stephan was unable to move, to turn his head and watch.

He heard the sound of labored breath, caught the smell of wild things and feral creatures. The skin on his arms pebbled; the hair rose on his neck. For a moment he thought the beast had returned from the water and taken Red’s place, and he panicked, fighting for a glimpse of the smaller man. Instead, a massive, powerful hand held him in place.

Behind him, Red growled softly in his ear.

“*Mine.*”

“Oh, fuck.”

He’d always known the kid was one of the beasts... but he hadn’t realized he was a shifter. Hot breath blasted into his ear, and the body behind him now topped him by several inches. The hand that came around to tug at his clothing was massive. He shut his eyes tightly, waiting for the fatal strike, waiting for sharp teeth to rend his flesh.

Instead, the beast that was Colin Redington leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss to his temple.

CHAPTER FIVE

Red smelled Stephan's fear, though it was liberally overlaid with lust. He smiled, focusing on containing the fangs that wanted to drop, pulling back the beginnings of fur and claw. He rarely let the wolf out to play, and Red needed a moment to cage that aspect of his other self. He was now massive, tall as a tree and bulked up like a mountain. The years in the gym had honed him into a weapon, one to be kept sheathed and hidden from all but those he trusted most.

Or those he planned to kill.

Why this man was one of the few he could be open with was a mystery, but Stephan had known what he was from the beginning. He simply hadn't been prepared for the reality.

"W-wolf?" Stephan asked. In answer, Red licked the length of his throat, pressing his teeth gently to the hunter's neck.

"I'm wolf. You knew that." He nipped the human's ear.

"Actually, no. I knew. I knew I'd have to kill you. I didn't expect..." he trailed off, so Red finished for him.

"You didn't expect I could contain it. To use it for the benefit of others. That in spite of the beast, I'm not an animal."

"Yeah. That." His breathing was rapid and shallow, and Red knew if he cupped Stephan's groin, he'd be hard as stone. Hell, he'd been putting off pheromones since they'd met in the bar.

"Evolution, Red Cap." Beneath him, Stephan went still, and for a moment, his breathing ceased completely.

"You figured that out, eh?"

"Turn that coat inside out and there's a great red cape. That knit cap you wear... it marks you as one of the senior members. And your hair... it's genetic. You were born to hunt the beasts. Your sister probably has the same skills. Granted, I figured you were just one of those rogue hunters... bad as that fellow that's been killing down on the docks."

Red wrapped a hand around Stephan's waist, shoving it up under his T-shirt. He reveled in hard muscles, the sprinkling of hair across his chest. Red gripped Stephan's hip and pulled him back, grinding his groin into the human's ass.

"Ah hell... you're gonna fuck me with that monster of yours." He sounded resigned and just a tiny bit excited. Scared.

Red chuckled in his ear. "Got lube?"

"In the bedroom. Let me go, and I'll get it."

"Bullshit. I let you go and you'll try to top me again." He stepped back, giving Stephan room to move.

Slowly, the human turned, his eyes level with Red's chest. He looked up slowly, taking in the breadth of chest, the brawny shoulders. Finally, he looked up at Red's face. His breath gave an audible hitch. "You're beautiful."

Red felt a flush spread over his skin. In truth, this form didn't look much different than his human shape. Just... more.

"You have another form?"

Red nodded. "Yeah, pretty much what you'd expect. Teeth, fur—"

"A tail?"

"Hell yeah."

Stephan laughed. "Can I see?"

"Later." Red leaned down, trapping the human against the wall, one hand cradling the back of his head. His hair was still damp. Red ran his fingers through it and it felt like damp silk. He trailed a curl over his lips, savoring the scent of Stephan.

"I usually top." Stephan's voice was hoarse and Red smiled, dipping down to kiss him lightly.

"So do I. But for now you have to know me... all sides of me." He dragged his tongue over Stephan's lips, moving in for a deeper kiss when his mouth opened slightly. Their tongues stroked, and he shivered at the sensation.

"Is the wolf gonna... you know...?"

“Fuck you?” He grinned down at Stephan, who was recovering his cocky attitude. “No.”

“Good.”

“Not yet, anyway.” He stifled a smile.

“You’re really gonna top me? I mean... seriously... you’ve gotta be huge...”

Red took Stephan’s hand and settled it over his cock, grinning fiercely as the hunter’s eyes went large. “Ok, I’ve always been a bit of a size queen... but you’re scaring me now...” He gave a laugh. “Lube. We’ll need a lot.” When Red let his hand go, Stephan continued to fondle and cup Red’s cock and balls. His fingers slipped back, gently tickling the tender skin back there, skimming over his hole. Once again, Red pressed in, pinning Stephan to the wall, enjoying the feel of the other man. He bent his knees, letting their cocks tangle and duel, slick with pre-come and scented with lust.

Carefully, Red dropped to the floor, his head level with Stephan’s taut belly. It took but a moment to loosen Stephan’s jeans, tug off the boots and strip his lower half. He trailed his tongue on a wicked journey down to the dark hair of Stephan’s groin, while one hand played at his nipple.

“Oh Lord...” Stephan’s head dropped back against the door.

As Red went down on Stephan, he tasted salt and musk and caught the slightest hint of the ocean. He played at the hunter’s cockhead, slipping the tip of his tongue into the eye, dragging the edge of his teeth over the flared ridge. Stephan’s knees buckled and Red caught him, holding him steadily in place.

“I dreamed about this... ten fucking years I dreamed about having you on your knees...” His mouth dropped open as he panted. “Just didn’t expect you to be a giant—motherfucker.”

Red grinned around a mouthful of Stephan, then swallowed him down whole, relaxing his throat till the other man’s cock kicked off his gag reflex. That made Stephan grip his head, digging fingers into his hair and tugging.

“If you’re really gonna fuck me... don’t like it after I come... better stop.”

Reluctantly, Red drew away, giving Stephan’s cock a single long lick before rising back to his feet. He leaned in, bracing his arms at either side of

the human's head, caging him, asserting his domination. "It won't always be like this, Red Cap, but tonight, I'm on top. Just so you remember later... I'm not your bitch."

"I don't want a bitch." Stephan reached out, tracing circles over Red's erect nipples. "I want someone who can give as good as I can." He looked up at Red, his eyes as sincere as they were ever likely to be. He scraped his nails over Red's chest, not quite drawing blood, but causing enough of a bite that he threw his head back on a gasp.

"You like that, eh?"

"Sometimes."

"And sometimes I bite." Stephan bit the muscle of Red's chest, bearing down hard enough to leave a mark.

Red's cock flexed and he felt fluid rising to trickle along his shaft. He looped an arm around Stephan, drawing him away from the wall, tugging him toward the tiny bedroom. In this full-grown form, he dwarfed the room. He stood and stared at the bed, wishing he was home where he knew he wouldn't break the furniture.

"I can downsize..."

"Hell no!" Stephan pushed past him and dug into the duffel next to his bed, searching for supplies. He pulled out condoms and held one up, looking from the packet to Red's shaft.

"Nope." He tossed it back into the bag and sorted through the handful he still held.

"Nope... uh-uh." Finally he found one that satisfied him. He rolled it onto Red's shaft, then pushed, so Red landed on the bed with a grunt. Somehow, the human had recovered his dominant role in their interaction.

"Not so fast." Red rolled, flipping Stephan to the bottom. "I'm on top this time."

He groped for the bottle of slick, making liberal use of the lube on his hand, cock and at the entrance to the other man's body. He worked him, not so much concerned with being gentle as being thorough. "You bottomed before?"

“I’m no virgin.” Stephan sat up slightly, propped on his elbows, watching Red as he worked the lube. “Dear God. I might need to rethink this.”

“Too late.” Red penetrated his ass with a finger, grinning in satisfaction as Stephan groaned, squirmed and quickly adapted to the invasion. After a few thrusts, he pulled out and turned the other man over. Stephan protested but didn’t fight, particularly once Red started finger-fucking him again, opening him... relaxing him and adding more lube. When he notched his cockhead and started his invasion, the hunter groaned gustily.

Red paused. “Is that a bad sound you’re making?”

Stephan lifted his head slightly. “It’s a ‘there’s a tree up my ass’ sound.” He laughed breathily. “Carry on.”

Red pulled back and added more lube. He started in again, making a little more progress. He slipped past muscles, then paused, feeling as though he was entering heaven. Stephan’s body was tight, hot and greedy. Evolution had made them; perhaps nature had made them for each other. He wrapped his arms around Stephan’s body, pulling them tightly together. He was now large enough that the human’s head tucked neatly under his chin. Once they were fully joined, Red sat up straight, pulling Stephan onto his lap. They paused like that, panting and still.

“Are you all right?” Red couldn’t help moving, thrusting in and out by fractional increments, afraid to pump and fuck as his animal demanded. He ran his hand over Stephan’s chest, circling his nipples, then sliding down to fist his cock. In answer, the human groaned and shuddered as a stream of fluid seeped from his cockhead. Stephan turned his head, his gaze fierce and hungry.

“Go,” he whispered to Red.

So Red moved. Slowly at first, the fear of damaging the man holding him back. Stephan found his balance and rose, coming down hard to meet Red’s cautious thrusts. They grunted, flesh slapping, sweat rising to sting their eyes and slick the skin between them. How dangerous... how delicious it was to take another man this way! Red held Stephan in place by brute force. When the old, decrepit bed groaned ominously, he simply moved faster.

He pushed the human forward till he landed facedown on the pillows and continued to plow into him, faster and deeper, and now in complete silence

save for the squeaking bed frame and the rough sound of their breathing. Stephan groaned, a sound that rose from the very depth of his being. His back arched and he shook. His seed filled Red's hand, making him slick, and Red continued to draw on the human's cock, milking out every drop of fluid.

When Stephan reached back and clasped Red's massive thigh, the drag of his nails bit, the salt of his sweat burned, and the tiny bite of pain brought Red over in clenching waves, almost painful in their intensity. He panted, held his breath and shuddered, finally dropping forward, catching his weight on one hand.

They hung there like that, limp, blissed out and sweaty, until the bed gave one more warning groan and finally collapsed. It dropped them to the floor in a tumble of broken wood and rumpled bedding.

Stephan laughed. The sound was tight and muffled, his face still pressed to the flattened pillows. Red rolled away, landing heavily on the floor. With a growl, he crawled back onto the mattress and gathered the human into his arms, spooning around him protectively. They lay there in the darkness, uncaring of the sweat and semen and streaks of blood. Red sighed, tucked his chin over the top of Stephan's head and closed his eyes, letting satiation and exhaustion take him away.

CHAPTER SIX

When Stephan woke, dawn had lightened the sky to grey. His front was cold, but his back was warm where Red lay asleep, still in his massive form. He moved slightly and the beast pulled him tighter, not letting him go.

“Really could use a piss about now,” he grumbled, but Red slept on. Minutes ticked by and he finally managed to twist around, facing the slumbering giant. It was still Red, with his copper hair and fighter’s build. Just bigger. With an edge of wild he’d lacked before.

A beast, but shockingly gentle. There’s no doubt Red could have gravely injured Stephan during sex. He studied Red’s face until the man’s eyelids flickered, and he woke. For a heartbeat, Red looked confused. Then he sighed, stretched, and to Stephan’s fascination, suddenly shifted shape, shimmering and rippling till the more familiar version of Red lay beside him in the broken bed.

“Did I freak you out?” He looked worried.

“You really turn into a wolf?”

“Yeah, but not the kind you see in the forest. I’m bigger.”

“I’d say that’s a given. Like a dire wolf?”

Red nodded his head. “Yeah, that. My folks weren’t this way. I guess I mutated.”

Stephan propped his head on his hand and studied Red’s exquisite body. “Which is your normal form? The one you’re most comfortable in?”

The shifter sat up and shrugged. “This one gets me by in public most easily. If I’m tracking another beast, the wolf is best. He can fight on equal terms. I use my other shape mostly for the scare.”

“Why didn’t you go after the killer last night? I mean, you could have followed him, fought him better than I did.”

Red gave a laugh. “You were there before me, dude. The two of you moved so fast I didn’t have a chance to strip and jump in. Then you were

gone.” His smile faded. “I thought you were dead. Between the water and the beast...”

“Yeah. Pretty rash.”

For a moment, they were silent, avoiding each other’s gaze.

“So,” Red asked, “you know about me. What the hell are *you*?”

As he watched, Stephan’s expression shuttered. He ran a hand through his wine-dark hair. “Human.”

“Not a normal human, though. You’re a hunter. That’s a mutation in itself.”

Stephan nodded, not looking at him, but he didn’t speak.

“And you’re a Red Cap.”

Stephan looked at him, slightly annoyed. “How’d you figure that out?”

Red nudged him. “Come on, like I said: red watchman’s cap, the lining of your coat, even your hair color.” He looked away, embarrassed. “I saw those papers, the assignment to come out here. Red Caps may be a secret society, but I figure they’re on the right side of the law. And these days, there’s not much law anywhere. Our force is pretty loosely organized, and no one’s gonna question me if I take help from an outside source.”

“We’re vigilantes.”

“Until the cities recover and the government is functioning again, we need people like you.” He touched Stephan’s face, turning him to meet Red’s gaze. “Tell me more about what you are. How you became a Red Cap?”

The human glanced away, not willing to look at Red as he spoke. “I guess hunters are mutants, too. My senses are more acute, and my brain... it’s hardwired for the chase. I’m obsessive. When I was a kid I couldn’t rest if something was on my mind. I needed answers. If I tried a game, there was no rest till I mastered it. Never wanted to lead or follow, didn’t have many friends. Just family. And then...”

“And then they were gone,” Red finished softly.

Stephan let out a huge, gusty breath. “Momma was the first. The bio attacks took her. We managed for awhile, till the rape gangs started

marauding. Me and Dad tried to keep my sister hidden. But she was taken. Dad was beside himself. And then something inside me clicked.” He paused and gnawed at his lip. “It was more than obsession. I *had* to find her. Eventually I did. She lived. Hurt, damaged, but alive. While I was hunting for her, Dad connected with a network. We eventually got her to safety.”

“What happened to her captors?”

The look on Stephan’s face chilled Red to the bone.

“You killed them. All of them.”

“I was fourteen years old.”

For a moment, he was frozen. The first time he’d seen Stephan, Red had been sixteen. A child. How had the young hunter survived that?

“Dad died that year. And the Red Caps came to me in the night. They recruited me, trained me and set me loose on the world. I’ve been with them...” He paused, frowning down at his hands. “...it’s been nearly twenty years now. Most don’t survive their first two years.”

“Maybe it’s time to stop.”

“Can’t. That serial killer? He’s alive. I can feel it, like an itch under my skin. I’ve gotta go after him.” He gave Red a despairing look. “I feel him; he’s gone south. When he hits another city, he’ll keep on till he finds another target.”

“Women.”

“Yeah.”

“Fucking beast.” Red shook his head.

“For the record, it’s probably not the beast that makes this one a killer. If he’d never mutated, he’d still have been a murderer.” Stephan rolled out of the bed, stepping carefully around the wreckage. He pulled an empty duffel from a shelf in the tiny closet and started stuffing clothing into it.

“You’re leaving.”

“Gotta. Otherwise it’ll make me crazy.” He stepped into the shower, not waiting for the water to heat. The cold cleared his head and tamed his erection. Having Red there so close... so naked... God. He stepped out and quickly toweled off. The young detective had occupied his mind for a decade. Want

for him had never risen to feral obsession, but he knew damned well it would now. Every step he took away from Colin Redington would pull him further into hell. Every step the beast took away from him tore him in half.

He was so fucked.

“Hey, Red,” he ducked his head out the door and saw that Red was still on the bed, stark naked and frowning at the sheets.

“You could come with me.”

The shifter shook his head. “Can’t.”

“How can you stand letting him get away? He killed how many people here? Four?”

“Five.”

Stephan continued. “He maimed your friend Ash. Poor kid. Now you’re letting the bastard get away.”

Red stood and came to within just a few feet of where Stephan stood. His face was pale, and the red hair on his head and at his groin appeared vivid in contrast. “I’m human to look at, Stephan, but at my core, I’m a wolf.”

Stephan cocked his head in confusion. “I know that.”

“I have a territory. The people inside it... I’m bound to them.”

“That beast invaded your territory.”

Red reached out, placing both hands on Stephan’s bare shoulders. The room was frigid, but neither of them seemed to notice the cold. “Now he’s gone.” He ducked his head. “I’m not a lone wolf, Stephan. I don’t roam. My territory is huge and my wolf is bound to it. I protect my territory.”

“And your pack. Humans and all.” Stephan moved into the circle of Red’s embrace. Together, they were warm. Before Red, he’d always been cold. It had never bothered him. Now it made him ache. He rubbed his chest, then moved away to pick up the clothing he’d discarded the night before. It took but moments to dress. Then he was ready, his coat on, hat over his damp hair.

Red was dressed, too, the hood of the sweatshirt shadowing his face. The grief Stephan felt was echoed in the other man’s demeanor. Together, they left the cold, empty little rental. Their feet echoed on the stairs, the sound of their

steps vanishing completely once they stepped out onto the sidewalk and into the fog. Stephan closed his eyes, tasting the air and the messages it sent.

South.

Red would turn and walk north. He blinked rapidly, turning to look at the beast. His beast.

Red stared at him, unmoving. “You’ll come back?”

“Won’t be able to keep me away.” He summoned up a smile. “The sex is too hot to ignore.”

And you hold my heart.

Dear God, but something deep inside him belonged right where he was, standing beside a young man not so different from the one he hunted. He started to walk away, and then turned. This wasn’t right. He saw hope flare in Red’s eyes, then fade just as quickly. Instead of speaking, Stephan pulled the other man close, holding him tightly, whispering in his ear.

“I *will* come back.”

“You’d better. And don’t take too long about it.” Red nipped Stephan’s chin, bearing down slightly, just enough to sting. He gently licked the wound and then came up for a kiss, soft and sweet. “Mate.”

He said it so softly that Stephan almost didn’t hear. When he understood, his heart went still.

One final kiss and they stepped apart, but this time Stephan remained rooted in place. He watched as Red turned away, walking rapidly, hands buried in the pockets of his jacket. The hood of his sweatshirt was brilliant around his head.

“Mate.”

What nonsense. He tried to laugh, but it came out wrong. Stephan whirled, the skirt of his jacket flaring out in a red and black blur. Then he was gone, traveling as fast as he could move, easily homing in on the trail of a killer.

He’d be back. Soon.

THE END

Author Bio

Belinda is an award-winning author of erotic romance, speculative fiction and LGBTQ romance. She lives in far Northern California with her family and a pack of perpetually shedding Siberian Huskies. Her m/m romances have won the RWA Passionate Plume, the EPIC and taken placements in the Rainbow Book Awards.

A graduate of CSU Chico, she managed to attend the notorious party school without once getting drunk, arrested or appearing in a “Girls Gone Wild” video. Her main focus of study was classical and archival history, cultural anthropology and theatre arts, all of which influence her science fiction and paranormal writing.

Belinda’s books are available at all the typical distributors as well as on the publisher’s homepages.

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SAILOR BOYS

By Anthony McDonald

Photo Description

Two young lads have just met for the first time. Both are in naval uniform, both on national service. They are startled by the coincidence of how much alike they look. Headily conscious of each other's and their own beauty, they are primed and ready to fall in love...

Story Letter

Dear Author,

They were both on leave for the first time in a strange city when they met. It didn't go well at first, but then later...

...and who knew it would last so long and so well, even fifty years on they're still surprised.

Sincerely,

Geoffrey

Story Info

Genre: historical/20th century

Tags: first time, young adult characters, coming of age, sailors, true love, infidelity, tear-jerker, established couples, outdoor sex.

Word count: 7,991

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SAILOR BOYS

By Anthony McDonald

We've just written our wills, Harry and I. It's something we should have done long ago. Anyway, it's sorted now. Everything will go to Alfie and Rick. The restaurant, the two pubs. After we're both gone. Though we don't expect to disappear for a long time yet. It seems a good moment to look back. Fifty years. Half a century this year. I can't believe I've just written that.

Sexually, I developed late. Had I known more about myself, I might have hesitated before joining the Royal Navy when the time for my military service came. I'd scarcely seen a grown boy naked before. Certainly I'd never seen one undress for his hammock just inches from my face. Never seen a hard-on stuffed quickly into bell-bottoms and buttoned there, confined like a trapped animal while we all clattered up iron steps to breakfast in the mess.

At sixteen I'd only just started to masturbate—which seems late by the standards of today. But, inspired by the proximity of my fellows, in my hammock I soon caught up. There was a yearning, and some heartache attached to this. I wanted to reach out and touch those other bodies, the naked and the half-clothed. Yet it was quite impossible. They might have been behind a wall of plate glass. And my wanting to touch them led to an appalled realisation about myself. I wanted other lads. Wanted to touch, to hug, to cuddle, to fondle—I couldn't get my head around other physical things just yet. Only queers did any of those things... I wanted to love. Did queers want that?

We put in at Portsmouth. Had some time to run ashore. Sometimes that was in the evenings—though by midnight we had to be back on board ship. It meant that young sailors who wanted to get tanked up and then get laid with a short-time girl needed to know what they were doing, and needed to be quick. It was on our last night in Portsmouth... Isn't it always the last night, by the way, on which the momentous thing happens? And don't we then regret all the previous nights, which seem in retrospect a waste?

Where had the others gone to? My crewmates. I don't remember. Probably because it became a matter of supreme unimportance a moment after they left.

Left me alone in one of the Spice Island pubs. Not alone exactly, because there were other customers. But without company at any rate. Then, over by the bar, sitting at the counter, there he was. His uniform was identical to mine; on the counter in front of him he'd laid the familiar cap. The bar counter turned a corner between us, so that he sat half-facing me. He could see me if he wanted to. Apparently he did. Within a second of my catching sight of him he gave me a friendly nod.

The world holds its breath at such moments. The future forks like a lightning bolt. The nod might have been the end of it. That was one possibility. There were two more. I could have walked over, taken my drink with me and joined him at the bar, chatted with him there in full view, and rubbing shoulders with everybody else. If I'd been the bolder one I'd have done just that. We'd have chatted and, again, that would have been that. But I wasn't the bolder one. Thank God. On this occasion at least, he was. I merely nodded back to him from the partitioned-off little alcove in which I sat all by myself. While he got down from his stool, wove his way through a crowd of other drinkers without taking his eyes off me, and was at my table a moment later. "Join me," I said. Did I tell you I wasn't bold? At that moment I was.

He looked rather like me, actually. (He still does.) Straight nose, dark blond hair, nice lips. And eyes... Well, I can't lay claim to anything of the sort myself. His were sky blue, dark lashed. They looked like stars, I thought. "What's your ship?" he asked, as he sat.

"Rother," I said. The third word I ever said to him.

"Sprite," he answered, volunteering the name of his own ship. The sound of that word made Rother go flat. We nodded to each other. It didn't need saying that we'd seen each other's ships at moorings across the big dockyard every day that week. Then we talked sailor talk, comparing notes, exchanging anecdotes... I realised after a moment or two that I didn't want to talk about all that. I wanted instead to climb inside the chambers of his heart. In just a few short minutes my own inexperienced little heart and cock had both fallen in love.

We were sitting very close to each other, I realised. The alcove was very small. The table in it screened us, from chests to knees at any rate, from everyone else's sight. In sitting down he'd placed himself, quite by chance I

supposed, as close to me as I now wanted to be to him. The feeling that gave me was wonderful. In fact, once we'd relaxed a bit and each was growing confident that the other was enjoying his company and not just being polite, I could feel that relaxation take physical shape: we both minutely moved our legs.

I felt our knees touch. It was like an electric shock. The contact spread, our thighs took part, and it felt as if a warm wave were sliding up my leg, as that first pinpoint of connection expanded out. I had never known anything like this before. Never felt anything so good.

“And then the skipper says...” He stopped in mid-story and smiled; his eyes joined in; the stars twinkled. “You weren't listening,” he said.

“Sorry,” I gasped.

“Wasn't really listening meself, tell the truth. I'm Harry.”

“Will,” I said. We shook hands. This must have looked funny to anyone watching, since we were already so close to each other, leaning in towards each other and now touching at the shoulder as well as the knee and a couple of places in between, that we had only to move our hands a couple of inches each in order to exchange the formal greeting. And our hands, having shaken each other, and seeming to have their own agenda now, refused to disengage themselves but stayed clasped for a moment, despite the awkwardness of our positions side by side and slap-bang up close.

Eventually those hands dropped into our laps. Although not quite. Harry was sitting to the left of me; the hand he'd used to shake mine dropped vertically and landed on my left thigh. That couldn't happen so easily with my right hand. I withdrew that. And slipped my heart and all its contents gently onto his right thigh with my left. We sat an age like that. We continued to talk, but absently. It didn't matter now what either of us said. Then slowly our hands began to move, just an inch or so in any direction, like hands on a Ouija board at a séance. Then after about another minute, Harry's hand stopped. “Wait,” he said. “I'll get us another drink.”

I watched him go. He was almost exactly my age. Two months older, he'd told me, than my sixteen and a half. He—whose face was so like mine—looked as lovely from the back as from the front. So poised, so confident. I

didn't dare imagine I looked like that. He didn't go directly to the bar. He called in at the gents' toilet first. I ached to follow him in there but dared not. I waited till he came out and went to the bar, and then I went to follow his example, prudently, not wanting to have to interrupt our second pint. I placed my cap on the table before I left it, so that no-one else should claim and usurp our charmed spot.

And we went on from there, after we'd sat back down again, resuming from the point at which we'd left off. We were soon stroking each other's thigh quite energetically, and rubbing calf against calf. After a while I dared to look directly at his crotch. I was thrilled, though almost horror-struck, to see the ridge of his erection there. Looking down vertically I beheld myself in the same state. To my relief it seemed that in our relatively modest size we were equally matched.

"Yeah, yeah," said Harry quietly. He sounded very much in control of things. Of himself. Of me. Then his voice changed totally. He sounded like a panicking kid. "I've never been here before. Have you, mate?" He wasn't talking about the pub.

"No," I said, in a broken thread of a voice. His hand was trembling and tentative as it grasped my cock through the fabric of my uniform trousers.

"Oh God," I said. "Oh no, please don't." But I didn't mean that, and he knew it, and he did it anyway. And, coming like a machine gun, unexpectedly, I fired off round after round into my pants.

The feelings that suffused my body, heart and mind were followed, as overhead lightning is followed by its thunderclap, by mortification, shame and the deepest embarrassment I'd known in my life. The words, "Oh no," escaped, less than a whisper, on my breath.

But Harry put his lips close to my cheek and whispered, hoarsely, urgently, "Do me too."

"What?" I whispered back. "Now? Like that?"

"Yes," he said, and I realised then how close he was. "Go. Now."

I clutched at the ridge in his trousers: it angled up sharply from his groin. Rubbed at it with my fingers a couple of times. Ineffectually, I thought. But apparently effectively enough. For after just two seconds he gave a gasp and

his whole frame shook. With startling suddenness I found his trousers and my fingers hot and wet—as if someone had turned on a hot tap.

I know now what I didn't know then. To expect a moment of mutual recoil after sex with a stranger, if the situation between you isn't... how can I word this?... extremely right. But that recoil never came. We stayed, closely snuggled against each other's flank and hip, saying nothing, just happy to be where we were and not wanting to move to anywhere else. With hindsight I know why this was. We were simply... extremely right. Our only source of anxiety was the dark blots on our bell-bottoms—that, and wondering how we were going to hide them when we eventually stood up.

Exchanging conspirators' smiles we picked up our pint glasses and resumed our interrupted drinks. "Cheers, mate," Harry said. And then, because we were young and quick, we started after ten minutes or so to fondle each other again. Fingering shoulders, chests and necks as well as hands and legs. We were bolder with each other this time round, more confident. Too confident in fact. Indiscreet. The barman clocked us and came over. He stood against our table, a tall barrel-shaped man with dark curly hair, bald on top. He overflowed our view, seemed to fill the pub. "Now lads," he said. "You can't do that here. And you know that. Either sit here quietly and keep your hands to yourselves or go somewhere else. Understand?" He turned abruptly and went back to his domain behind the bar. He'd spoken like a firm but kindly schoolmaster. We'd been lucky in that, we thought. It was England, 1963, and he could have—many of his ilk would have—called the police.

"At least he didn't get a proper look over the table top," I said, thinking about our blotted pants. We both sniggered. But we were too cowed by the barman's intervention to do other than he said. We finished our pints quite quickly, not saying much. Then Harry drained his glass. "Come on, let's go," he said.

"Go where?" I asked.

"Dunno," he said "Alleyway? Round the back?" I was thrilled, and my cock stirred again at the daring of that thought.

We had to do quite a bit of exploratory walking around the centre of Old Portsmouth before we found an alley that was quiet and dark enough. Having

entered it we turned to face each other, touched each other's forearms, then kissed.

Then kissed. So simple, so ordinary a thing that sounds in later life. But the astonishment, the wonder of it, when it's the first time for both of you! The sweet, sour, complicated, taste of it, the needy thrusting of the strong and bony parts of another boy's head, the soft, soft, wetness of another boy's warm lips.

I felt Harry's hands at my waist, checking I had an erection again. (I did.) I felt him undo the buttons and spring my trapped cock. And I felt my own hands, again as if they had minds of their own, do exactly the same to him. I gasped at the discovery at that moment that I held another person's penis in my hand. That this tough, wiry-muscled teenager—probably well able, as I was, to take care of himself in a fight—was ready to allow his most delicate and fragile adornment to be clutched by my rough strong fist... That seemed to me, and seems so to this day, an expression of the most profound and humble, and humbling, trust. I held Harry's erection as gently, reverently, carefully, as a gun-dog holds a live bird captive in its mouth.

"Pull them further down," I said—I meant his bell-bottoms—with a kind of desperation in my voice. I wanted more of him to see, to feel, to smell: his balls, his thighs. I loved the boy-man scent of his nakedness and I wanted more of that. I made the heart-stopping discovery that he wasn't wearing underpants. No wonder he'd earlier made my hand so wet and hot. But Harry had the same desires as I did, evidently, for while we continued to kiss I felt him tugging my own waistband halfway to my knees, then tenderly fingering, exploring, my tight small ball-sac.

Then in a businesslike way we wanked each other off, standing facing each other, feet a little way apart, one hand each around the other's shoulder for physical as well as emotional support. Lacking the experience and the know-how, we hadn't the wit to twist sideways when the moment came, but ended up spraying the inside of each other's thighs... Actually, I was glad of that: for a couple of days afterwards I managed not to wash it off.

We buttoned up and walked back to the dockyard. Some of the way we went arm-round-shoulder, in the manner of sailors everywhere, pretending to be drunker than we were. At last we came to the place where our ways parted;

we had opposite directions to walk in, skirting the dock's brink, towards our different ships.

"That was your first time, then?" Harry asked me, for the second time, suddenly diffident and needing to check.

"Like I said."

"Me too," he reiterated, almost whispering the words.

A wave of emotion poured itself over me, drenching me through and through. I said, "Stay with me. Come back to my ship."

"Don't be a child," Harry rebuked me gently. "You know we can't do that."

"Then let's run away together, Harry. Jump ship."

"Oh bloody hell, mate!" His exasperation showed, though he was trying to be gentle about it. "Go where? Do what? Desertion's not exactly without risk." (I don't remember now whether they still shot you for it in 1963.) He laughed a bit bitterly. Then, "Okay," he said, suddenly the senior one. "Time to say goodnight." He ruffled my hair.

"I want you!" I croaked hopelessly, fighting sobs that rose from previously uncharted depths.

"You'll be okay in the morning," he said, either cheerful or else feigning it. Then he turned and walked away quickly without looking back.

I wasn't okay in the morning, of course.

We met again on Malta. A year had passed. I walked into a bar alone, out from dizzying sunshine into shadow for a second; then, as my eyes adjusted, at a table with a group of other sailors, again in the familiar uniform, there he was. A lot of water had flowed under my bridge in the year since we'd first met. Other fluids too, if you'll forgive a moment's crudeness. I hadn't exactly kept myself for him. I might have fallen heavily for my first ever jack-off mate, but I wasn't as silly or self-denying as that. And I could see—my first glance at him told me this, as if his past year's history had been tattooed all over him—that all the above went for him too. His seventeen-year-old face

had acquired a world-used, lived-in look, or so it seemed to me, aged two months younger than he was. Though from where I stand now he'd have looked fresh-faced and innocent enough. My heart missed a beat in any case. He was still Harry. Harry again. On Malta, just when I was. He still looked... Even now I grope for a word... Perfection, I thought.

He saw me at once, got up from the table, left his mates without explanation or excuse and came to greet me. "Will!" he said. I was grateful just that he remembered my name. Then more grateful yet for the smile on his face. "Will! Oh hey!" He shook his head. "Seeing you here." He sounded almost overcome. And the contrast between this and his brusque rough parting from me in Portsmouth a year ago was almost too wonderful, too painfully wonderful, to take. I didn't remind him of that parting, or of the bitter taste it had left. The present moment was too precious, too beautiful and exquisitely fragile. I feared that if I pushed at it too hard it would crack and break.

"How long are you on Malta," I asked, dreading his answer.

He gave me the answer I dreaded most. "We sail tonight."

"Oh fucking hell!" I said. I touched his fingers for a fleeting, electric nanosecond the way that, on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Adam touches God. "I've never forgotten you, Harry," I said.

"I haven't forgotten you," he said. He chewed on the words a bit, as if he'd come across something in a mouthful of pie that he wasn't quite sure about.

"Is there somewhere we can go?" I asked wildly. "An alleyway? Something?"

His eyes of stars opened expressively wide. "It's broad daylight out there." He flicked the stars towards the table he'd just left, scarcely moving his head. "I'm with me mates."

There was nothing to be done. I joined him and his mates back at the table and, with a beer or two and lots of laughter and false bonhomie, passed the most miserable hour and a half of my entire life.

Luck strikes occasionally like a spark, but we have to have the tinder in place, ready for when it does. It was I who had the forethought to provide the

tinder in this case. As we parted—the time had come for him and his mates to return to HMS Sprite—I said on a sudden impulse, “Give me your address. Home address.”

He shook his head defeatedly. “You wouldn’t know it. Capel-le-Ferne. Little place outside Dover. Near Folkestone cliff.”

That was the spark—the lightning bolt—of luck. “I live in Dover,” I said quietly.

We wrote our addresses on a couple of finger-wipes, plucked from the metal dispenser on the table nearest the door. “When are you next there?” I asked.

“September,” he said. He didn’t sound very hopeful as he said it. It was now March.

But September will always come, whether we live to witness it or not. I was young, we were at peace, not war, so there was a good chance I’d make the next September at least. But, precisely because I was young, the six months passed as slowly as months have ever passed for any teenager in love.

My stint of national service was behind me when September finally turned up. I was wondering what to do next. And as I wondered, I walked, or took the bus, daily up the long hill that leads south-west out of Dover to Capel-le-Ferne atop the white cliff. Then, from a grassy slope that looked down on a row of terraced cottages, I staked out Harry’s parents’ house. A dowdy piece of 1950s terrace, it looked like my own parents’ home in fact. It took eight days of waiting but then at last I saw him coming out of the shabby front door. He was wearing a one-piece overall, with bib and brace. Plimsolls on his feet. And—presumably because the weather had remained unseasonably warm—apparently nothing else. I ran down the slope to him. So fast that I had to stop myself with flailing arms to avoid knocking him flat. I would have liked to embrace and kiss him, but walls have ears and windows, eyes, and they’d already seen quite enough.

“What are you doing here?” he almost shouted, startled. “We can’t be seen to meet!”

I'd had eight days to rehearse this. Calmly I said, "Red Fox. Eight o'clock." I'd named a pub, halfway between our two houses, which I'd never been inside. Nobody there would know me. I hoped the same would be true for him.

At eight o'clock I sat there. And at ten past eight. With the passing minutes I felt my rapture turning to despond. By half-past I was a whimper away from breaking down in noisy sobs. He wasn't going to turn up. And then he did. My heart rose to meet him like a flock of bright-feathered birds. And for the second time in minutes I wanted to cry so much that it hurt.

"Sorry," he said. "Tea was late. I won't go into it. I told my folk I was meeting mates an'd be back late."

"I said the same to mine," I said.

If the last time we'd spent in a bar together, on Malta, had been hell, then this was already a taste of heaven. We talked, we caught up, we opened ourselves up; our hearts became like molluscs without shells. "Do you...?" our youthful questions all began. And, "Yeah, so do I," or "Me too," all our answers came. But remembering our experience on Spice Island eighteen months ago we dared not touch. We sat on opposite sides of a table, our legs drumming involuntarily up and down in that engine-running reflex that is the giveaway indicator of excitement, anticipation and—in this case certainly—longed-for sex. The expression *body language* hadn't been invented back then, I don't think, but the language existed all the same. And it gave us away again, just as it had done in Portsmouth. But rather wonderfully, we found we'd given ourselves away to the right person this time round. To the very person who, that night, could help us most and who—though we couldn't guess it then—would change our lives. But our hearts sank as the landlord strolled over to us and joined us at the table. We feared a repetition of the Portsmouth incident.

"Well, boys," he said gravely. "Haven't seen you in here before. You're very welcome. In a minute I'll buy you a welcome drink. But I wanted to say something to you first." He said this in such a serious yet nice way, that we looked carefully at him. He was a slim, curly-haired man in his late thirties. (We worked that detail out later, when we knew him better. Had we been older we would have realised that he was a very handsome man, but we were young

and in love and so didn't notice that.) "I'm Charlie. I run this place with a friend of mine called Pete. You'll meet him later, I expect." He was looking very carefully into our eyes for signs that he and we were all on the right track. "We're partners, if you know what I mean." We saw what he meant. It came as a blinding flash of revelation: a Saul on the road to Damascus moment. And he could see in our eyes that we'd got there, and that we were indeed all on the right track. "I just wanted to say to you, we know how difficult it is at first. You may not have anywhere to go, for instance. I can well imagine that." We didn't answer him, but he read our response in our faces as we looked at him, and he carried on, "We've got rooms aplenty upstairs, going empty. Beds in them even..." He gave a saucy grin as he said this. "If ever you need a place to... well, just be together, or stay the night." He paused. "Just making the offer, you understand. Just in case. No charge, obviously. And it'd be just between us, of course. Tick the No Publicity box. Okay?"

Harry astonished me then. He was wonderful. He said, "How about tonight?"

Undressing for the first time together we had the deep, lovely, but also rather difficult, feeling that we were stripping bare not just our bodies but our souls. We watched each other the whole time this was going on, so that we kept tripping in our clothing as we pulled it all off. I loved the look of him. He loved the look of me. How do I know that? He told me, and has done many times since. Both recently returned from operations in the tropical seas, we sported golden tans; taut, well-exercised muscles clothed our slender frames; we showed off pretty swirls of light brown hair in all the places where hair grows on seventeen-year-old boys. We played with our newly naked other halves awhile as we stayed standing up, enjoying—a bit naughtily perhaps—the fact that we looked, and were built, a bit like twins.

But the room was not warm, hadn't been used for some time. We were soon in bed. Exploring with our hands and tongues—with our hearts too—all those parts of each other we hadn't touched before, and laying claim to them, while not forgetting those other bits, the hard and jutting bits, the furry musky bits, we'd claimed eighteen months before. "Have you ever been fucked?" Harry asked me in a tremulous voice after a little while. "Fucked another boy?"

“Not yet,” I said, a bit nervously.

“Nor me.” He was nervous too.

“Look,” I said. I caressed his cock very softly. “Do we need to do everything all at once? Shouldn’t we take it slowly to begin with? Step by step?”

“Good idea,” he said. He sounded relieved. He kissed me then, again. Placed his hand, again, delicately on my cock. We stroked each other’s till we came. And then we repeated that. And in the morning yet again. We had our first go at sixty-nine the second night. And fucked each other for the first time—face to face on both occasions—on the third. We managed not to hurt each other as we each poked experimentally into the other’s backside that third night, and smiled cautiously into each other’s eyes. That was partly because we trusted each other implicitly and were perfectly relaxed. And partly because, physically, in terms of size as well as other things, we were a perfect fit. I still think that in proceeding in that softly-softly way those first three nights we exhibited wisdom beyond our years.

Pete was as handsome as Charlie was and, like his partner, a lovely friend to have. It was Pete, even more than Charlie, who put us on the road to our first jobs in civilian life. Car ferries, and in those days train ferries too, sailed almost every hour from Dover to ports on the French and Belgian coasts. Each ferry carried a complement of sailors, of course, and we might have thought, off our own bat, of applying for a job of that kind. It was Pete who had the better idea. “Apply for jobs as stewards,” he told us as the four of us sat in the bar of the Red Fox discussing this one night. “You know. Bar work, kitchen, restaurant... Fact is, it might make more sense. The man who hires the stewards for...” (he named the biggest operator on the Cross-Channel routes) “... is a mate of mine. He comes in here. You’ve met him. That can’t do any harm...” We spoke to the man Pete knew. We wrote to him. He interviewed us. We got the jobs.

Why do I keep writing *we*? *We* did, *we* thought. Off *our* own *bat*—not bats. How could that be? What right have I to say that it was so? Because it was. We never said, we are a couple, we’ll stay together forever, in those early

weeks and months in Dover, or in those years when we worked aboard the ferries—always wangling to be on the same watch, in the same cabin, on the same boat. It just was so, and it never crossed our minds that there was any other way that things could be. We simply accepted it, starting that first night in the cold bedroom at the Red Fox. Because, I guess when I think about it now, the long time that elapsed between our first meeting and our second, and the time that passed between that meeting on Malta and our coming together the third time at Dover, and the way we responded to each other every time... Those things taken together told the unconscious bits of ourselves all that they—we—needed to know. We hadn't been celibate during those times apart, yet now it was somehow understood by both of us—we didn't say it, we didn't formulate it in our heads—that *we*, Harry and I, and that *I-love-Us* thing, were... extremely right.

We worked hard on the ferries for three years. Heads down, buried in our work. Sometimes we were so caught up, so busy, so cream-crackered after hours of relentless toil, that we didn't know if we were headed south or north or if we were due to disembark in ten minutes onto a quayside where we would hear English spoken or French. There were moments of beauty all the same. Not only in our shared cabin at night, cuddling, our two hard bodies tough as dogs, having sex together in whichever way occurred to us that day, enjoying the scratch of each other's body hair, wallowing in each other's musky scent. Occasionally we would find ourselves out on deck at sunset, coming out of Calais, turning north at the limit of the dredged channel along the shore, when Dover cliffs presented a white crescent on the horizon ahead of us, and the sun, going down, seemed to raise the other ships in view a metre or two above the calm blue, so that they floated like white castles in the air. We'd taste the cold, salt, sexy sharpness of the breeze; hear the excited mewling of the gulls above the regular whoosh of the bow-wave. We'd want to kiss at those and other moments. Never possible, of course. At least we always knew we'd be making up for that in a few hours' time.

When ashore we'd stay at the Red Fox. We'd tell our parents we were staying over with friends, just as we had done, from the call-box outside the pub, on our very first night. Our room there was our own now, decorated and furnished—albeit simply—by us. Never cold now, not even on a winter's night.

In the summer of '67 the British parliament made it legal for men over twenty-one to have sex together. So whatever Pete and Charlie did in bed at night (we never got too involved there) was suddenly no longer punishable, if discovered and reported, by a prison stay. Over the next few months first Harry, then I, turned twenty-one. And became legal too. Charlie and Pete took the opportunity soon after that to lure us away from our ferry jobs. They were buying a second pub. We'd helped out in the Red Fox from time to time, for three years. It was our way of saying thank you for a safe haven on shore. Now they asked us if we'd like to manage their new acquisition for them. Joint managers of the new pub. In Dover. Centre of town. At twenty-one, a place of our own. We accepted. For two gay men in '68, an opportunity like that was pretty rare.

Years passed. A restaurant was mooted, near the port. Cuisine was to be French-inspired. Harry and I were asked to set it up. We did so with some trepidation. Yet our experience of on-board catering, and of spending time ashore in France, pulled us through. "You were thinking of this all along!" we challenged Pete. "When you sent us off to work on the ferries, this was what you had in mind." Pete protested he'd never had any such idea.

A never-ending honeymoon it sounds. Fifty years from '63 to the present day without a hitch, maybe. Well, of course not quite. Life—or love: they're two words for the same thing really—never is an on-going honeymoon, and we all know that. Some things did go wrong between Harry and me. Surprise, surprise. When would that have started, then? In 1970, to be exact. Seven years after we first met. (Seven years. Ring any bells, does that?)

A French lad called Olivier came to work for us that year, as sous-chef in the restaurant. He was three years younger than the two of us. A handsome boy of medium height, he had dark brown curls which—because this was 1970—he allowed to grow down over his collar. He had nice full lips, chestnut brown eyes that were lustrous and laughed and, as far as we could tell through his clothes, a beautiful physique. Quite early on he developed the habit of turning up (by coincidence?) in the restaurant's gents' toilet from time to time if I happened to be having a pee there, and having a pee himself. He did this quite flamboyantly, happily showing off his cock and, when he caught sight of

me giving it a glance, smiling quite brazenly in my face. He had something to smile about: although he was of about the same height and build as Harry and I were, his cock was on a larger scale than either of ours. That was a matter of interest but of no great importance. Similarly, he was circumcised, which Harry and I are not. I found that cute, but again hardly eyebrow-raising. Just one of those things. Okay, that's two of those things—but life's like that. Inevitably... you know what's coming next, I think... those moments of glancing across at each other's equipment grew ever so slightly longer as the weeks passed, and so, I have to admit, did our cocks. Eventually things reached a point at which we had difficulty stowing them away each time, since they would both be almost fully erect. Neither of us commented on this, but we'd mug a grin or a grimace at each other as we tried to stuff them back where they belonged. I had no intention of taking this any further, for all Olivier's physical and personal charms. First, I was committed to being faithful to Harry, and hadn't found that difficult up to that time, and secondly, Olivier was our employee, so that was that.

One night that summer I sensed a difference in Harry when we got to bed. He'd come back from a meeting with suppliers in London and had spent the evening being nervy and irritable and tense. In bed he felt different somehow, like a car that has been driven by someone else. And he had a different smell. I spent some time that night mulling over all this as I lay awake. By the next morning I'd come to the conclusion, though I said nothing at all about it, that he actually had been driven by somebody else.

I bided my time. And then there came another day when Harry was out somewhere, doing business on behalf of both of us. I had some time off in the afternoon and so did Olivier. We coincided in the toilet as we finished work. I looked at his handsome, full-grown penis as he rather slowly tucked it away, and said to him baldly, boldly, "Nice afternoon, don't you think? Wonder if you'd fancy driving up to the Warren for a walk?" Despite all his previous signals in the course of the preceding months, I knew there was still the chance he'd say no to that, but he did not.

Folkestone Warren was a bit of a paradise for lovers. It probably still is. An undulating criss-cross of chalk paths and grassy clearings among bushes and small dense trees atop the white cliffs. There was a good view of the sea too in

places and, when the day was clear, of France. France wasn't visible that afternoon as it happened, but we hadn't gone up there for that. The sun shone hotly, brightly on us at least.

Olivier was more than beautiful once he'd stripped. Tanned and cutely muscled. Almost without body hair, except for one dark arrow of it, pointing down from a little above his navel, and merging eventually with the soft fur collar that encircled his little balls and big wagging dick. Not that I'd expected less. He paid me the compliment of saying I looked good too, and that he liked my cock. That though it was a size smaller, he thought it more beautiful than his. More elegant, he said, more stylish and more shapely. He was simply charmed by the idea of a foreskin, I now think, looking back. He lay down on the grass on his back, smiling up at me, and wordlessly, though with eloquently raised knees and parted thighs, invited me to enter him. And without any difficulty—he must have been used to this—I did.

He did something I never saw anyone do before or since. As I rode him most enjoyably, propped on my hands as if doing push-ups, enjoying the sight of his rigid dick beneath me bouncing a little in time to my thrusts, and almost ready to come inside him, he came suddenly himself, without any help from his or my hand, raining milk-white threads of semen all up his tummy and onto his chest. It looked, since his spurts seemed to coincide exactly with my thrusts, as though my own sperm were pumping through him, the outpourings of my own cock channelled mysteriously out through his. It goes without saying that I came immediately after that. Then I lay forward and we kissed each other happily for half a minute. "Are you okay?" I asked him tenderly, and he said he was. For a minute or two I believed myself to be in love.

That was a feeling that dissipated on the car journey down the hill. By the time we were back in Dover my heart was as heavy as lead. I hadn't gone off with a random stranger by way of paying Harry out for whatever he'd done in London a few days back. I'd fucked our chef, with whom Harry and I would have to go on working now, day in, day out. Only we didn't. Olivier gave in his notice within a week, then left. Which made me feel ten times worse.

Of course it all came out. It nearly always does. Harry and I experienced a week or two of awfulness and separate beds, during which it seemed the floor

had opened up and swallowed us, and taken us to hell. Yes, he'd met someone in London. Yes, I'd fucked the chef. We picked over every squalid detail endlessly, even though it was like rummaging in a box of drawing-pins: there was nothing to be encountered there that didn't hurt. We went to hell, yet we came back. Somehow we forgave each other, and discovered once again as the weeks passed how much we were in love. Love does that. And, because we were both human, not creatures from some angelic mould, similar falls from grace occurred a few more times during those early years. More often, if I'm honest, on my part, not his. We suffered the pain of discovery anew each time, the shaming humiliation of it, no less horribly than before. Yet again, and yet again, love healed us every time, and has kept us together since.

Charlie and Pete died ten years ago, just six months apart. They left the whole business to us, the restaurant, the two pubs, as they'd told us they intended to in advance. We'd started penniless, Harry and I, two poor kids from two poor streets four miles apart. Now we had a thriving business, or three to be precise, to run and to build up. Something that would cushion us, when the time came, in later life. We were determined to manage things carefully, make a go of the business just as Pete and Charlie had done before us, and so far we've done all right.

Five years after Pete and Charlie died—five years ago in other words—two lads came into the Red Fox one evening, then again the next night. I happened to be working behind the bar there on both nights. I couldn't help noticing them, then taking a particular interest in them, for reasons which will become obvious as I set the details out. They were two blond fellows of about eighteen, I guessed. Both rather shorter than average height, but showing enough muscle through their clothing to suggest they were both fit and would be able to take care of themselves, if things came to it, in a fight. They looked rather alike, though not so much alike that they might be actual twins: there was no question in my mind about that. The resemblance was heightened by the identical uniforms they both wore. They were junior ratings—as Harry and I had been long before—in Her Majesty's Navy. They were also—their body language gave it away—very much in love. I could see their frustration with their situation: it was expressed through their engine-running, drumming legs.

I went over to them, smiling inside, though with quite a serious expression on my face, I think. “Listen, you two,” I said to them. “I’m Will, and I run this place with Harry, my mate. Just thought I’d tell you this and—just in case you ever need a place to stay the night...”

They moved into one of the spare rooms that very evening, Alfie and Rick, and have lived with us when on leave ever since. A year ago they quit the navy, and started to work with us, helping to manage the pubs and restaurant, full time.

Today, after Harry and I made our wills in favour of our two young friends, our boys, the four of us had a celebration meal—at a restaurant that wasn’t ours, for once. We lingered at table after we’d finished eating, over another bottle of wine. Alfie was a little pink in the face by now, and ready to be mildly indiscreet. He’s still only twenty-three. He said, addressing Harry and me, “Do you remember the moment at which the scales tipped?”

“In what way exactly?” Harry asked, frowning a little across the table.

“I mean,” said Alfie earnestly, “the moment when it all clicked into place, The moment when the new person in your life, the one you talk about excitedly to your friends, is suddenly off-limits to everyone else. He’s become un-talkable-about. D’you understand what I mean? The moment when he’s suddenly become a very private space. You talk to him, but not about him anymore. It’s like you’re one person now, not two, and that God, or whatever there may be, has drawn a veil of privacy over the two of you that nobody else can lift.”

“That’s rather beautifully put, Alfie,” I said. But I didn’t answer his question straight away. Instead I asked him very gently, “When did that happen to you and Rick?”

Alfie didn’t hesitate before answering but plunged straight in. “It was the moment that second evening in the Red Fox, when you came over and talked to us. It happened then, didn’t it, Rick?” Rick nodded energetically. Alfie wanted to get back to his original question, though. “But what about you and Harry? When did you first know you were a couple? Your first night in the Red Fox with Charlie and Pete, all those years ago? Or not till after that?”

“I think it was earlier,” I said, after a second’s thought. I glanced across the table. “Don’t you?” Now it was Harry’s turn to nod. Encouraged, I went on. “I think we sort of knew on our first evening on Spice Island, in Portsmouth.” I looked across to Harry again, suddenly feeling diffident and needing his support. Again he nodded, smiling. In that second nod of Harry’s I saw suddenly his very first nod to me, a nod from one lonely boy at a bar counter to another one at an alcove table on his own. And at that moment I saw Harry as his sixteen-year-old self again, fresh-faced and starry-eyed, with dark blond hair. I turned back to Alfie. “I think God, or whatever may be, had earmarked us for a couple even before we met.” I found I was struggling suddenly with my voice.

THE END

Author Bio

*Anthony McDonald is the author of five gay-themed novels. Adam is an acknowledged coming-of-age classic. Blue Sky Adam takes that story six years further on. Getting Orlando combines thriller with love story in a novel of adventure and travel. Orange Bitter, Orange Sweet opens a Spanish trilogy: six young people who meet in Seville in 1977 grow to maturity in Along The Stars. He is currently working on the final part of the trilogy: Woodcock Flight. His erotic gay fiction is published on Kindle under the name **Tony Pike**.*

Anthony has worked in the theatre in every capacity except electrician, and taught English in Paris and provincial France. He now lives in rural East Sussex, UK, among friends and with Pippin the Cat.

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ONE LOVE, ONE MISTAKE

By Kelly McGrath

Photo Description

A tattooed man with short, dark, spiky hair holds an adorably chubby baby. They are both in profile, faces pressed together, and the man is blowing a comical kiss to the delighted baby.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

One night of mistakes... and I lost him.

I loved him and seduced him for months (I am a notorious player,) and when we tried to have a relationship, my past came back to haunt me. One random consolation fuck with a co-worker, and here comes a baby. The responsible thing to do would be to marry the mother... right? But my lover will not go along with being put in the closet, so he left.

But we finally meet again... and now he is my son's paediatrician. I never thought my son would be the one who put us together again. I finally have the second chance to prove that I'm ready to settle down with him and build a family.

Thanks, son!

Sincerely,

Jann29

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: medical personnel, sweet no sex, men with children, reunited

Content warnings: off-screen m/f noncon/dubcon

Word count: 10,537

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ONE LOVE, ONE MISTAKE

By Kelly McGrath

PROLOGUE

“Oh God! Oh God, oh God, oh God.”

The heart-crushing whimper came from somewhere near the door as Sean’s mind pulled him from sleep. Looking over to the doorway he saw Anthony leaning against the doorframe with a stricken look on his face.

“What’s wrong, babe?” Sean asked in a voice gravelly from the desert that had taken root in his throat, the sound sending shooting pains through his head. If anything, Ant’s face went even more pallid as he wavered on the spot. Just as Sean was about to pull his ass out of bed to go to Ant, he felt the mattress shift before he had even found the strength to lift a finger. *What the Hell!*

Thoughts raced through his head as he looked over his shoulder, belatedly realising there was a woman next to him. *A very naked woman!* What the hell was Cho doing in his bed? She was the bane of his existence at work. Looking down at himself, it was blatantly clear that he was also naked, and, even worse, judging by the cum stains on the sheets—making them stick to him in odd places—and the dried fluids on his cock, he had very recently had sex. *With a woman!* No wonder Ant was now practically being held up by the door frame, Sean felt like he was going to pass out himself. What the hell had happened?

He didn’t remember much of the work party the night before. Ant had been on shift at the hospital and hadn’t been able to make it, so Sean had gone on his own. Still not used to being in a relationship, he hadn’t thought much of it even though Ant had seemed a little peeved, even going so far as to mention the wicked witch currently lying next to him as a reason not to go. Ant liked her even less than Sean did, and judging by the current situation, he seemed to have every right. How the hell had this happened?

Jumping up out of the bed with more speed than he had thought himself possible of, he rooted around the floor for his boxers. Falling over a pair of

women's shoes, he landed flat on his ass, jarring his already aching limbs and brain into full-blown wakefulness. Not good. Before, they had only been dull aches as if they hadn't woken up yet either, now they were definitely making themselves known. With the sound of the thud as his body hit the floor came the louder sound of the door slamming and stumbling footsteps down the hall.

Pulling himself off of the floor and taking a final glance at the woman in the bed, he stumbled his way out of the room on legs that were so wobbly that he bounced off of every wall along the way. He didn't care how much he hurt, how confused he was over what had happened; Sean just knew that if Ant walked out the door there was no way that he would come back. Racing after Ant as fast as he could through the house, Sean saw, out of the corner of his eye, the breakfast stuff on the side table that Ant had obviously picked up on his way to see him after his shift. Finally catching up to Ant as he fumbled with the locks on the front door, Sean grabbed for his arm, making him turn around to look at him.

The droop in his shoulders and the tears streaming down Ant's face tore something in Sean chest. They hadn't been together long, only about six months, but it had been long enough for Sean to fall head-over-heels in love with him, contrary to what he had wanted. From the moment they had met, he had known that there was something different about Ant, and for a man that had only ever wanted to get laid and sow his wild oats in as many greeneries as he could, he had been swept away. Ant was sex on legs without even realising it—he didn't flaunt himself like all the other guys that Sean had been with, he was more natural.

Before Sean had a chance to say anything, though, and still not quite sure what he had planned on saying, Ant took a deep, ragged breath, seeming to get himself under control and to quell the tears, he looked Sean straight in the eyes.

When he spoke, his toneless voice nearly brought Sean to his knees. "How could you? Why would you do it? You don't even like women—you're gay, for crying out loud. Or was that a lie? I knew you were a player when we got together but I thought we had something. Was I wrong? Do you feel nothing for me—is this your way of getting out of this relationship? You could have

just said that you didn't want to be with me anymore. You didn't have to—to—to do th-th-*this!*” At that Anthony broke, covering his mouth with his hand as he turned and practically sprinted from the house.

Over the next few weeks Sean tried talking to Ant, but he wouldn't take Sean's calls and wouldn't even acknowledge him when Sean showed up at his door.

He had tried talking to Cho at work, but she just kept avoiding him as well—even though the few times he saw her looking his way, she seemed extremely pleased with herself for some reason. As much as he tried to remember how he had ended up in bed with Cho, he just couldn't. The last thing he remembered was being on the dance floor after a few too many drinks, but after that, there was nothing. He didn't even remember leaving, and he certainly didn't remember how he had gotten home.

Just as he was about to make one last try at getting Ant back after two months, Cho finally came to talk to him. And talk to him she did, telling that she had been after him for years, even knowing that he was gay, but figuring that if he had the right woman he wouldn't be anymore. *Delusional woman!* But she also revealed that she had spiked his drink, and that was why he didn't remember anything. She said that he had been great in bed and that they should stay together. When he asked her why she had been avoiding him if she thought they should be together, she simply replied that she had gotten what she had wanted and didn't want to listen to him whine and moan.

“Why are you here now, then! You can't honestly think that we would be together?” Sean bellowed at her, shaking with rage at the woman who had caused him to lose everything.

“It seems that after our little tryst, something very unexpected happened. Even though I was on the pill and thought that we were safe, it seems that the alcohol in my system and the leftover antibiotics from the week before when I was sick inhibited the pill.”

At this point Sean thought he might pass out with what she was saying. He had a feeling he knew what was coming but there was no way in hell that it

could possibly be! Hands sweating, he clenched them in front of him, waiting for her to continue.

Taking a deep breath, she finally put her hands at her sides and raised her head to look up at him with what could only be described as a smirk on her face.

“I’m pregnant.”

CHAPTER ONE

He loved his son, AJ, he really did, but there were just times that Sean wished that he wasn't on his own with him. Three o'clock in the morning, with only three hours of sleep in the last twenty-four was definitely one of those times. He had thought that by doing the right thing by Cho and the baby everything would be okay. *Damn!* He had been so wrong! Yes, he had felt trapped, but there was no way in hell he would leave any child of his to grow up without him. He hadn't planned on having a kid, feeling that for that to happen he would need to settle down and stop playing the field. Granted, that had started to change.

Anthony had been the start of that, come to think of it. He *had* started to settle down, he just hadn't realised it fully at the time. Too bad the settling down had been with the wrong person, let alone gender. Anthony had been a great man, a doctor in Waterford University Hospital, and a total hottie to boot. He was a kind, generous man that everyone who knew him looked up to. In the time since Sean had found out about the baby, he had been trying to forget about Anthony, though, because what was the point? Anthony was never going to be in his life again. Between his past and now AJ—no, it was better just to let go of the memories of a life that was no longer available to him.

He had done the right thing in marrying Cho, or at least he thought so at the time. Now he was left without the one thing that he had grown to crave since being with Anthony—the love of a good man.

Cho left him not long after the baby was born; she hadn't wanted to be a mother and had no maternal instincts what-so-ever. The only reason she kept the baby had been in hope that it would bring them together the way she wanted. Once she finally realised that would never happen, she gave up.

Being stuck in a loveless marriage, well, that part Sean understood, but he still couldn't forgive her for leaving their child. He hadn't loved her, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he had thought that they were in this together, raising their child together so that AJ would have two loving parents.

That was all he wanted for his child. He knew that he could and would make a go of it on his own—he would do anything for his child.

From the moment AJ was born, Sean loved him. He hadn't expected to have quite the connection with his child as he had, but there it was. He couldn't explain it, but it was real. AJ was a part of him, his flesh and blood. For his child, he would move mountains, and he felt sometimes as if he had. It had been hard there at the beginning after Cho had left. AJ had only been four weeks old at the time, and there was no way that Sean was going to pawn him off on someone to look after... not that there hadn't been loads of offers.

His parents were great, they had come and stayed with him for the first few days while he figured out what his next step would be. He wanted to do right by his child, and therefore took a sabbatical from work so that he could raise AJ on his own, and figure out what to do. His employer offered to allow him to work from home; being a data analyst meant he could work from anywhere so long as he had a computer and an Internet connection.

It had been working out okay for them, except for the lack of sleep. He had started to figure out what AJ's different cries were, but the one that he was hearing at the moment was one he hadn't heard before. Vaulting out of bed in nothing but his boxers, as AJ's cries got progressively louder from the whimper it had started out being, Sean made his way over to the little cot at the side of his room. It had been given to him by his mother, who had kept it from when he had been a baby, hoping, as all mothers do, that it could be passed down. Being an only child, he was her only hope. His parents had always known that he was gay—that didn't stop the badgering to settle down with a nice man and start a family.

Looking down at his son, he noticed that AJ was red and blotchy from crying and scrunched up in a tight ball as if in pain—and he wasn't kicking out his little legs and arms as he usually did, this looked more like flailing. Not knowing what could be wrong, he immediately lifted AJ from the cot, automatically making sure to support his head.

He brought the baby to his bare chest, cradling him there rocking to and fro, AJ's face moved automatically into the hollow between Sean's neck and shoulder. He couldn't get over how much AJ had grown in his short three

months of life; it seemed only yesterday that Sean had brought him home from the hospital able to hold AJ's head in his hand while the baby's bum rested on his forearm.

From the minute they had gotten AJ home, Cho had moved into the spare room, leaving AJ with his father in the main bedroom. The only reason they had shared a bed in the first place was because she had hoped it would lead to something, and when she realised it wouldn't he had still insisted on it. He had become used to feeling his child kicking him in the back when Cho curled up behind him and was loath to lose that.

After the baby was born, the only times she had gotten up at night when the baby woke was so that she could get the breast pump, and even then the only reason she even did that was because she was starting to hurt. She would go to the kitchen, use the pump, leave the milk and pump on the counter, and go back to bed.

Coming out of his musings, he noticed the screaming had quietened to a whimper, but this only lasted for a couple of minutes before it started again, only worse this time. Laying AJ down on his bed, Sean stripped him of all his nightclothes and checked his nappy. Nappy empty, he figured that that wasn't the issue. AJ did seem a little warm though, so he picked up his nappy-clad baby and started walking around the room rubbing his back, willing to try anything to help his son even if it meant walking for hours.

After two hours of nonstop crying, and Sean trying everything he could think of—from walking around his room for an hour, because even if he wore a hole through the shag rug on the floor then it would be worth it; to giving AJ a bath to see if that would help—he was finally at his wits' end. Why had his parents decided that this weekend would be a good weekend for a trip away? His mother always knew what was wrong and would have been there in fifteen minutes if he asked.

Starting to worry and not knowing what was wrong, he placed AJ in his carry-cot and rushed around, throwing on whatever clothes he could find and grabbing his wallet and keys. His only option left was to go to Accident & Emergency at the hospital. Strapping the carry-cot into the back of his car, he made the ten-minute drive to WUH.

Scrambling through the doors of A&E, Sean could only imagine what the nurse at the desk was thinking looking at him. Unshaven, with his tattoos, black spiky hair, and ear rings, he knew he looked like some punk-biker, but on top of all that, he caught a glimpse of himself in the reflective glass of the A&E doors and realised he was wearing a pink “Don’t Read In The Closet – M/M Romance Group” T-shirt... and carrying a screaming baby that had some obvious Korean descent.

Well, he wasn’t sure if it was a look of sympathy or wariness on the nurse’s face. Not caring about anything other than his crying baby, he rushed to the desk. Placing the carry-cot on the ground carefully, he lifted his tearful baby out and cradled him against his shoulder trying to soothe him. Turning back to the nurse Sean explained why he was there with just a touch of near-hysteria threading through his voice.

“Hi, I’m Sean Keogh, this is my son AJ. He started crying at about three a.m. and I haven’t been able to settle him since. He’s a little clammy, I tried to bring his temperature down by bathing him, but it doesn’t seem to be high enough for a fever and he doesn’t seem to have any kind of rash. I have winded him, checked his nappy but nothing seems to be working. He has been curling up into a ball as if he is in pain and I have checked him over as much as I could but I can’t see anything that it could possibly be.”

He knew he was rambling but couldn’t stop.

“I just don’t know what’s wrong and he won’t stop crying and I’m starting to get worried. My mother usually knows what’s wrong but she’s away and I don’t have anyone else to ask. Is there someone that can look at him, can you tell me what’s wrong with him?”

Sean had been looking at AJ through the last half of his quavering speech, all the while keeping a smile on his face for his son. They said that babies could pick up on tension, so he tried to remain as calm as he could. When he finally looked up expecting the nurse to say something, it came as a total shock to see that the nurse was no longer standing right in front of him, but was now standing behind the most gorgeous man that he had ever seen—tall, lithe, a five o’clock shadow gracing the jaw of a face that could have been chiselled by the gods, and bright emerald-green eyes looking at him with a

peculiar expression that he couldn't read. A man he had never thought to see again... and a man that hadn't left Sean's dreams since that fateful morning after AJ had been conceived.

Sean breathed the name, as if he said it out loud the Adonis would disappear.

“Anthony.”

CHAPTER TWO

Dr Anthony Ryan couldn't believe his eyes. The last person he expected to see coming into A&E in the early hours of the morning on his first shift here in nearly a year was Sean Keogh. God, had he missed the man! Even after everything that had happened between them. He had known that Sean was a player when they first started seeing each other, but he thought that after six months together that Sean was actually starting to leave his old ways behind him. They had been seeing each other more and more on their time off, they spent every night together when he wasn't on the night shift—and when he was, he would go to Sean's with breakfast, and they would spend the rest of the morning in bed just loving each other until it was time for Sean to go to work.

Sean had even given him a key to his place not two weeks before *The Incident*, which was why it had hurt so much. He had come in from work that morning with breakfast for them both, knowing that Sean probably hadn't eaten much the day before, only to find him in bed with that Cho bitch. Anthony had known the minute he met her that she was after Sean, but when he told Sean as much, Sean had just laughed it off.

Obviously Sean had only been covering the fact that he had already known, and he'd been waiting for the right time to do what he was good at. Anthony had just never realised that Sean was bi; if he had, he would have been a bit more cautious about the company he kept. He hated the fact that he had been so unwary with his partner.

The chance to move to another hospital couldn't have come at a better time for Anthony. A colleague in Sligo had been hit with some hard times, and had asked him to cover for him in his own hospital for a few months. Within two weeks of him walking into Sean's house to see him in bed with a woman, Anthony had closed up his house, leaving his parents to keep an eye on it, and was living in Sligo. He knew that Sean had tried to get in touch with him for weeks, before and after he left, but just hadn't had it in him to speak to the man that had broken his heart. He knew it had been cowardly, but his heart just couldn't take it.

Even now, looking at the man across the counter of the nurses' station with his dishevelled hair, unshaven panicked face and a now-screaming baby on his shoulder, his mind and heart were warring with each other. His whole body wanted to melt into a puddle on the floor in front of the man who had been the star of his dreams for months, take a hold of him and wrap his arms around both the man and child to protect them from the world. The other part of him wanted to rail at the man who had broken his heart and that he just couldn't seem to get over.

But, ever the professional, Anthony inclined his head to Sean and held his arms out.

"Mr Keogh. May I take a look at the child?" He sounded a bit more detached than he would have liked; being professional was one thing, being rude was another.

Sean handed the child over to him with what seemed like more ease than you would see with most parents, even ones that were at their wits' end. It felt like a completely natural movement. Not wanting to think too much on that, Anthony walked from around the desk and moved to one of the curtained examination areas, knowing without turning around that Sean was following on his heels. The sheer presence of the man was overwhelming.

Placing the child on the examination bed, Anthony pulled down the U-cushion they used for babies to stop them rolling, and started examining him while asking Sean some routine questions.

"What is the child's name?"

"AJ... Anthony John." Came the hesitant reply.

With his heart racing, Anthony looked away from the child for a moment, his eyes moving to Sean and searching for confirmation. The gleam of love and pain he saw there was not something that he had been expecting and not something he was likely to dwell on at the moment. *That look was for the child, you idiot, not you!*

"Um, okay, does he always cry like this at night?" Ignoring the fumbling of his own words, and the way his heart was about to jump out of his chest and straight into the other man's arms, he continued to try to remain professional, knowing he was doing a piss poor job at it.

“This is the first time I’ve heard this cry—I know all his cries and I have never heard this one before. What’s wrong, Ant? Please tell me he’ll be okay. Is it something I’ve done?” The panic was starting to creep back into Sean’s voice, Anthony noticed, and Sean hadn’t even realised that he had called Anthony by his old pet name—no one had ever called him Ant, only Sean. It seemed that whatever was going through Sean’s mind since they first saw each other in the waiting room was being pushed back as his focus moved completely to his son.

Anthony continued speaking and asking questions as he looked after the baby. He still couldn’t get over the fact that Sean had given the child his name—what was that about? What didn’t he know? But he was getting away from himself. There could be another logical explanation for the child being called Anthony; considering Sean was the Gaelic version of John, the baby was named after Sean, as well. He couldn’t remember Sean saying anything about any of his family having the same name, or even the Gaelic version, Antóin.

Not that he cared anyway, he didn’t care what this man did or didn’t do; his main focus right now was the baby. He couldn’t think of him as AJ, it hurt too much, and as soon as the baby was well again, they would both be out of his life and he could go back to the way they had been this last year. *What a depressing thought!*

Looking over at the carry-cot Sean had brought into the exam room, he saw a soft blanket and pulled it out, folding it on the bed next to crying baby the way he needed it.

“If Cho...” he stumbled over the bitch’s name, “...is breast feeding, you need to tell her to stop eating dairy products for a while. Actually, you better go out and get her so that I can tell her this as well.”

When Sean didn’t move like Anthony hoped he would, leave the room and get Cho from wherever she was and granting him the space he needed to get his head straight, he looked over at Sean with a question in his eyes.

“Cho doesn’t breast feed. She left when AJ was four weeks old. She resented that the baby didn’t bring me to her bed like she hoped. She finally

realised that I was gay and that she couldn't change me. She never wanted AJ, and when she realised that even pregnant with my baby I still wouldn't sleep with her, she wanted to get rid of him. But with the abortion laws in Ireland, she couldn't."

The look on Sean's face nearly broke his heart all over again—the anger for the woman who could do something like that, and the love as he looked at his son—and melted a little bit of the anger Anthony felt toward him. He had heard through the grapevine that Sean and Cho had gotten married in a quiet civil ceremony about two months after he had left for Sligo... and that she was pregnant. He had assumed that they were in love and having a baby together. From what Sean was now saying, that didn't seem to be the case at all. It seemed as though Cho had trapped Sean.

All the messages that Sean had left for him, all the times that Sean had tried to get in contact with him saying that he didn't remember what had happened that night, the anguish in his voice... maybe it had been real. Maybe there had been something between them after all.

Sean continued talking as though he hadn't just turned Anthony's world upside down.

"I found out about AJ the same time I found out that she had spiked my drink that night. *That* was why I didn't remember what happened, and how I ended up in bed with a woman. She told me later that she had been sick of me talking about you all the time, and that I just needed the right woman to be straight, that I wasn't really gay. I had been planning something that night for when you got home in the morning and was telling the girls about it during the party. She... snapped, said she spiked my drink knowing that she would be able to get me into bed, and that you were coming over the next morning and would see us." The derision in Sean's voice sent a bolt of what could only be described as hope through Anthony.

Sean took a deep breath at this point, looking as if he had more that he wanted to say, but Anthony just couldn't bring himself to hear it. Needing to squash the feelings starting to well up inside himself, instead he cut Sean off, and tried with every last ounce of willpower left in his body to stop the shaking he could feel in his body and heart.

“He has colic.” he stated simply, applauding himself for the calm he portrayed in that one line, even as he was a bag of jitters inside.

CHAPTER THREE

“Oh God, that’s bad isn’t it?” Sean asked as he raced the two paces over to the examination bed his beautiful baby was lying on. Scooping AJ up into his arms as if to protect him from everything, Sean turned pleading, tear-filled, fearful eyes to Anthony.

He couldn’t cope if anything happened to his baby; he had already lost one man he loved, there was no way that he would survive the loss of another. Looking at his baby boy in his arms, he shushed him, rocking him and rubbing his back, AJ’s eyes a deep hazel colour so much more vibrant than his own. Life in general had dulled Sean’s eyes, and lack of sleep didn’t help either. If it meant his son was healthy, he would give his sight or his life for him.

Looking up at Anthony, he was surprised to see a smile on his face and an emotion in his eyes that made Sean’s heart skip a beat. How could he be smiling when AJ was sick? That made him angry, and he was about to blast Anthony when the other man put one hand on Sean’s arm and the other on AJ’s back, so close to his that every time his hand made an upward swipe on AJ’s back their hands met. Even that barest touch calmed him and sent sparks shooting through his body.

“He’s fine, about twenty-five per cent of babies his age get colic—it is more like indigestion and cramping than anything else. Give him over here and we’ll see what we can do.” Anthony plucked AJ right out of Sean’s arms, and he was too stunned by not only the sensation of Anthony so close to him, but the *we* in Anthony’s statement.

Following Anthony back over to the bed, Sean watched as he laid AJ down on the folded blanket and started wrapping him in it. Sean lost sight of the process, even though he knew he should be watching closely so that he could replicate it himself in future. But he was too busy watching the man with his son—the way he handled him so gently, as if AJ were the most precious thing in the world to him. As if he was also AJ’s father.

It was something Sean had dreamt about for months, that it was Anthony he was having a baby with, not the woman who was AJ’s mother. Obviously

that was not something that could ever happen, but dreams were fantasies, and he had read enough sci-fi in his life to have an active imagination.

Once Anthony had finished the complicated-looking wrapping of the blanket around AJ, Anthony proceeded to lay the baby over his arm and onto his little belly. As soon as AJ was positioned where Anthony wanted him, holding the baby's head under his chin and rubbing his back slightly, AJ's crying stopped practically instantaneously.

Sean couldn't believe it, he sagged with relief and stumbled to sit on the edge of the bed in front of them. With a shaking hand, he reached over to AJ's face to wipe the tears stains from his baby's face and saw that AJ was fast asleep, his eyes closed and huffing softly.

"Thank you." He ducked his head as he whispered to the man he loved, a man he knew he could never have—but he was also the man that had helped his child, and would forever be the man that no one else could live up to. Not that Sean ever wanted anyone else to try.

Clearing his throat, Sean looked to Anthony, hoping that now his son was asleep and no longer in pain, Anthony wasn't going to leave the room and send the nurse in to deal with everything else. To his ultimate surprise, not only did Anthony not leave the room, but he came over and sat down on the side of the bed next to Sean, not even attempting to hand the baby over. He seemed content to just sit there holding the baby who Sean so wished was theirs, not just his. Sitting there, barely breathing, hoping that if he didn't make any movements then Anthony would stay there with him. Staring at the man next to him, he tried to commit as much of this scene to his memory so as to never forget it.

Sean had no doubt that this would never happen again; no, he hadn't deliberately set out to hurt Anthony, that had been Cho, but there are just some things that the heart can't get over. He had a feeling that what happened between Anthony and himself was one of those things. But he hoped that someday Anthony would forgive him. God, he would love to be able to fix things between them, but even if he did, why would any free single man want be saddled raising a child that wasn't his *and* had been conceived in the

situation that they were in? *None, that's how many!* He didn't think he could do it, seeing the reminder every day of the act that had hurt him so much.

So he sat there quietly, not moving, not saying anything, just watching Anthony with his son and willing his heart to stop hoping for something that could never be. He knew he needed to crush this dwindling hope that was trying desperately to spark in his chest just from looking at the two of them.

Anthony broke the silence after a while. Sean didn't know how long they sat there next to each other, shoulders brushing with each inhale of breath taken. The first thing that was said was possibly the only thing Sean had been expecting, but was also the one thing he didn't want to hear.

"I should be leaving soon. I'm the only one on duty, and I'm surprised they haven't called for me already."

Standing up from the bed, Anthony bent down while still cradling AJ in his arms to pick up the carry-cot, but Sean reached out and did it for him, placing it on the exam bed. Anthony lowered AJ into the cot, making sure that he was comfortable, and ran his finger over the soft cheek peeking out through the blanket. The action was so tender, it made Sean's heart cry out for the man he had lost and the father that he had denied his son.

If he hadn't had the reputation that he had back when he and Anthony had been together, they might have been able to work it out. There was no hope of that happening; he didn't think there was any way Anthony could trust him again. What little trust Sean had earned disappeared after the conception of AJ.

It hadn't been his fault, and it wasn't like he had done what he had done willingly—Sean knew that even though Anthony now knew that he had been drugged, something tenuous had been broken between them. He realised now that they really hadn't known each other that well after all was said and done. If they had, Anthony would have known that there was no way that he would sleep with a woman of his own free will, that he wasn't bi and would never have done what Anthony accused him of. All Anthony had known was that Sean was a player, but not what had made him that way. He wasn't as cold-hearted as most thought, he had just been unable to bare his emotions the way that most would.

His very first boyfriend back in school had played him. Sean had loved him, or at least it had felt that way at the time, he knew differently now. What he had felt for Tomas was nothing compared to what he felt for Anthony even back when they had first started seeing each other. There had been something about Anthony. He couldn't put his finger on it then, now he knew it was something akin to them being kindred spirits.

He had come to realise that they had both wanted the same things, both were looking for a family to call their own. Sean had found his, granted, in an unorthodox way, now all he needed was to complete his family.

Making up his mind even though he didn't think that he had a hope in hell of succeeding—but as his mother always said, “God loves a trier, but hates a chancer”—he had to try. He also knew that this would be it for him, and there wouldn't be any other. There was one person out there for everyone, their soul mate, and he had come to realise that Anthony was his. It was time to show the man he loved that he had changed, that he had changed because of him. When Tomas slept with his best friend back in school, he had been devastated, and swore that he would never let anyone close enough again to hurt him like Tomas and Shirley had. It had been ironic, really, that his boyfriend had slept with the girl next door just simply to break up with him. The coward hadn't even had the balls to do it himself, but had set up a stage for Sean to walk in on, exactly the same as Cho had done. It had broken something in his child's heart when they had done that, but it had been nothing compared to the break in his soul when he lost Anthony.

The first time, he had been lost, and he had lashed out at everyone since, keeping them at a distance and using people the only way he knew how to keep them there. He had become a player. This time though, he had gained something from his time with Anthony, he had learned respect, not only for others but also for himself. Anthony had made him stronger.

CHAPTER FOUR

Anthony didn't know what Sean was thinking as he stood there looking at him; he seemed to be in his own world making some kind of decision. Whatever it was, there was a look of determination in his eyes and something that looked very much like hope, all mixed together with a deep-seated sadness that had the potential to burn a hole through Anthony's heart. Whatever it was, it sent thrills through Anthony and set his gut to churning.

He knew he shouldn't care what Sean was thinking or what he was deciding, but after Sean's revelations there was a small part of Anthony that felt a little guilty for not allowing Sean to talk to him. From the sounds of it, Sean had needed him and he hadn't been there for him—and that crushed another piece of Anthony's anger and directed the majority of what was left over at Cho for what she had done. She had messed with and ruined so many lives, not just AJ's, the son she had abandoned, but she had ruined his relationship with Sean—hurting them both, it seemed.

Looking down at the baby in the carry-cot, his heart broke just that little bit more. Even with everything that had happened between him and Sean, he was a little bit jealous of Sean for getting the family that he, himself, had always wanted, even if it wasn't in the best circumstances. He would give anything to be able to be there for Sean and AJ like he should have been since the beginning. He couldn't imagine how angry Sean must be at him; they had been doing so well together, but he hadn't trusted Sean enough to even hear him out, abandoning him when he was needed the most.

Even if Sean wasn't angry with him, how could Sean ever trust *him* again? If the tables were turned, he didn't know how he would be able to cope with what Sean had gone through and not be angry with everyone around him, especially someone who was supposed to be there for him but wasn't. How he could do that to the man he supposedly loved? He'd just given up on him, and Anthony was mortally ashamed of himself for it.

Without even looking up from the sleeping baby, he could feel Sean's eyes boring into his back. There was no menace there, but it seemed as if whatever had been going through Sean's mind, he was ready to say something.

Taking a deep fortifying breath, Anthony turned to look into the deepest-hazel eyes that had haunted his dreams since the day he walked out the door of Sean's house. The pain and confusion in those gorgeous eyes that day still stole all the breath from his lungs. Now all he saw was determination and...

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

They both said it in unison. Sean's gaze turned questioning as Anthony felt his face turn a light shade of red.

"What do you have to be sorry for?" Sean demanded. "*You* didn't do anything wrong, I was the one that hurt you. If I hadn't kept myself so closed off, and opened myself up to you like I should have, you wouldn't have believed that I would have slept with Cho in the first place. This is all my fault, and I pray to God that you can forgive me, that we can at least be friends.

"I have missed you so much—and I don't mean just in my bed, I mean in my life. I have missed having someone I can talk to. It's not quite the same talking to a baby, they can't understand you and can't tell you how much of an idiot you are." The slight smile that accompanied that comment made Sean's eyes twinkle in a way that Anthony loved to see.

"I should have talked to you," Anthony whispered. "I shouldn't have left the way I did. I let my own insecurities get in the way." Hanging his head in shame, he turned away from Sean, not wanting to see the confirmation in his face.

He felt Sean come up behind him, and was surprised when he felt arms hesitantly wrap around him and cradle him back against Sean's chest. Sean was a slight bit taller, not even half a head, but it was enough for them to fit comfortably together in this position. He had loved it when Sean used to hold him like this, and with a sigh he relaxed back into the embrace that he had missed as much as the man himself. There was so much going on in his head right now, he just wanted something to make it stop. He wanted to enjoy the feeling of being in this man's arms again.

Sean took his chin gently in his hand and slowly lifted, turning his head to face him while tightening his other arm around him at the same time. The look

he saw in Sean's eyes made his heart gallop in his chest and his breathing unsteady.

“It wasn't your insecurities that did the damage, it was my reputation, the by-product of *my* insecurities, that caused it.”

“But...”

“No ‘buts’.” Sean shushed him with a kiss to his neck. “I should have opened up. I came to realise that even though we had been together for over six months, we really didn't know each other that well. But if you would be willing, I would like to rectify that. I want for you to trust me again.”

The moan that escaped Anthony at the words, and the feel of them being whispered against his neck, was loud enough to make the baby stir in his sleep.

“I treated you so bad, how could you want to fix things between us? How could you ever forgive me, I can't even forgive my... oomph.” Anthony couldn't finish what he was saying because Sean's mouth came crashing down on his. The shock of the pleasurable assault on his mouth made him gasp, opening his mouth and giving Sean the opportunity to push his tongue past his lips to taste every inch. As soon as Anthony came to his senses he was a full participant in the kiss.

The feel of Sean's lips on his was divine, so was the feel of the solid body wrapped around him from behind. He had never felt anything to equal the sensations he felt when he was with Sean, it was as if the last eleven months hadn't happened, that they hadn't been apart at all. His senses were overwhelmed by the movement of muscle under his hands and the sensual musky smell of Sean, a smell he had longed to duplicate in the last few months but hadn't been able. It wasn't a scent of any aftershave, but the aroma of man, a man that he loved.

Breaking away slowly, loathing to do so, but needing to for both their sakes in order to breathe, Anthony turned in Sean's arms and placed his hands on Sean's pecs, feeling the rapid beat of Sean's heart under his fingers as he tried to rub away the tension he could feel there. He tucked his head into the crook of Sean's neck, and felt content for the first time in a long time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sean didn't know what had just happened. He hadn't meant to rush this, but seeing the shamed look in Anthony's eyes, he had wanted to do everything in his power to take that look away. To hear him talk about his insecurities, that he thought Sean should be angry at him—well, it had never crossed his mind. Sean knew it was all his fault, that he had made so many mistakes when it came to their relationship, and he couldn't handle it. All he had wanted to do was comfort Anthony, and hoped to God that he wouldn't push him away. When he had put his arms around him and Anthony hadn't rejected him, his heart had soared, but then to hear him talk about needing Sean's forgiveness—well, damn, that had been the last straw.

His better judgement had flown into the wind, and he had done the only thing he knew would stop Anthony from berating himself further. The kiss felt like coming home, like warm apple pies made in your nan's house, like summer mornings or a lit fire on a winter's night, curled in front of it under a blanket. Anthony's scent had curled around him exactly like that blanket, even under the tang of disinfectant and the innate hospital essence that clung to everything. But Sean had gotten used to that in the time they had been together, and it was as much a part of Anthony as anything else.

He prayed that it had been the right thing to do once they had stopped to catch their breath. He would have preferred to keep on kissing until they both passed out from it, but there was no way he would put Anthony in danger of getting hurt from passing out. Not to mention the fact that they were in the hospital where Anthony was currently on duty. But based on the way that Anthony was currently wrapped around him as if he never wanted to let go, and the way he was currently nuzzling into Sean's neck, it had hopefully been the right move.

The tension in his shoulders slowly dissipating under the ministrations of Anthony's hands, he laid his cheek next to Anthony's, and said—to his own surprise—something that he hadn't planned on sharing just yet... at least not until he had gained Anthony's trust again.

“I love you. I think I have since the first time I met you. I hadn't meant to kiss you like I did just then, but I'm so glad that I did. I don't want to rush you

and if you don't want me just tell me. I love you and I just want you happy, so if you would prefer never to see me again then I will respect that. But I want you, I want us to get to know each other properly this time, and I want you to be a part of this family.”

Feeling Anthony going stiff in his arms he forged ahead, until he had said everything he wanted to say before he was pushed away. He needed Anthony to know it all before that happened.

“I was hurt bad back when I was in school, it ruined the boy I was, and I lashed out and cut every possibility of hurt from my life. That's why I had been such a player when we first met, I think. But then I met you, and you changed me, you showed me that it was okay to let someone—the right someone—in. You are that one, the one person I want to spend the rest of my life with. When you left, the only thing that kept me going was this little guy.”

Looking over at his baby, he had so much to be grateful for. He turned back to Anthony to see him looking at AJ with a soft, tender expression on his face that Sean recognised from his own face.

“I want AJ to know the man that brought his father back from the brink and showed him how to love.”

There was a slight catch to Anthony's inhale as he turned his gaze on Sean. As he opened his mouth to answer, a nurse came barrelling into the exam room with a harassed expression on her face. Anthony slid out of Sean's arms gracefully and turned to face the nurse as if nothing was amiss at all.

“I'm sorry, Doctor, I tried to give you as much time as I could with Mr Keogh...” The comically devious grin that flashed across her face had Sean wondering just how much the nurse had figured out about what was going on.

“That's quite all right, Nurse, what seems to be the problem?” Ever the professional again, Anthony's face was devoid of any emotion as he looked at the nurse that had probably just ruined one of the most pivotal moments in his life.

“There has been a crash out on the new ring road with several injuries. I have most of everything ready but you are needed out there. They have an ETA of five minutes.”

“Thank you, Nurse, I will be with you momentarily.” Dismissing the nurse, Anthony turned back to Sean. “Keep the baby swaddled like that for as long as you can, lay him over your arm like I did earlier to help with the pressure in his tummy. I have to run but I will leave instructions at the front desk before you go home.”

And with that he was gone. Sean didn't know what to do. Anthony had still had his professional face on when he turned back around to speak to Sean, so he had no idea what had been going through his mind. Not knowing what else to do, and knowing that they would need the exam room for when the accident came in, he picked up the carry-cot and made his way back to the front desk.

While making his way back up front, he kept his eye out for Anthony, but he was nowhere to be found. Once back to the nurse at the front desk, Sean signed all the forms that she handed him and took the offered envelope. Looking between him and the envelope, she explained that it was the instructions that Dr Ryan had requested she give him.

By the time he was leaving through the doors of the hospital, the accident victims had arrived and the place was in full throttle. Taking one last look into the A&E, he couldn't see Anthony, so he left, not wanting to be in anyone's way and wanting to get his baby back home to sleep more comfortably. There was nothing else he could do tonight, or should he say this morning, as it was now going on six a.m.

He would try and contact Anthony and see if they could meet for a coffee. If he said yes, they could talk and if he said no... well, either way Sean would have his answer. He would give him a few days, give him a chance to decide for himself and he would see where to go from there.

CHAPTER SIX

Sean didn't want to wake up from the most perfect dream he had ever had. It felt so realistic—he had his baby curled in his arms in front of him, and a warm body wrapped around the back of him. But AJ was starting to fuss, so he knew he needed to look after him and get his bottle ready.

He had stopped off in the twenty-four-hour shop on the way home from the hospital to get the new formula that Anthony had suggested in the notes he had given him through the nurse. He couldn't believe how long AJ had slept; it felt as if it had been hours. Opening his eyes to look at the clock on his bedside table, he noted that it was gone midday, he had been asleep for four hours without AJ waking up. The poor little thing had obviously been worn out from crying and being so ill the night before.

Looking down at his squirming son, he saw something that couldn't be real. There was another hand also curled around the baby, not just his own. A very masculine hand. The feel of a person wrapped around him from behind hadn't been in his dream but in real life. The heavy weight of an arm slung over his hips and the feel of breath on the back of his neck had Sean whipping his head around behind him, his heart wanting to bolt out of his chest at break-neck speed.

It couldn't be, he had to still be sleeping, there was no way that Anthony was in the bed behind him. But as soon as his gaze locked onto the devastating green eyes that shone back at him with the twinkle he knew so well, he knew he wasn't dreaming. He lay there at an awkward angle, frozen in place, terrified that if he moved it would break the spell that he seemed to be under and he would come back to reality, a reality where Anthony wasn't in his bed with him.

Sitting up, Anthony reached over him to lift AJ up into his arms, and lay back down again with AJ between them in the bed. "I still had the key you gave me. I hope you don't mind, but when I finished work the thought of going home to my place was the last thing I wanted. I hoped that with everything you said this morning you would want me here as much as I wanted to be here myself. With you... and our son."

That finally broke Sean out of his stupor and put him into action. He practically dove across the bed, minding his baby, and attached himself to Anthony's lips. This kiss was just as explosive, if not more so, as the one they had shared in the early hours of the morning, and made both of them groan in unison.

They finally broke apart only when AJ's fussing started to get a bit louder and Sean had to get up to get his bottle. Anthony pushed him out the door, saying that he would watch AJ and to hurry up to get back into bed.

Sean had never moved so fast in his life. Not caring that it was freezing and that he wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing, he jumped from the bed and practically ran down to the kitchen to prepare the bottle. He was back to the bedroom in record time, with Anthony snatching the bottle right out of his hands as soon as he got near.

Instead of climbing back into bed, he threw on a pair of sloggies, the comfortable cotton trousers that he wore only around the house. Seeing the questioning look in Anthony's eyes, he simply said that he would be back in a minute. Going back down to the hall, Sean fetched his coat from the hook and carried it back into the bedroom where Anthony had just finished winding AJ and was putting him back in his cot. The sight of his ass all perky and sticking up in the air as he bent over the cot had some very inappropriate images racing through his head while his son was in the same room.

"If you're that cold, I know good ways of warming you up. You won't need your coat in bed," Anthony assured him from his position by the cot with a waggle of his eyebrows and a smirk on his face. The sway in Anthony's hips as he all but stalked across the room had Sean panting and furiously trying to remember what it was he had been planning.

"I love you too," Anthony practically purred, "and I want this to work between us if you hadn't figured that out already. I agree that we need to get to know each other better this time around but... I don't think that we need to go all that slow. I have been wanting for a long time, wanting you like you wouldn't believe. Now get your fine ass over here and let me remind you why you like mine so much." The growl in Anthony's voice sent shivers down his spine; Sean had never seen Anthony like this before, the aggressor, but that didn't mean it didn't make him as horny as hell.

“Not like... *love*. I love your ass. And your present is in my coat, that’s why I have it.” Sean all but choked out the words, his brain too focused on Anthony to get the words out properly.

Willing his brain to function properly, he tried again. “I told you that I had been planning something for you the night of the work party, well it’s here in my coat. It has been since that night. I never take it out. I always hoped, even if I thought it was useless. I never stopped hoping.”

Reaching into the coat he drew out a box that looked like it had seen better days. The wrapping paper was rubbed through in places and torn in others, as if it had been handled a lot over time, and the bow on top was half flat and half loosened. All in all, it was falling apart, but from the way Anthony was looking at him it could have been wrapped in gold.

Taking a hold of Anthony’s arm, Sean pulled him to sit down on the edge of the bed and joined him, hands shaking as he handed the box over for Anthony to open. Hesitantly, Anthony took the box from his hands, and with more care than the paper was worth, he picked the paper open to reveal the box underneath. He was so nervous he was shaking. Sean watched Anthony’s face the whole time, watching for every microscopic change in expression. Everything he had ever dreamed of was just moments away. He knew that he was moving fast, but waking up with Anthony next to him this afternoon had sealed it for him. It was time to make them a family once and for all.

With a sharp intake of breath and a multitude of emotions racing across his face, Anthony turned to Sean. “This was the surprise you had for me? And you have kept it all this time, even after everything?”

With a nod of his head, the lump in his throat making it impossible for him to even utter a sound, Sean confirmed the unasked question.

The joy on Anthony’s face made Sean breathe easier even before he spoke a single word.

“Then yes, yes I will marry you.”

With a silent thank you to his son for helping bring them back together, for making them the family he knew both had always dreamed of, he took the man of his dreams, his soul mate, the man he loved, into his arms and proceeded to love him for the rest of their lives.

THE END

Author Bio

Kelly McGrath grew up in Waterford, Ireland and lives in a little country area with her family. She has been an avid reader since she was a teenager, starting with her mother's crime novels that she squirreled away before they were taken off of her.

Over the last three years she has read upwards of eight hundred books, and has recently decided that it was her turn to write one.

After getting into the M/M Romance genre two years ago, she hasn't been able to put them down. With a love of books, men, and of happily-ever-afters, where else would she start?

With a very open-minded family, she has found the support she needed from all directions.

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HUMAN FRAILTIES

By Jaye McKenna

Photo Description

The man stands against a fog-shrouded landscape lit by a full moon shining through thin clouds, his long, black hair whipped by the wind. His stance is open but ambiguous—it could be welcoming or threatening—and one foot rests upon a glowing jack-o-lantern. Under his open robe he wears only leather pants and high boots. In one hand he holds a staff topped with a skull; above the other hand float glowing, arcane symbols.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Darkness has been a part of my life since I can remember.

I never understood why it was so hard for me to be part of the bright world. The Internet couldn't satisfy my need, so I went to this arcane little book shop. The old hag behind the counter gave me a book, where she said I might find the answers to my questions.

Supposedly, this book opened your power to summon entities to obtain knowledge. One in particular drew my attention. Its name was unpronounceable, but I could not bring it to me without saying its name aloud. Its symbols—a black dog, a pumpkin on fire, and a heart surrounded by thorns—were a potent siren song. They simply drove me crazy.

When I finally untied my tongue and called, it didn't come to me. Instead, it took me to a sinister realm.

Forget my questions. All I want to do now is drop to my knees and worship him.

Sincerely,

Gabbo de la Parra

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, other world

Tags: sorcerer, angels/demons/gods, magic users, soulmates or bonded, slave, prisoner, psychic ability, snarky banter

Content warnings: dubious consent

Word Count: 39,517

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HUMAN FRAILTIES

By Jaye McKenna

PROLOGUE

Exile

Ashnavayarian became aware by slow degrees. At first he thought he dreamed or remembered, but as the sensory input became more and more intrusive—cold, hard ground beneath him, chill wind brushing over bare skin, pain in his head, and the distant howling of a pack of rhyx—he realized that this was not a dream or an imagining, but a reality.

A familiar enough reality; he often wore a human form when he moved through the human worlds. But this was not the reality he'd expected. He'd expected to find himself in his natural element, dancing through the leythe on its ever-shifting energy currents.

Opening his eyes didn't help much. The night sky was dark and a veil of clouds partially obscured the moon. One moon. That narrowed down the number of places he could be. He peered into the darkness. All he could make out were oddly shaped rock formations and dead trees reaching skeletal fingers toward the sky.

He forced himself to a sitting position and bit back a grunt of pain as cold, stiff muscles protested the sudden movement. Muscles...

Curious, he ran hands over bare skin. Human, definitely. And... male. Nicely put together, too, if he was any judge—and he was. The body fit in a way that was familiar. So familiar that he knew without looking that the long hair tickling his back was blue-black, and that the very human eyes that were currently struggling with the darkness were violet. It was the same body he'd been using when...

He reached for the leythe, attempting to draw the pure energy straight from the Void, only to find that he could no longer touch the Void. The energy that came to hand was only the mere trickle he could draw from the earth around

him rather than the rushing, raging torrent of the Void. The taste of it told him exactly where he was.

It also brought back the memory of Jhara's rage.

For it was Ashnavayarian who had shown the first human colonists of this world how to draw the leythe from the earth around them. And it was Ashnavayarian who had taught them how to shape it and work it, to make it serve their needs.

But it was human ingenuity that had inspired them to use it as a weapon. Human nature that had driven them to turn that weapon upon one another. Human greed that had led them to breed their brightest and most powerful for ever-greater control over the leythe.

And it was decidedly *human* hunger for power that had sparked the flames of the war that was inexorably spreading across the Westlands.

Not his fault.

He'd only given them that first spark of knowledge.

What they had chosen to do with it, well, that was hardly his affair, was it? He just liked to watch the flames kindled by that spark as they blazed a burning trail through the leythe.

Of course, Jhara didn't see it that way, did she?

Jhara accused him of disturbing the delicate balance of the leythe and sought to punish him for his meddling. She had exiled him to human form and crippled his ability to manipulate the leythe until he learned such abstract human concepts as mercy, compassion, and love.

Things Ashnavayarian had always counted as human frailties.

Hot and very human rage coursed through him. He lifted his face to the night sky. "Jhara, you bitch!" he screamed. "There is nothing you can teach me about your human children that I don't already know. *Nothing!*"

CHAPTER ONE

The Black Dog

Tor MacAran set the broom back in its spot in the storage closet and let out a sigh of relief. Friday night. Work was done for the week, so he could head home to his apartment for some much-needed time alone. He shut the closet door and headed back to the sales floor where he had one last look over the bookshelves. He straightened a few volumes he'd missed earlier. Derrick was working tomorrow, and Tor knew he'd hear about it come Monday if things weren't nice and tidy for opening.

"Toryn MacAran, isn't it your birthday tomorrow?"

He'd thought he was alone, so he nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of the female voice behind him. A familiar voice, to his relief, and he vaguely remembered Derrick mentioning something about Angie coming in to work in the office tonight. She did all of the shop's accounting, because while Derrick might know old and rare books upside-down and sideways, the man couldn't do numbers to save his life.

Tor turned around and presented her with the scowl that was usually enough to drive off unwanted attention. "I'm pretty sure there's some kind of law against you poking around in the personnel files."

"I do payroll," she said with a bright smile. "It's an occupational hazard. So... birthday? On Halloween, no less. Big plans?"

Tor shook his head and turned back to the shelves, fussing over the placement of a few older volumes to cover his discomfort. He drew in a deep, calming breath, and concentrated on the smell of old books that permeated the shop. There was something magical about that smell. It never failed to conjure pictures in his head of all the different lands he'd escaped to in the course of his life. Middle Earth, Narnia, Darkover, Valdemar—

"Small plans?"

Angie hadn't gone away. In fact, she'd moved to stand next to him. He shook his head again, then looked down at the floor so his long, black hair covered his face and hid the silver-gray eyes she always commented on.

“Any plans?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Absolutely. I got... I’m going...”

“Home to your apartment?” she said gently. “Like you did last year?”

He didn’t answer. Didn’t want to hear what she’d have to say about it.

After a brief silence, she said, “I’m going to a Halloween party tomorrow night. Would you like to come with me?”

He shook his head harder. A party... with all those people he wouldn’t know. He had no desire to make the effort to get in with a new crowd, only to find out that he didn’t fit in with them, either. “Angie... I appreciate the offer, I really do, but I don’t think—”

“Tonight, then. Just you and me. We’ll go out for a drink. We’ve got time, and we can’t let your birthday pass without some kind of celebration.”

He wanted to ask why not, but his tongue seemed to be firmly stuck to the roof of his mouth.

She lifted a hand and parted the curtain of his hair. Her pretty blue eyes softened as they searched his face. “I’m sorry, Tor. I don’t mean to be pushy. I just... There’s a very sweet guy buried under all that silver and black and eyeliner, and I’d like to see him smile once in a while.”

He pulled away and let his hair fall over his face again. “I do smile.”

“When?” When he didn’t answer, she continued, “You’re so alone, Tor.”

“I’m fine. Really. I like my life just the way it is.” He said it with such conviction that he almost believed it himself. Almost.

Angie let her breath out in a soft sigh. “Okay. Just... call me if you change your mind. I hate to think of you spending your birthday all by yourself.”

“Okay,” he said. But he wouldn’t change his mind.

And his birthday wouldn’t be any different from any other day.

Half an hour later, Tor leaned on the worn wooden railing of the bridge and stared down into the dark, swirling water below. The wind carried the scent of burning leaves in from the fields beyond town, and the silver light of the nearly full moon danced like glitter cast upon the surface of the river.

He walked this way almost every night. On those nights that he felt the most alone, he would stop on the bridge to look down at the water and then gaze up at the stars and wonder why he hurt so much.

Deep inside, where no one could see and no one could touch, there was an emptiness that gnawed at his soul. An emptiness that had been there ever since he could remember.

As a child, he'd tried to fill the void with books and television and make-believe. As a teenager, he'd tried drugs, alcohol, and sex. All those things had passed the time and helped him forget for just a little while, but nothing he'd tried had ever come close to being able to fill that empty, aching darkness.

Every day it seemed to grow a little bit bigger and gnaw its way a little bit deeper into him. And every night as he stared up at the stars, he wondered when the void would grow big enough to consume him entirely, and what would be left when it had.

He'd searched all his life for something he had no name for. He was about ready to give up looking, because how did you fill a space that you couldn't even see the shape of?

The shadows deepened as a cloud passed over the moon. Tor looked at the dark water churning below him, and it occurred to him to wonder why he even bothered getting up in the morning. He'd been in pain for twenty-six—no, twenty-seven, tomorrow—years, and he'd never understood why.

Something nudged against his legs, something warm and furry shoving its way between him and the railing. He stumbled as it pushed him back toward the center of the bridge. When he'd caught his balance, he found himself staring into a pair of glowing violet eyes belonging to the biggest, blackest dog he'd ever seen. It blended so well with the darkness that it was hard to make out the shape of it, but it was definitely a dog of some kind.

The dog stared back at him. Something about the animal tickled a scrap of memory buried so deep he couldn't take hold of it. *Something* that was achingly familiar. He closed his eyes, searching deep, and came up with...

A sense of comfort and safety, like an old teddy bear. The dog felt like something that had been with him all his life. Something that had always been

there in the darkest corners and the deepest shadows, only ever seen out the corner of his eye, in glimpses so fleeting he doubted his senses.

A presence that was so constant he took it for granted.

But surely if he'd seen something like this in waking life, he'd have remembered it. Wouldn't he? The sheer size of the thing, and those eerie eyes, he'd remember those.

Dreams, he decided. No matter how much they felt like memories, those fleeting impressions of violet eyes glinting from the shadows could only have come from his dreams.

The dog stared back at him. Its tail thumped once on the pavement.

He reached out to touch it, but his hand met empty space. A moment later the dog coalesced out of the air some five feet away, eerie violet eyes still fixed on him.

Tor let out a shaky breath. Definitely dreaming. He must have gone home from work and fallen asleep in front of the computer again. "Easy, boy. I'm sorry. I won't try to touch you again."

The dog cocked its head, and its tail thumped again. It rose and turned toward town, then looked at him over its shoulder as if to say, *Come on, then.*

"What, you want me to follow you? I just came from there. I was heading home."

Home to what?

He wasn't sure where the thought came from, but it stopped him cold because really, what was there at home? His apartment held nothing but the promise of another night of mindless internet surfing, and maybe a movie that he'd fall asleep in front of because the sound of people talking made him feel less alone.

"Yeah, all right. I guess I don't have anything better to do. And there's something really odd about you. I feel like I've seen you before, but I'm pretty sure I'd remember if I had. Those eyes of yours are enough to creep anybody out." He frowned and shook his head. If he *wasn't* dreaming, standing in the middle of the street having a conversation with a stray dog had to be a symptom of something. Maybe Angie was right. He needed to get out more.

The dog trotted forward half a dozen paces, then turned and looked back. Tor followed after it, feeling like a fool one minute, and wondering where it was taking him the next.

CHAPTER TWO

The Book

He'd never seen the shop before. Of that he was certain. He walked down this street almost every day, so he'd have noticed a new bookshop, especially wedged between the soda fountain and the post office as this one was. And even if he had been oblivious enough to miss it, Derrick would surely have had something to say about it. The town of Sienna could barely support one bookshop, let alone two.

The dog sat down in front of the door. Its tail thumped the pavement twice, and those luminous violet eyes fixed on him. Tor examined the shop front, wondering how he could possibly have missed it. It looked like it belonged there, and had for some time. The wooden door was weathered, with flaked and fading red paint. The front window was glazed so he couldn't see in, but there were cobwebs lurking in the corners. Old-fashioned lettering on the window proclaimed, *Madame Jhara's Books and Antiquities: Occult, Witchcraft, Legend, Leythe*.

Leythe? Tor wondered what that meant. Legends and myths, ancient civilizations, and the occult, all of those things fascinated him, but in all his reading, he'd never come across that term.

There were no hours posted, but the glazed window glowed with light. He looked at the dog. It returned his gaze expectantly.

"Do your people work here?" he asked it.

Another tail thump.

"Well, it looks like somebody's working late. I guess you can't open the door by yourself, can you?"

The dog cocked its head and waited with an air of infinite patience. Tor pushed the door open. The dog trotted in ahead of him and disappeared behind the counter.

It was an old-fashioned wooden counter, scarred and warped with age. An old woman in a long black cloak stood behind it. She had long white hair and violet eyes exactly the same shade as the dog's.

Tor's eyes settled on her for a moment and he frowned. Had she been there all along? His gaze darted about the shop as he took in the bare, cracked walls and the lack of bookshelves or merchandise of any kind. He turned his attention back to the old woman. "I... sorry to disturb you. Your dog..." He gestured vaguely, looking around, but the dog was nowhere to be seen.

Her eyes met his, deep and timeless, full of secret shadows and dark knowledge. Something huge and ancient whispered into his mind, unfolding inside him, probing every corner of him. He felt naked before it. It was too big, too much, and he shivered while all his darkest thoughts and most secret longings were unearthed and laid bare to shrivel in its cold light.

He drew breath to scream, but as quick as the feeling had come, it was gone, leaving him shaken and breathless.

She smiled, a small, enigmatic smile. "Good evening, Toryn." Her voice was deep and rich, nothing like what he expected from a woman of her age. And—

"How did you...?" His own voice sounded faint and squeaky. He swallowed hard and tried again. "How did you know my name?"

One shoulder lifted in a delicate shrug. "It is written in the leythe." And in his dream, that made perfect sense. Because this had to be a dream, didn't it? People couldn't really get into your head like that, could they?

Not really wanting an answer, he shied away from the question. He turned instead to more practical matters. "How long has this place been here?"

"Since the beginning."

"I've never seen it before."

"Ah, but you didn't need to see it before, did you?"

"Where are all the books?"

Again, that smile. "You don't need *all* the books, young Tor. You only need one." She reached beneath the counter and drew out an old, dust-covered book.

It was about the size of a textbook, but bound in scarred black leather and held closed by a metal latch so old and tarnished it was hard to tell what metal

it might actually be. Silver runes adorned the cover and spine. They slithered and twisted across the cracked leather surface as he watched, rearranging themselves to form letters and words he could read. *The Book of the Leythe*.

“What is this?” He couldn’t take his eyes off of it.

“Take it,” she said. “All the answers you seek lie within this book—and within yourself. You have only to speak the name of the entity you wish to question. It will appear and answer you.”

“Entity?” he asked faintly.

She waved a gnarled hand. “Spirit, demon, angel, god... what you call them doesn’t matter. They will do you no harm. The same cannot be said for the knowledge they impart. Be careful what questions you ask, young Tor, for the answers you receive *will* change you.”

When he didn’t make a move to touch the book, she picked it up and pushed it into his hands. “Take it,” she said again. “Within its pages you may finally learn the shape of what is missing from your life.”

“But—”

Between one blink and the next, she was gone, and he was standing on the pavement outside the shop.

Only he wasn’t outside the shop, because the shop was gone, too. There was the post office... and there was *Frankie’s Soda Fountain*... no sign that *Madame Jhara’s Books and Antiquities* had ever been there.

Except for the weight of the book in his hands.

Tor locked the door of his apartment behind him and leaned heavily against it. He’d walked all the way home convinced that he was dreaming. Now he wasn’t so sure. Last night’s dishes were still piled in the sink. Yesterday’s black T-shirt was draped over the kitchen chair where he’d tossed it before his shower. This morning’s coffee cup sat on the table, half full, just as he’d left it. His dreams were never this mundane. They were dark and frightening, full of shadows and things barely glimpsed.

He pushed himself away from the door and set the book on the table, then ducked into the kitchen. If he went about his normal routine, maybe it would

disappear. Or maybe he would wake up. He found some leftover takeout in the fridge. It smelled all right, so he heated it up in the microwave and ate it standing up. He did the dishes, cleared off the counters, and wiped them down. When the kitchen was spotless, he took a deep breath and went back to the dining room.

The book lay where he'd left it, waiting for him.

Tor approached the table slowly and stared down at the worn cover. The book had to be at least a hundred years old, maybe more. It looked like it belonged in a museum. He wondered if he even dared open it. Derrick had a few old texts like this, their yellowed pages thin and crumbling with age. They were kept in sealed, humidity-controlled glass display cases in the back of the shop.

He reached out a tentative hand to open it, then stopped. He could just hear Derrick moaning about the acid on his fingers and what a tremendous responsibility it was, preserving the past for future generations. Maybe he should just set it aside. He could bring it in to work on Monday, and see what Derrick thought of it.

No. The minute he gave the idea serious thought, a sense of wrongness twisted deep inside him. This wasn't meant for Derrick. It was something special, meant for him alone.

Besides, Derrick would never believe him if he said where he'd gotten it. And Derrick would want to know. He was like that, especially about books.

Tor took a deep breath and sat down at the table. Something that was half dread and half anticipation curled quietly in his gut.

Nothing will happen, he told himself.

But...

Within its pages you may finally learn the shape of what is missing from your life...

She knew. A lifetime of trying to make sense of the emptiness, the not-belonging, the wrongness that was his existence, and somehow she *knew*.

He didn't believe in fate or destiny.

But maybe...

He brushed trembling fingers over the latch. It was cold and rough. The moment he touched it there was a strange sense of pressure around him. It was as if the air itself was holding its breath, waiting with the same sense of infinite patience as that damned dog. He half expected the latch to break or be stuck with age and disuse, but the catch released easily enough.

He opened the book and paged through it. There were very few words, and those were written in runes that he couldn't read. But there were pictures the like of which he'd never seen before. They looked like paintings. Given how old the book had to be, they were in amazing condition. He would have expected the colors to be faded with age, but they were clear and bright and looked almost wet, as if the artist had only just stepped away from the canvas. He turned the pages slowly, glancing at each in turn, and then stopped cold as one caught his eye.

This one.

The image on the page burned itself into his mind. He couldn't tear his eyes from it. The churning in his gut stopped and an absolute calm settled over him like a warm, comfortable blanket as he studied the picture. *This is the one.*

It wasn't the colors that drew him. They were dark and somber, and revealed an eerie, fog-shrouded landscape lit by a full moon as it shone through a parting in the veil of clouds.

It wasn't the images that drew him, although they were haunting and disturbingly familiar. The black dog he'd met on the bridge stared at him from the shadows with baleful, violet eyes. And the thorn-covered vines twisted into the shape of a heart...

He didn't need to take off his shirt to know that it was identical to his own tattoo.

Tor touched his chest, rubbing the spot over his heart. He'd gotten the tattoo two years ago after the first serious relationship he'd ever risked had crashed and burned. It was supposed to be a reminder, inked into his flesh so he'd never forget how much it hurt to be betrayed by the one person you'd shared your deepest soul with.

How could a tattoo of his own design be in a book that had to be far, far older than he was?

That question, while compelling, wasn't nearly as disturbing as the thing that had captivated him in the first place.

No, the thing that really grabbed him was the man.

He was every fantasy Tor had ever had. If he could have put a face and a body to the dream lover his imagination conjured when he touched himself under the covers at night, this would be it. It was as if someone had rummaged around in his head and pulled the man right out of his deepest dreams.

The memory of something huge unfolding in his head flitted through his mind, but he pushed it away to focus on the picture instead.

The eyes that seemed to lock onto his own were an intense violet, like the eyes of the dog and the old woman who'd given Tor the book. The man's stance was open, but ambiguous. Tor couldn't decide if it was supposed to be threatening or welcoming; it seemed to shift from one to the other from moment to moment.

The black robe he wore was open at the front and pushed back over his shoulders, revealing a nicely muscled chest and sculpted abs. Under the robe, he wore only snug leather pants and high boots. Tor licked his lips and his jeans began to feel uncomfortably tight.

Long, dark hair flowed out behind the man, floating around his face in the wind. And that mouth... God, he could just imagine those full, kissable lips wrapped around his cock, those beautiful eyes half-closed in ecstasy...

With a whimper, Tor let his hand creep down to rub himself through the fabric of his jeans. He closed his eyes, letting his mind drift with the fantasy, and tried to imagine that face alive with passion. He wondered what the man would sound like, crying his pleasure to the dark sky above.

A cold thread of laughter twisted in his mind and he jerked his hand away, face flaming.

When he focused on the page again, his breath caught in his throat. The man in the picture stared back at him with an expression of wry amusement.

He tore his gaze from that compelling stare and scanned the rest of the page. His eyes settled on the runes above the picture. He couldn't read them at first. They were similar to the symbols on the front of the book, and as he studied them they began to writhe and wriggle across the page. The runes rearranged themselves into English letters forming what might be a name, but not a name Tor had ever heard of or had any idea how to pronounce.

Ashnavayarian.

What the hell was that? Tor had read a lot of mythology and ancient legends, but he'd never come across a name like that. He wasn't even sure what culture it belonged to.

He wondered what would happen if he spoke it.

Answers to his questions, that was what the old woman from the shop had said.

But which questions did she mean?

The ones about why there was a gaping hole in his soul, a dark void that he felt as an aching emptiness every day of his life?

The ones about who his parents were and why they'd left him on the street to be placed in a string of foster homes, none of them really bad, but none of them any damned good, either?

Or the wholly inappropriate one that he just could not get out of his head:
What do I have to do to get you to fuck me until I can't remember my name?

CHAPTER THREE

The Summoning

For the rest of the evening, Tor tried to forget about the book, but something kept drawing him back to it. He'd start to do something else only to find himself standing by the table staring down at the man in the picture. Worse, every so often, he'd hear himself trying to twist his tongue into the shapes the letters above the picture demanded.

He couldn't decide what it was that kept drawing him back. Was it the man? Painting or not, he had to be the hottest thing Tor had ever seen. Was it the old woman's vague promise of answers? Or was it something else?

He shivered. It was Halloween tomorrow. Maybe he was just letting all the seasonal weirdness get to him. He'd spent a lot of time helping customers in the occult section of the shop over the last few weeks. Seasonal weirdness didn't explain the book, though. Or the dog from his dreams. Or the shop that suddenly appeared where one had no business being.

“Ash... Ashna... Ashanavarian...”

Shit. He was doing it again. He snapped his mouth shut, unable to decide if he was relieved or disappointed that he couldn't seem to get his brain wrapped around the pronunciation. There were no accent marks to give him a clue as to what the name was supposed to sound like. He'd even tried Googling it and come up with absolutely nothing.

Which meant what?

The... entity?... was part of a mythology so ancient that no one remembered it?

Then who had put the picture in the book?

He stared at the picture again and blinked hard. Had the man just rolled his eyes?

No.

He was seeing things. He glanced at the clock, noting that it was nearly

midnight. As much as he wanted to figure out this puzzle, he knew he was too tired to spend any more time on it tonight. He needed to get to bed.

Tor rose from his seat and went about his nightly ritual. He checked the locks, setting the heavy steel bar in the track of the sliding glass door that led out to the balcony, and turned off the lights.

He brushed his teeth and re-checked the locks. Then he decided that one last look before bed wouldn't hurt. It might even inspire his dreams. He glanced down at the book, still open to the page that had captivated him, and did a double take. The man now stood with his foot resting on top of a glowing jack-o'-lantern. He stared right at Tor with one dark eyebrow raised in challenge.

Tor looked at the clock again. Two minutes past midnight.

His birthday.

Halloween.

He chewed on his lip for a moment, considering, then gave it one more try.

“Ashnavayarian.”

The air around him shimmered, and a crack of golden light tore through the space in front of him. A wave of dizziness washed over him. Tor dropped to his knees, staring at the light that spilled through the crack and swirled around him. He saw colors he had no names for, shadows and shapes that were twisted and wrong.

His kitchen grew dim as more cracks rent the air. The world splintered into fragments and Tor felt his body disintegrating, turning into light and color and shadow...

He woke to bitter cold. The ground beneath him felt like lumpy stone, and the wind was chill. His eyes snapped open and widened as he found himself staring out at a landscape that was all too familiar.

The picture in the book.

He squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them again.

The odd rock formations. The fog-shrouded night sky. The moon. He stared up at the moon. It was subtly wrong. Bigger. The color was wrong too, more violet than it should be. And shouldn't he see dark smudges on its surface? This moon looked more like the one in the painting than the one he saw outside his window at night.

In fact, everything looked a lot like the painting, except—

A deep voice spoke behind him, a soft flow of liquid syllables that sounded too beautiful to be spoken in such a harsh tone.

Tor rolled over and froze.

The man from the book stared down at him, and he did not look pleased.

Tor's mouth fell open. He could not take his eyes off the man. God, he was even more beautiful in real life.

And not exactly like the picture, either. He wore a black cloak rather than a robe. Under it was a leather vest with what looked like a soft, long-sleeved shirt underneath. Sensible, on a chill night like this, although Tor wouldn't have minded seeing if the body underneath the clothing was as gorgeous as the picture had suggested.

He struggled to sit, but a wave of dizzy nausea pushed him back down. He groaned and closed his eyes.

Tor felt a hand take his own. His eyes flew open as the dark void inside him was suddenly filled. For the first time ever there was peace in his heart, and the pain that had always torn at him was gone. The man's brilliant violet eyes widened, then locked onto Tor's.

Captivated by that gaze, Tor could not have looked away if he'd wanted to. He felt like he was falling into those eyes, drowning in them. They held him, frozen, while words poured into his head—images, connections, structure—an explosion of information coalescing into something that almost made sense, as the pattern of a language he'd never heard before was mapped out in his brain.

The information flow stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Tor shivered and blinked, feeling strange and disoriented.

The man dropped his hand and broke that magnetic eye contact. Tor could

have wept at the emptiness that swept through him. The void was back, large and ugly as ever, its dark edges cutting into his very soul.

Tor closed his eyes, body trembling with something more than fear, something deeper than longing.

Was it *his* touch that had driven away the pain and the darkness?

Within its pages you may finally learn the shape of what is missing from your life.

“Do you understand me now?”

Tor opened his eyes to see the man from the book kneeling beside him, dark brows knit in a frown. From the annoyed expression on his face, it wasn't the first time he'd asked the question.

“I... yes.” Tor started to sit again, and this time there was no dizziness. He forced his mind to focus on the now, not that brief, fleeting moment of peace when all had seemed right. He looked around just to make sure the world hadn't changed again. “Where the hell am I? How did I get here?” Panic started clawing its way through his belly.

“If you've the power to cross the Void, you should damn well know where you are.”

Void? “I don't know what that is. Who are you?” There was a hysterical note in his voice, but at that moment Tor didn't care. The man narrowed his eyes. He looked angry and dangerous. Tor scooted back, out of arm's reach.

“Calm yourself, Human. We'll not get far if you work yourself into a panic.” The man made a motion with his hand, as if he were plucking something from the air itself.

A peaceful calm settled over Tor. His heart rate slowed, the knot of fear in his belly loosened, and the muscles he'd been holding taut softened and relaxed. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“That's better. Wouldn't do to have you go running off into the hills only to be eaten by a pack of rhyx. Now, let's start with a few simple questions, shall we?” He spoke slowly, enunciating each word carefully as if Tor was a small child or a half-wit.

Tor frowned at him and asked the first thing that popped into his head. “How did you learn my language so fast?”

The man rolled his eyes. “I didn’t, Human. I gave you the pattern for mine. What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know. You were supposed to come to me.”

One dark eyebrow lifted. “Oh, I was, was I? And who are you to command me?”

“I’m Toryn. Toryn MacAran. You can call me Tor.”

“Can I? How very... *familiar*.” The voice dripped sarcasm. “You don’t feel like a leythari. *Tor*.”

Tor stared at him blankly. The word meant nothing to him until something clicked in his mind and he made the connection. His newly acquired knowledge of the language gave him a sense of *wizard* or *sorcerer* for the term *leythari*. “I’m not a... leythari.”

The eyes narrowed. “Then how did you manage to cross the Void?”

“I don’t know! I don’t even know what that means. I was in my kitchen and there was a book and you were in it and I was supposed to say your name and you were supposed to come and answer my questions and—” He knew he was babbling but he couldn’t seem to make himself stop, and he wanted to, because the man’s expression was getting darker and darker by the second. “And... she didn’t say anything about me... ending up in the... picture.” The torrent of words finally slowed to a trickle. Tor snapped his mouth shut before anything else could escape.

“*She*? Tell me what happened, Human. All of it.”

So Tor told him about the dog and the old woman, the shop that shouldn’t have been there, and the book that had remained in his hands even after the shop had disappeared. He didn’t mention the part about wanting to be fucked blind. Now that he was confronted with the reality, he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to give it any ideas. It was one thing to fantasize about a man in a painting. Quite another to sit here under that same man’s icy gaze.

By the time he’d finished his tale, the chill of the night had settled into his bones and he was shivering violently.

The man's expression was dark as a thundercloud. "The bitch," he muttered. "She thinks to test me? Fine. I'll play. And we'll just see who ends up testing whom."

Tor looked longingly at the campfire some twenty paces away. "Can I get warmed up?" His own questions could wait. He was almost too cold to think. All he knew for certain was that he ought to be a lot more scared, and probably would be if it wasn't for that strange sense of calm lapping at the edges of his mind.

"Humans." There was a sneer in that voice. "So fucking frail. Go. I need to think."

Tor got up carefully, mindful of the dizziness that had swept over him earlier. The man was maybe an inch or two taller than his own six feet, and if the picture in the book was accurate, he was in pretty good shape. It probably wouldn't be a good idea to antagonize him. At least, not until Tor was feeling a little steadier. "Um... what do I call you?"

The man's scowl deepened. "Whatever the hell you like, Human. I don't much care. Ash. Navaya. Varian. I've been called all of those and worse." He fixed Tor with a fierce glare. "I doubt you'll survive long enough for it to matter."

Annoyance stabbed through the calm. Tor glared back at him and forgot all about caution. "Fine. Maybe I'll just call you *ass*." And then froze, not sure how serious an insult that might be.

It earned him a narrow stare. When no lightning bolts or fireballs were forthcoming, he turned toward the fire. Best to take his leave before his mouth got him into real trouble.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cold Night

Ashnavayarian glared at the retreating form of the human and cursed Jhara under his breath. Her claws were all over this. The black dog and the old woman were two of her favored forms when she chose to walk the human worlds.

Jhara herself must have dragged the human across the Void. He'd reek of the leythe if he had the power to do it himself, and there was no hint of that kind of power in his aura. Ash sensed pain and emptiness. He sensed a darkness that ran so deep he couldn't see the source of it. But there was no sense of any kind of power. Nothing obvious, anyway.

Under other circumstances that darkness, along with the odd and shocking sense of completion he'd felt when he'd touched the human, might have drawn his interest.

Except that he was certain that was exactly what Jhara wanted.

He was tempted to leave the human here and be on his way. Only the fact that Jhara had specified *mercy* and *compassion* stopped him.

He'd already tested his ability to work the leythe to the limit. It hadn't taken him long to learn that he could only command a fraction of the power he'd need to escape back into the leythe. The thought of acquiescing to Jhara's demands made him burn, but the month he'd spent caged in human form had brought him to the bitter realization that he might not have a choice. She'd trapped him here quite neatly. Unless he could find some outside means to raise the power required to break his exile, he would need Jhara's help. He doubted that abandoning the human to die in the untamed wilds near the Iceshards would earn him her approval. It could hardly be deemed an act of compassion, after all. Not even according to Ashnavayarian's admittedly flexible moral standards.

Though it would probably be a hell of a lot less trouble.

The wind kicked up, cutting through the thick wool of his cloak. He shivered and cursed as he stomped toward the dying fire. The human was

sitting as close to the glowing embers as he could without getting singed. He looked cold and miserable, huddled there on the ground in his short-sleeved black shirt and blue trousers.

Ashnavayarian bent to pick up some of the dead branches he'd gathered earlier. He threw them onto the embers, then waved a hand over them, drawing on the leythe to nudge the fire to warmth more quickly. The flames danced and leapt. That small, pathetic display of power had the human scooting back from the fire and gaping at him in awe.

"You could have built the fire up," he said, not bothering to hide his irritation.

The human—Tor—blinked up at him, then ducked his head, hiding his face behind a curtain of dark hair. "I-I didn't know how."

Ashnavayarian sank down across the fire from Tor. He was cold, tired, and hungry. And thoroughly sick of dealing with human frailties. Unlike the forms he used when he walked the human worlds by choice, this one had all the weaknesses of a true human. It needed fuel and rest. It needed to eliminate waste at annoyingly regular intervals. Worse still, it felt the cold of an autumn night in the far northern reaches of Vakarra quite keenly.

"Ash?"

Ash it was, then. In the Void, when he danced in the leythe, his name was a glimpse of his essence. It was light and shadow, sound and texture, a ripple in the leythe that held far deeper layers of meaning than a single, spoken syllable could possibly express. Blind to the leythe as most of them were, these humans lacked the senses to perceive such a thing. They needed something to wrap their tongues around. 'Ash' was as good as anything; it was short at least. He looked up to find Tor watching him from across the fire. The human looked a little more settled, so Ash slowly released the wisp of leythe energy he'd used to calm the man.

As Ash's grip on his mind eased, the human's eyes widened a little and he swallowed hard. His body tensed, but he remained sitting by the fire. Ash breathed a sigh of relief. He'd much rather warm up by the fire than by chasing the human through the foothills.

“What did you do to me?” the human asked.

“Nothing you couldn’t have done yourself, given time. I calmed your fears enough that you wouldn’t go running off into the night.”

The human didn’t look happy with that explanation. He closed his eyes. “I went to the bar with Angie,” he said firmly. “Somebody must have slipped something into my drink. Hopefully I’m lying in bed at home and not in some dark alley. I’m going to wake up soon, and all this will just be a bad dream.”

Ash smirked. The human capacity for self-delusion never ceased to amaze him. He didn’t argue; if believing he was caught up in a dream made it easier for the man to accept his situation, Ash was fine with that. Delusion would be far less exhausting to deal with than flat-out panic. “If you like, Human.”

The man’s eyes snapped open. “I like it a lot better than the idea that everyone I meet is fucking with my head.”

Ash didn’t respond to that. The human was silent for a time. His pale eyes searched Ash’s face. Ash waited patiently for him to draw whatever conclusions he required to support his delusion.

“You’re not here to give me answers, are you?” There was a sad, resigned note in his voice, and Ash sensed the disappointment behind his words.

“Answers to what?”

“She said you would answer my questions. So far, all I’ve done is answer yours.”

Ash heaved a sigh. “Ask your questions, then, Human. If I can answer them, I will.” Rather magnanimous of him, he thought, since it wasn’t *his* actions that had dragged the human across the Void.

Magnanimous enough, perhaps, to be construed as an act of mercy?

Hopefully, Jhara was watching.

“If this *isn’t* a dream, how do I get home?”

“It’s not, and you don’t,” Ash said bluntly. He sensed the human’s fear building again. Apparently his capacity for self-delusion only went so far.

“But... you brought me here, you can’t just—”

“I did not bring you here. *She* did. And if I had the power to send you back, I’d also have the power to not be stuck in this godsforsaken wasteland in the first place.”

“You can’t send me home?”

“No.” Much as it rankled. “You’ll have to throw yourself on her mercy if you want to go home. And pray she has some, because if she does, I’ve not seen evidence of it.”

“But you did the thing with the fire.”

Ash rolled his eyes. Humans. Frail *and* ignorant. As if lighting a candle could be compared to calling a firestorm. A cold gust of wind fanned the flames. Ash called a whisper of the leythe to warm his cloak. Tor shivered and inched closer to the fire.

“Ash?”

“Yes, Human?”

“This isn’t a dream, is it?”

“I’ve already told you it isn’t.”

“What’s wrong with me?” Tor asked in a voice that sounded small and desperate. “All my life I’ve never really belonged anywhere. It feels like... like I was born in the wrong time or maybe the wrong world, or... or like something is just... *missing*.”

Ash stared past the flames at the human’s aura, studying the shadow it cast into the leythe. Its dark, muted jewel tones rippled and shimmered, and he hadn’t imagined that hint of darkness threading through it. It permeated the depths of the man’s aura. He could sense tiny questing tendrils of darkness buried deep within the energy matrix. They floated on the currents of the leythe, as if they searched for something.

“Something *is* missing,” he said. Ash wondered how much of his explanation the human would really understand. The pattern he’d imprinted in Tor’s mind had given the human the structure and shape of the language spoken by the humans here, but not the cultural context he would need to fully understand the meanings of some of the words. “There are holes and tears in your aura, places where the colors are muted and bleeding into the leythe.

There is a thread of darkness running through it all, into the depths of the matrix itself.”

Tor frowned and shook his head slowly. “I don’t—”

“I know you don’t. But you asked me what was wrong, and that is what I see.”

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. I would have to look deeper.”

“Can you?”

Ash opened his mouth to refuse, but something about Tor’s expression stopped him. The emptiness and longing in those silver-gray eyes, maybe. “Perhaps,” he said. “But not tonight.” He reached for his leather pack and rummaged around until his fingers touched the cloth-wrapped packet of travel cakes he’d picked up in the last village he’d passed through. The cakes were made of toasted grain, dried fruit, and dried meat pressed together with honey. They were hardly satisfying when one craved meat after a long day on the road, but they would fill an empty belly. Until recently he’d been unfamiliar with the sensation of hunger, but it hadn’t taken long for Ash to discover how difficult it was to fall asleep when his stomach was gnawing on his backbone. He pulled out two cakes and tossed one across the campfire to Tor.

Tor caught the offering, sniffed it, then devoured it.

Ash ate his own share more slowly, savoring the contrast between salty meat and sweet fruit. In his month of exile, the only advantages he’d found to being truly human were food and sex. Thus far he hadn’t had nearly enough of either.

When he’d finished eating, he unrolled his bedroll near the fire. Then, as an afterthought, he tossed a thin blanket to Tor. “Sleep near the fire,” he told the human. “It’ll be chilly tonight.”

Tor gave the blanket a dubious look, but he settled it over his shoulders and lay down near the fire with his back to Ash.

Ash made a circle of the camp, some twenty paces out from the fire, setting wards against chance intruders. This far north and this close to the Iceshards, animal intruders were more likely than human ones. He’d heard the eerie

howls of a pack of rhyx for the past few nights. In his natural form, he could have built an invisible shield that would disintegrate anything that got close to the camp. Now the best he could do was a line of wards that would alert him if it was crossed.

Once the wards were set to his satisfaction he drew on the leythe to warm his bedroll, stripped, and slipped inside. Tor was still huddled across the campfire, shivering and miserable. Ash could hear his teeth chattering.

He wondered how cold it would have to get for the human to freeze to death. Colder than it would be tonight, he thought. He probably didn't need to worry about it. Although if Tor got no rest they wouldn't make good time tomorrow. Ash frowned as he considered the problem. He very much wanted to reach the city of Vakar, seat of power of the realm of Vakarra, before the winter set in. There he was hoping to negotiate the means to research the possibility of breaking his exile, and circumvent Jhara's demands entirely.

Across the campsite, the human sat up and moved closer to the fire, wrapping the blanket tightly about his shoulders.

Ash sighed. "I'm not going to be able to sleep with your teeth chattering like that."

"S-sorry," came Tor's reply. "I'm c-c-cold."

"Come here."

Tor peered at him across the campfire, catching his bottom lip lightly between his teeth as he considered the invitation.

Ash lifted the edge of his bedding and patted the space beside him. "It's nice and warm in here."

Tor got slowly to his feet and moved around the fire. He stared down at Ash, eyes narrowed, then nodded slightly to himself and toed off his shoes. He made to slide into the warm bedding, but Ash shook his head. "Not in those filthy clothes."

Tor's eyes flicked to his face. "But they're the only clothes I've—"

"Take them off."

Tor swallowed hard, but made no move to comply.

“It’s not getting any warmer out there.” If he wasn’t so damned tired, the conflicting emotions he could see flickering in the man’s aura would have been amusing. He reached for a tiny tendril of the leythe and planted a whisper of suggestion in the human’s mind, a wordless promise of warmth and pleasure.

It wasn’t manipulation, Ash told himself. Not really. It was more of a reinforcing of what was already there. Tor *was* cold, after all. And Ash hadn’t missed the attraction flaring through the human’s aura every time Tor looked his way.

Tor turned his back to Ash and began to strip.

Ash’s throat went dry as the shirt came off. The shifting firelight cast shadows that threw each muscle into sharp relief as Tor moved. The human was just what Ash liked in a man. Hair long enough to wrap around his fist when he held the man down, muscles, oh, yes, and lean, narrow hips, long legs, and a trim waist... strong enough in body to take what he had to give, but weak enough in mind to bend to his will.

When Tor turned around his face was in shadow, but Ash didn’t need to see his expression to sense the attraction he was trying to hide. The heat of arousal blazed through him.

Tor slid into the bedding beside him. The moment Tor’s bare skin touched his own, their auras brushed together in the leythe, sending harmonic ripples of pleasure through him. Ash had never experienced anything like it before. He had no idea what that feeling was or where it came from. All he knew was that he wanted this man, wanted their bodies and their auras entwined as closely as possible.

He pulled Tor tight against him and locked his mouth to Tor’s in a savage, heated kiss. Tor whimpered and pushed himself into Ash’s embrace, returning the kiss with enthusiasm.

Ash’s hands started to wander, sliding over heated skin and hard muscle. The sudden anger blazing through Tor’s aura snapped him back to reality like a splash of cold water in the face. Tor put his hands on Ash’s chest and pushed himself away. “What the fuck are you doing to me?” he demanded. “You—you’re in my head again.”

“Does it matter?” Ash asked, nudging the leythe to increase Tor’s arousal. “You’ve wanted me since the moment you saw me.”

Tor shuddered and closed his eyes. Ash sensed a brief inner struggle, and then the man was back in his arms, kissing him with enthusiasm. Tor’s tongue stroked his, and Tor’s hands skimmed down his back. Ash moaned into the kiss and let his eyes drift shut, giving himself over to the wonderful, addictive, and wholly *human* sensations coursing through him.

Gods of the leythe, it was almost worth being trapped in this form to be able to experience this. He rolled onto his back as Tor’s mouth moved lower, leaving a trail of burning kisses down his neck and onto his chest.

Ash drew in a sharp breath as Tor’s tongue flicked across one nipple and then the other. He buried his hands in Tor’s hair and pushed him lower still.

Tor’s tongue lapped at the head of his cock. Ash groaned and then cursed under his breath. He could feel his control slipping, his body shuddering with need. He called another tiny flicker of the leythe to nudge the human a little further.

Slick, wet heat engulfed his cock. His breath clogged in his lungs as Tor slowly took him all the way into his mouth. Tor’s hands moved to his hips and then dragged over his skin in slow, rhythmic strokes. Ash felt the head of his cock hit the back of the human’s throat, and writhed in pleasure. The intensity of the sensations sliding through him was almost too much to bear.

No question, the human knew exactly what he was doing. He used tongue and lips with consummate skill, driving Ash right to the ragged edge. Ash’s hands tightened in Tor’s hair, forcing the human to hold still. He thrust hard into Tor’s mouth. Tor whimpered, but whether it was in need or protest Ash couldn’t tell and was too close to care. A few more thrusts and he let out a hoarse cry as the climax ripped through him.

Tor swallowed, then lapped him clean before kissing his way back up Ash’s body. When his head emerged from the bedding he leaned in for a kiss. Ash pushed him away. Heat and desperate desire shivered through Tor’s aura, making it glow with all the colors of need and want. He whimpered and shifted closer again, rutting against Ash’s hip. “Please,” he whispered, “I want you.”

Ash gave him a lazy smirk, which was all the man was getting out of him, and said, “The curse of being human—wanting what you can’t have. Go to sleep. We have a long way to go tomorrow.”

Tor froze and his eyes widened. “But—”

Ash shoved him away again, harder this time. He rolled over, back to the human. “Sleep.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then Tor muttered, “Fucking selfish *ass*.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Cold Truth

Tor squirmed, uncomfortably aroused. Damned if he was going to do anything about it, though. There was no fucking way he was giving that asshole the satisfaction of hearing him jerk off. Tor forced himself to lie there, stiff, silent, and uncomfortable as hell.

By the time his arousal faded, the deep, even sound of Ash's breathing told him the man was probably asleep.

Damn him.

Tor lay awake for a long time, debating. Fury at Ash for messing with his head warred with the growing realization that he wasn't at home anymore. He considered taking off. He even went so far as to sit up and begin sliding out of the bedroll. But the moment his skin broke contact with Ash's, that empty darkness consumed him once more. He sank slowly back down.

Even if it hadn't been for the relief of feeling whole for once, it took only a few moments of reflection for him to decide that leaving was a stupid idea for more practical reasons than wounded pride and thwarted desire. He had no idea where he was. He didn't know how to get home. He had nothing but the clothes on his back, or rather, in a heap beside the campfire, and he had no knowledge of how to survive in the wilderness.

He shifted a little closer to Ash and stared up at the night sky. The wind had torn the clouds to shreds, leaving only a few lingering wisps to obscure the stars. His eyes sought the moon. It was still wrong; wrong color, wrong size, wrong everything. More stars than he'd ever seen before winked down at him. He studied them with a growing sense of unease as he tried to locate the constellations he knew he ought to see on an October night: Andromeda, Pegasus, Pisces. He couldn't find any of them.

Where the hell was he, that the stars and the moon were wrong?

He didn't think he'd be able to fall asleep, but he woke to morning light and a hot, hard, male body pressed against his back. And morning wood wedged between his ass cheeks.

He jerked forward, not sure where he was or who was behind him. He was drawn back forcefully by a hand on his hip. "Where do you think you're going, Human?" Ash's voice all but growled in his ear, and it all came flooding back to him, including—*especially*—Ash's callous treatment of him last night.

Tor gritted his teeth. "My *name* is Toryn," he said in a low voice, "and I'm not your whore."

"Never said you were," Ash whispered, breath hot against his ear. "Whores get paid."

"Damn it—" He tried to scramble out of the bedroll. Before he could move, Ash's arm snaked across his belly, hauling him back. Then his hand moved to take hold of Tor's cock, stroking him slowly but firmly.

Tor's eyes rolled back in his head and he thrust his hips forward, driving himself into Ash's hand. Ash shifted behind him and Tor felt hard, hot flesh pushing between his cheeks, seeking entrance.

"No, don't—" Panic shot through him and he struggled to pull away. There had been no offer of lube, no stretch, no nothing. The one time he'd ever let anybody try this it had been every bit as bad as he'd imagined it would be—

"Hush. It's all right." Strong hands gripped his hips, forced him to be still. Soft lips moved against the nape of his neck, sending little shivers down his spine as Ash slowly worked his way in. "The leythe's not just for starting fires. It can be used to heal and soothe, too. I won't hurt you."

The knot of panic in his chest slowly dissolved to be replaced by desire. He couldn't remember why he'd been struggling, or why he would even want to, when everything Ash did to him felt so good. Ash hitched Tor's leg up a bit, then stroked his cock again as he pushed himself a little deeper.

Tor bit back a moan of pleasure. He'd had no idea it could feel like this. He wanted it, wanted it with all his soul, but damned if he was going to let Ash know it. Summoning his last shred of resistance, he struggled to form a coherent sentence. "I'm not... I didn't... you can't..."

“Relax,” Ash whispered, and pushed the rest of the way into him.

And wonder of wonders, it *didn't* hurt. It didn't feel anything like that hot, tearing, burning agony he'd been expecting. It felt... oh, yes, it felt like something he wanted a whole lot more of. He pushed his hips back, needing something, but not quite sure what. Deeper or harder or moving or—

Ash flexed his hips. After a few deliciously slow strokes, his fingers tightened around Tor's cock and began stroking him in that same easy rhythm.

“Ash... *oh shit, oh shit, oh shit...*” White hot sparks of pleasure sizzled through him as Ash brushed over something inside him that no one had ever touched before.

After that he didn't give a damn what Ash thought. The man made him forget that there was anything in the world except the rhythm of their bodies moving in harmony and the pleasure of being filled so completely. The wicked heat coiled deep in his groin stretched taut as his body strained for the white hot moment that was just beyond reach. Ash pushed into him hard, and it all broke loose. Tor howled as he fell back into blind white ecstasy.

When he came back to himself he was lying in Ash's arms, his back pressed against Ash's chest.

“You were saying?” He could hear the smug smirk in Ash's voice even if he couldn't see it.

Tor didn't have the energy or the desire to come up with a retort. He closed his eyes and relaxed against Ash, feeling comfortable and complete, whole, for the first time in forever. And thoroughly satisfied for the first time in almost as long.

Until Ash pulled out of his body and continued on out of the bedroll, exposing that gaping, open wound in his soul once more.

“No! Don't go!” He scrambled to his feet and grabbed hold of Ash's hand. The darkness receded instantly, and he couldn't entirely suppress a sigh of relief. “Please...”

Ash turned and stared into his eyes. His gaze traveled down to their joined hands, and he frowned, but made no move to pull away. “Something's wrong. Something...” Those brilliant violet eyes shifted up again to search Tor's face. “What do you feel? When we touch?”

“It... you touch me and it doesn’t hurt anymore. All the dark places are filled with light. It feels...” Tor stopped, staring at the tattoo on Ash’s chest.

A heart shaped out of a twisted tangle of thorn-covered vines.

Like the one in the book, it was identical to his own, right down to its position over his heart. He reached out his free hand to touch it. “Where did you get that? I mean, I designed it. How could you...”

Ash looked down at his own chest and then at Tor’s. He looked more grim than surprised. “*I* didn’t. It was part of the package.”

“Meaning what?”

“*She* trapped me in the body I was using when she exiled me.” Ash placed his hand over the tattoo. “*That* was there when I awoke and found myself in exile. It is her brand. She uses it to mark her property. And to warn others off.”

“Her *property*? But I’m not...” He frowned. “What does it mean that we both have it?”

“Nothing good.”

“Is this the same *she* you were talking about last night? The one you said brought me here?”

“Yes, the same.” Ash started to pull his hand away, but Tor held on.

“Please, don’t.”

Ash shook his head, tossing his dark hair back over his shoulder. “I need to find out what she’s done. I can’t do that holding your hand. Your aura is too... too distracting.” He did pull his hand away this time, but he did it gently.

Now that he’d had a taste of what it felt like to be whole, the contrast was agonizing. The moment Ash’s fingers slid away from his own, all the color drained out of the world. Tor couldn’t help the little whimper that tore from his throat as he was consumed by that dead emptiness again.

Numb and dazed, Tor dressed slowly in the jeans and T-shirt he’d arrived in. The fire had burned out during the night, and he sank down next to the ashes in a miserable huddle. Ash rolled the bedding and strapped it to his pack, then opened one of the pockets and produced another of those pressed cakes of dried fruit and meat. He brought it to Tor, along with a waterskin and the blanket Tor had abandoned last night in favor of Ash’s bedroll.

Tor noted that Ash was careful not to touch him. He tried to brush his hand against Ash's, but Ash pulled away quickly. "Not now," he said, his tone surprisingly gentle.

Tor followed Ash with his eyes as he climbed onto a huge boulder at the base of one of the odd rock formations dotting the landscape. He ached inside. Disgusted with himself, he tore his gaze away. He'd always prided himself on not needing anyone, but he craved Ash's touch, craved an end to the emptiness.

"This might take a while." Tor glanced up to see Ash looking down at him from his perch. "Jhara is skilled, and whatever she's done, it will not be easy for me to read the matrix she's built." Ash scowled then, and added, "Especially since she's seen fit to cripple me."

"How long is a while?" Tor asked.

"I won't know until I have a look. Just don't go wandering off. The wards around the camp will alert me if anything approaches, but if you break them I'll have to reset them."

Tor wondered what, exactly, was likely to approach, but he didn't ask. Ash had already settled himself into what looked like some sort of meditation pose: cross-legged, head bowed, eyes closed, hands resting lightly on his knees.

Tor took the opportunity to look about himself. At first glance, the area beyond the campsite didn't look particularly alien. The land was rocky and hilly with clusters of trees scattered here and there. To the north, he could see mountains, their sharp, white peaks scraping a sky that wasn't quite the right color. Tor stared up at it. He wondered how he'd missed that when he'd first opened his eyes that morning.

Oh, right—Ash had been intent on fucking him into oblivion when he'd first woken up. Tor still wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that. Ash seemed like kind of a jerk, but the things he had done to Tor had felt so damned good. Part of him was deeply ashamed of the way he'd let Ash take what he wanted. A bigger part of him wanted more.

He wished he knew for sure if Ash had been messing with his mind this morning. Being manipulated was somehow a lot less shameful than being pathetic. At least if he'd been manipulated he could tell himself he hadn't had

a choice. He turned his attention to the sky once more, determined that he wasn't going to think about Ash and the confusing, conflicting things the man made him feel.

The sky was more blue-violet than blue. It was a subtle difference, but it made him uncomfortably aware that all was not as it should be. He shivered and tore his eyes from it to stare at the ground. After studying the stars and the moon last night, he didn't really need further confirmation that he was a long way from home.

He wondered how long it would be before anyone realized he was gone. Monday, probably, when he failed to show up for work. He tried to think who might miss him. The only people he had regular contact with were Derrick and Angie, neither of whom was a close friend. He had no family that he knew of, and no one else he could really call a friend. He'd only ever had the one boyfriend, and he was long gone.

Maybe not being able to get home wasn't such a big deal after all. It wasn't like there was anyone he would miss.

Or anyone who would miss him.

An eerie howl echoed through the foothills. Tor's thoughts scattered and his pulse quickened. Something about that sound touched his deepest, most primal fears, setting the hairs on the back of his neck to prickling. Ash didn't seem to notice, or if he did, he wasn't bothered by it. Tor remembered what he'd said about wards. He hoped they did more than just alert Ash. He had the feeling the man might be quite happy to watch some foul beast wander in and have him for breakfast.

The sun had climbed halfway to midday before Ash's head suddenly snapped up. "What. The. Fuck?" His violet eyes narrowed, and he stared at Tor with something that looked very much like hatred. "Bonded... to a *human*?"

Tor got to his feet, ready to turn and run if things got nasty. He might crave Ash's touch, but he wasn't ready to be anybody's punching bag. From the stormy look in Ash's eyes, that was the only kind of touching he was likely to get.

Ash rose to his feet and lifted his face to the sky, hands clenched into fists. “Jhara, you treacherous bitch!” he screamed. “What the hell are you doing to me?”

The sky didn’t answer him, not that Tor could tell. Ash finally slid down off the boulder and stalked to his pack. He bent to pick it up, then stopped and turned to Tor with an imperious expression. “Carry that.”

Tor considered refusing, and might have, if another eerie howl hadn’t cut through the morning air and sent a shiver of atavistic fear straight to the depths of his soul. It only took a moment to weigh his options: alone in a strange wilderness with whatever was making that god-awful sound, or playing pack mule to an ill-tempered demon who looked like sex incarnate and could probably incinerate him with a look.

He picked up the pack.

Ash set off across the rocky landscape at a ground-eating pace, leaving Tor to trail behind struggling with the heavy pack.

The only good thing about this whole setup was the unobstructed view he had of that mouth-watering, leather-clad ass.

CHAPTER SIX

Revelations

In his fury, Ash set a grueling pace. By late afternoon the human was lagging behind. It didn't bode well for the kind of time they were going to make on this journey. They'd gotten a late start as it was, with him spending half the morning deep in the energy matrix of the leythe examining Jhara's handiwork.

And what he'd found still burned. The bitch had bonded *him*, a creature of the leythe, to a *human*.

He should have realized it the first time he'd touched the human. He shouldn't have needed to see the way their auras meshed together within the matrix of the leythe to understand what she'd done.

Leythe-bonded.

It certainly explained why just touching the man felt so damn good. It had taken every shred of will he could muster to get out of his bedroll this morning and move away from Tor. Possessing the human's body had been better than any drug he'd ever tried, human or otherwise. Hot, wild, and addictive as all hell. Even through his anger, Ash couldn't stop thinking about next time, anticipating what he would do to the human when they stopped to camp again.

Much earlier than he had originally intended, he slowed his pace and began searching for a place to spend the night. He told himself it was because he didn't want to drive the human to exhaustion. In the long run it would only slow him down. In the short... well, he supposed there was nothing wrong with admitting to himself that he wanted Tor on his knees pleasuring him tonight.

As soon as fucking possible.

His cock stirred at the thought, and he dared not turn to look at the man following along behind him. The hot waves of need shivering through Tor's aura weren't helping him focus, and with a snarl he reined in his own aura and wrapped it tightly about himself. He'd had to do it at least half a dozen times

since they'd set out. No matter how tightly he bound it, it kept slipping free, sending questing tendrils through the leythe toward Tor.

Leythe-bonded.

For the rest of his life. Or, at least, the life of this body.

And the bond would grow, connecting them through the leythe on ever deeper levels, joining them in ways that Ash didn't even want to contemplate.

Damn Jhara for doing this to him. And damn this human body for being weak enough that she could get away with it.

With an inarticulate snarl of rage, he jerked his errant mind back to the task. Campsite. Find a campsite. The sooner he did that, the sooner he could bury himself balls deep in the human's body.

Once he stopped raging at Jhara and turned his mind to his task, it didn't take long to find what he was looking for. A shallow cave, its entrance nearly hidden by one of the twisted rock formations scattered through the area, appeared up ahead. He had Tor wait outside while he checked the cave. When he found it to be dry and unoccupied, he beckoned Tor inside.

"Rest," he said, the first word he'd said to the man since they'd set out.

Tor dragged the pack inside and sank down near the cave entrance. He sat shivering while Ash searched the surrounding area for enough deadfall to start a fire. The trees were sparse here, though, and he didn't find nearly enough to last through the night. He abandoned his hunt for firewood and set to collecting fist-sized rocks instead. When he had enough, he arranged them in a small pile in the center of the cave.

Tor watched in silence. When Ash drew the leythe from the earth to heat the rocks and then crowned the pile with eerie violet flames, Tor scooted back to the wall of the cave, eyes wide.

"Better than a fire," Ash told him. "No smoke to worry about, and it's hot enough to cook food and heat water for tea. It will stay warm until I release the energy back into the leythe." The downside was that the leythe energy itself might attract unwanted attention. Rhyx in particular used the leythe to hunt their prey. But given the small trickle of leythe energy it took to maintain the fire, the risk was small, and Ash was not about to spend the night shivering.

Tor moved cautiously toward the fire. His whole body seemed to sag as he got close enough to feel the warmth. He shot a surreptitious glance at Ash, as if he was trying to gauge his mood, then asked in a tentative voice, “Why are the flames purple?”

“Because I willed them so. They could be green, if you prefer.” He drew on the leythe again, making a tiny adjustment to the delicate balance of energies within the matrix, and the flames shifted color to a deep emerald green. “Nothing’s actually burning. I heated the stones themselves. I thought the illusion of flames might serve to remind you that the stones are hot.”

“Child-proofed,” Tor said softly, and his lips twisted in a sardonic smile. “How thoughtful of you.”

Ash smirked. “I wouldn’t have put it that way, but since you did...” He ignored Tor’s scowl and bent to pick up the waterskins. “I’m going hunting. I’ll set wards a little way back from the cave, so don’t go wandering off.”

“Can’t I—”

“No, you can’t. You’re too noisy, for one thing.”

Tor didn’t say anything to that, but he regarded the pile of leythe-heated stones with wary eyes.

Ash gave the leythe a subtle tug to shift the color of the flames to a warm, orange-yellow, something more familiar to human eyes, and left without another word. He set a line of wards around the cave entrance and another line farther out. When he was finished, he headed west, where he’d sensed water up ahead.

Moving away from Tor’s aura was a relief, but not as much as he’d hoped. Without that aura to distract him, he was suddenly aware of the subtle energy flow that joined them. Tor’s energies were bleeding into him, and his own were leaking into Tor, through the bond.

He cursed under his breath, not at all happy with the idea of anything bleeding off his own limited energy. It must have started the moment he’d touched Tor, soon after the human had crossed the Void. He hadn’t noticed it then because of that damned distracting aura. He would have to do something about it. The sooner the better. He had no intention of spending his exile

bonded to a human. It was impossible. Ridiculous. What in all the human hells did Jhara hope to accomplish by it?

By the time he returned, it was starting to get dark. Tor was waiting just inside the cave, a worried look on his face. Ash deactivated his wards with the tiniest flicker of the leythe and reset them after crossing them. Inside the cave, he threw a couple of rabbits down at Tor's feet along with a knife. "Skin those and cut them up for stew."

Tor stared down at them and swallowed hard, then looked away. "I... wouldn't even know where to—" He stopped, then looked back down at the rabbits. "What are those?"

Ash rolled his eyes. "Rabbits."

"But... they have real tails."

"As opposed to what?"

Tor stared up at him. "Rabbits don't have tails like that where I come from."

"I thought we'd already established that you're a long way from home, Human."

Tor shivered and looked away. "Well, whatever you call them, I don't know how to... how to skin them. Or clean them. Or whatever it is you do to get them ready to eat."

Ash narrowed his eyes, then took the rabbits and dropped a couple of thick roots in their place. "Peel those, then. Surely you can manage that."

He took the rabbits outside and set to work, grumbling to himself as he prepared the meat. The human was useless. Couldn't start a fire, couldn't skin a rabbit, didn't even know what a proper rabbit *was*, apparently. How had Jhara ever expected him to survive out here on his own?

The answer rose in his mind, unbidden, unwelcome. She hadn't. She expected Ash to take care of him. Why else dump him at Ash's feet, unarmed and helpless as a newborn babe?

Why else bond them through the leythe?

Ash was just returning from burying the remains of the rabbits when Tor yelped and dropped the knife. Ash knelt down beside him and took hold of his

hand. He ignored the subtle feeling of completion that shivered through his aura when their fingers touched.

“Clumsy,” Ash said. “How ever did you survive to maturity?” He examined the wound, which wasn’t very deep, and drew a whisper of leythe energy from the earth to close it.

Tor’s eyes widened the moment their hands touched. When Ash was finished, Tor twisted his hand around to grasp Ash’s wrist. “Please.” His voice trembled. “Just... can you stay here... just for a little bit. I need to feel—”

“Oh, I’ll make you *feel*—” Ash stopped short as he saw the naked hunger in the human’s eyes, felt the wanting and the needing that flared through his aura.

Ash couldn’t deny that he wanted and needed, too. Wanted to touch him, hold him, lick him, bury himself inside him. “Let me finish this,” he said, his voice husky with desire. “We’ll have some time while it cooks.”

It took some effort to hold his own hand steady as he peeled and sliced the root. He added it to the pot with the meat, then followed that with a handful of grain and some dried herbs from his pack. He poured in enough water to cover the lot. Once the stew was bubbling away, he rose and spread his bedroll near the back wall of the cavern. He settled himself there and looked over at Tor, patting the space next to him.

Tor watched him, expression shifting between wariness and raw need. Ash loosened the bonds he’d kept on his own aura all day, letting it flare out into the leythe and bathe in the energy currents. The human was wracked with indecision. His aura vibrated with both desire and anger, a wanting that was almost beyond bearing warring with the fury he felt at not having any choice.

Ash understood exactly how he felt.

Not that there was any question as to the outcome. Desire would prevail in the end. The struggle was always worth watching, though. You couldn’t fight a leythe-bond no matter how much you might want to. He ought to know. He’d forged enough of them in the past for his own amusement. He found it fascinating to watch the humans struggle with desires they couldn’t control. Bonding the children of sworn enemies had always been a favorite of his. It produced such interesting results, and it rarely ended well.

Finding himself trapped in such a way was disconcerting to say the least.

Indeed, said a dry voice in his mind. *Your fondness for manipulating human emotions for your own amusement is what tore this land apart in the first place. There is more to this human than a simple leythe-bond. Look deeper and see. And enjoy the experience, Ashnavayarian, as I will enjoy watching your little drama unfold. It should prove amusing to watch you fight your own desires for once.*

Fury surged through him. He longed to answer her, but she'd taken that ability from him as well. She'd left him with only the pathetic powers of a human leythari, and not a particularly strong one, at that.

The bitch.

When he opened his eyes, Tor was pressed back against the wall of the cave. Ash realized that between the bond and his own aura floating free in the leythe, Tor had likely experienced the full weight of his anger.

He stared at the human. *Look deeper and see,* she'd said. "Come here."

Tor's silver-gray eyes fixed on him, wary and more than a little fearful. "Why?" he asked, his voice far steadier than his shivering aura.

"Because I command it."

"What if I don't want to?"

Ash let his lips curve in a cold smile. "You want to."

"Bastard."

But he came. Slow and reluctant his steps might be, but he did as commanded. He sat on the edge of the bedroll at first. Ash shot him a narrow stare and patted the spot beside him. Tor hesitated only a moment before he moved closer, pressing his body against Ash's side.

Ash let his breath out in a long sigh of relief as the tension that had been riding him all day melted away. The leythe energies of the human's aura blended so seamlessly with his own it was as if they were two halves of a whole.

Which they were, damn Jhara to every hell the humans had ever conceived of.

Without even thinking about what he was doing, Ash wrapped his arms around the human. He leaned back against the cave wall, pulling Tor against him and holding him close. Tor sighed and rested his head against Ash's chest. Ash ignored the heat that stirred in his groin, *damned* if he'd give her the satisfaction of watching him rut like an animal, and concentrated instead on Jhara's words.

Look deeper.

He closed his eyes and sank his awareness into the leythe, burying himself in Tor's aura. He read the shifting energies, sinking deeper as he traced the path of darkness at the core of the energy matrix that was Tor.

The darkness led him into the depths of the leythe, almost to the limits of his human perception. That was where he finally found it. A channel of shifting light and glittering dark that had nothing to do with the exchange of energies that bound them. No, this was something else entirely. And not at all what he'd expected.

He'd found a conduit straight to the heart of the leythe.

Tor was that rarest of humans, a living channel for the leythe. A powerful amplifier, in the hands of a knowledgeable leythari.

Ash let his exultation buoy him back to the surface. When he came back to himself, he laughed for perhaps the first time since he'd awoken caged in human flesh.

Little drama, indeed.

Jhara had just handed him the power to escape his exile.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Explanations

Tor lay in Ash's arms and closed his eyes. The sense of peace that had settled over him the moment he'd touched Ash was almost overwhelming. Amazing that a man who irritated the crap out of him could also make him feel so damn good. Lying here against Ash's chest with those strong arms around him, he could almost forget how sore and tired he was.

Ash had set a relentless pace when they'd started out late that morning. After the first couple of hours, Tor had found himself struggling to keep up. Back home, he'd always thought he was in pretty good shape. He lifted weights and jogged a few times a week, and he was used to being on his feet all day at the bookshop. None of that had prepared him for keeping up a fast pace across rocky terrain for hours at a time.

What the hell was Ash that he didn't even seem fazed by it?

Ash might look human, but the way he said the word when he called Tor *Human*, with that derisive curl of his lip, made Tor think that he might be something else entirely.

A sudden bark of laughter jerked him out of his musings like a slap in the face. He looked up at Ash, who had an amused look on his face and a dark glint in his eye. Tor didn't like the look of that at all. The man was dangerous. Powerful. Frightening in ways that Tor couldn't even begin to articulate.

So why the hell was he curled up against him like a lost kitten?

Disgusted with himself, Tor pulled away. He sat up but didn't break contact, torn as he was between the sense of peace and the unwanted intimacy of the touch that brought it.

"What's funny?" he asked, more to cover his own confusion and embarrassment than because he really wanted to know.

Ash looked at him, his expression unreadable. "Jhara. She thinks to trap me, yet she gives me the means to escape. And she is well aware of what she does. Devious bitch. I wonder what kind of game she thinks to play."

“Who is she?” Tor asked.

“The humans in this world call her a goddess. They build shrines to her and burn incense in her name.”

“Is she? A goddess, I mean?”

Ash snorted. “That depends entirely on your definition of the term.”

“You said she brought me here. Why would she do that?”

“Why? To punish me, perhaps?”

“Punish you for what?”

Ash’s gaze slid away. “Who knows? I’ve yet to divine the workings of her mind. Perhaps she finds it amusing to watch me struggle.”

“What is she to you, then?”

“She is the oldest, and she was the first. She is my...” Ash paused for a moment as if searching for the right word. “Creator? Progenitor?”

“Mother?” Tor supplied.

The suggestion earned him a glare. “That is a *human* word, for a relationship that does not exist among my kind.”

“What *are* your kind, then? Not human, I guess.”

“Not human. We live in the Void Between Worlds, the matrix of the leythe. Your kind have called us monsters and demons, spirits and nightmares. But those are just words for what your human senses tell you when your minds try to interpret something beyond your ability to perceive or comprehend.”

Tor cocked his head, frowning slightly. “You seem perfectly human to me.”

“Practice,” Ash told him drily. “I’ve walked the human worlds in human form for many, many of your lifetimes.”

“So you’re a god.”

“Again, it depends on your definition.” He gave Tor an appraising stare. “For our purposes, close enough.”

“And you’re trapped in a human body.”

“A temporary inconvenience that will soon be rectified. If she thinks I will

stay here quietly until... well, never mind what *she* wants. More important is what *I* want.” He reached for Tor.

Tor shifted back a little, but took hold of Ash’s hand so as not to break contact completely. “Wait. Explain to me what I’m feeling. Tell me why you make me feel so...”

Ash arched an eyebrow. “Used?”

Tor shook his head. “No...”

“Owned?”

“No, damn it, I want to know why I don’t feel empty when you touch me.”

“Because I fill you like no other man ever has,” Ash said with a smirk.

Tor felt his face heating. He ducked his head, not wanting to give Ash the satisfaction of knowing that was true. “That’s not what I meant,” he muttered. When he glanced up, Ash was giving him a knowing look. Tor figured he wasn’t going to get a meaningful answer, but then Ash frowned and relented.

“There is a darkness within you. I see it in the leythe, deep within the matrix that contains your life energies. The emptiness inside you stretches out far beyond you, winding through the matrix of the leythe. I followed it, to see if I could determine where it led.”

“And did you?”

“It leads to me. When we are close enough that our auras mesh within the leythe, we both feel complete. We are bonded, we two. You humans would say that I am your other half. Your missing soul, if you will. Jhara has seen fit to entwine our destinies, so instead of pursuing my own interests, I find I am compelled—against my will, I might add—to take you under my protection.”

“Why? If you don’t want to—”

“Because our energies are locked together within the leythe. If anything should happen to you...”

“What?” Tor whispered.

“I’m not sure,” Ash said softly. “When one half of a leythe-bonded human pair dies, the other usually follows. And since I am currently human in reality rather than appearance...”

Tor's mind snagged on a question that Ash had evaded rather than answered. "Why would she do that to you? Why would she bind you to a human? And to me in particular? What does it mean that you and I have the same tattoo?"

Ash pulled Tor against him with surprising strength and grabbed a fistful of his hair. "Enough of your questions, Human."

Tor only struggled briefly before giving in, and that more for the sake of pride than anything. Ash pushed him down on the bedding and stripped him, then let him go while he removed his own clothing. Tor whimpered at the loss of his touch, the return of the emptiness, but Ash was quick and efficient, murmuring quiet words of encouragement. Before Tor knew it, Ash was back. He moved against Tor, skin on skin, driving all sane thought from his mind with hands and lips and tongue.

Tor's hands slid over Ash's body, exploring every swell of muscle, every curve and plane of his flesh. The sounds Ash made were better than anything his fantasies had provided, husky little moans and whimpers that sounded like they were being torn from deep inside him. It was as if Ash couldn't bear to show such vulnerability to anyone, not even his lover.

It was different this time, far more intense than it had been this morning. Every time he touched Ash, he could feel the echo of that touch on his own body. And from the way Ash reacted when he touched Tor, he figured Ash was feeling the same thing. Like an endless feedback loop of heat and desire, growing in strength each time it echoed between them until they were both lost in need and want and *now*.

By the time Ash flipped him onto his belly and entered his body, Tor was burning. The flames of desire were so all-consuming that he couldn't even remember his own name.

Ash was not gentle, but he was thorough, and unlike the night before he saw to Tor's pleasure as well as his own. When Ash was finished with him, all Tor could do was collapse in a sweaty, satisfied heap.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Of Frogs and Slaves

Ash woke to morning sunlight streaming into the cave. Tor was curled against him, head tucked under Ash's chin, one arm flung over his waist. Ash shifted a little and stared down at the human's face. In sleep, the guarded expression he wore like armor was gone, replaced with a soft, vulnerable look that did something funny to Ash's stomach.

Hunger, he told himself firmly, not—

No. The human flesh that caged him required sustenance, that was all.

Tor stirred, pretty silver eyes blinking up at him. As Ash watched, that sweet, sleepy innocence was replaced by a watchful wariness. Tor moved back, untangling his limbs from Ash's, but not quite breaking contact. As Tor moved, Ash felt a burning ache flare through him. It took him a few moments to realize that the discomfort wasn't coming from his own body. It was coming from Tor's.

It occurred to him that he might have been a bit rough with the human. Lost in Tor's sensations as well as his own, he'd found it difficult to maintain control. An uneasy feeling of regret flashed through him. Annoyance quickly followed; he would *not* feel guilty for using the man as hard as he damned well pleased. Hell, Tor had *wanted* it. Regardless of his initial reticence, he'd begged Ash in the end.

He was under no obligation, none at all, to do anything about it.

Still, if the human was in pain, it would slow them down. Perhaps it was in Ash's best interests to keep him as fit as possible.

"Sore?" he asked, not bothering to hide his smug smirk.

Tor winced and his cheeks flushed. "A little."

"Come here." Ash pulled him close again, hands moving to probe Tor's backside.

"Hair of the dog?" Tor inquired, flinching at his touch. "Thanks, but no. I won't sit down for a week as it is."

“Keep still, Human.” Ash drew a tendril of leythe-energy from the earth, wrapped it around his finger, and pressed it against Tor’s abused flesh.

Tor froze, then relaxed against him with a sigh as Ash manipulated the delicate energies of the leythe to ease his discomfort and heal the damage he’d done. “Thank you,” Tor said when he was finished.

“I didn’t do it for you.” Ash felt compelled to explain himself, just so nobody got the wrong idea. “I can’t have you slowing me down.” It didn’t mean anything more than that. Although now that he thought about it, healing the human after taking him hard might count for something with Jhara. Mercy, perhaps, or compassion, or one of those other human frailties she seemed so concerned about.

He hoped Jhara was watching and taking note, because if things didn’t go his way when they reached the city of Vakar, he might need to comply with her demands after all.

Beside him, he sensed Tor steel himself and then slowly pull away, breaking contact with him. He tensed, waiting for the sharp stab of loss he’d felt the last time they’d separated, but nothing changed. Tor drew in a breath and frowned, then reached out and laid his hand on Ash’s chest and slowly pulled it back again.

“What did you do?” Tor asked. “The emptiness... it’s gone... even when I’m not touching you.”

Ash let his awareness sink into the leythe. As he’d feared, their auras were meshing at ever-deeper levels. Two becoming one, the inevitable consequence of a leythe-bond. With his own ability to manipulate the energy matrix so limited, there was nothing he could do about it.

Except watch it happen.

He sank deeper still, wondering just how far down the connection went.

It was already far deeper and more vibrant than any leythe-bond he’d ever created or observed. The energy exchange had increased, their auras now meshed so tightly that it was no longer possible to tell where one ended and the other began. They were joined so deeply within the leythe that it might prove impossible to separate them, even for one of his kind.

When he surfaced Tor was curled against him, watching his face.

“Well?” the human asked, the moment Ash opened his eyes.

“The bond deepens,” Ash said grimly. “It will not be long before every emotion each of us experiences will be felt by the other, no matter what distance separates us. And I can do nothing to stop it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m stuck with you.” For the time being, at least. Once he broke his exile and escaped into the leythe, he should be able to shed the bond along with his human form. Tor would not be so lucky. He would be left in psychic agony.

Assuming he survived the breaking of the bond in the first place.

Tor narrowed his eyes and slid out of the bedroll. “Well, it sounds like I’m stuck with you, too.”

Breakfast was a silent affair. Tor helped break camp, but when it came time to set out and Ash ordered him to carry the pack again, he raised an eyebrow and said, “Carry it yourself.”

Ash gritted his teeth. “You’re with me on sufferance, Human. You’d best refrain from angering me. You’ve already demonstrated quite admirably that you haven’t the skills to survive out here on your own. Pick up the pack. We’re leaving.” He turned away and set off toward the west, the direction of Vakar.

“What if I don’t?” Tor’s mocking voice came from behind him. “Will you turn me into a frog?”

Ash spun around and pinned him with a glare that, back when he’d actually had real power, had been known to reduce men to quaking at his feet. “Believe me, Human, the notion is not without appeal.”

Tor merely smirked, unfazed by Ash’s display of temper. “Can’t imagine a frog being much fun in bed.”

The bark of laughter was out before Ash could stop it. And once he’d started, he couldn’t stop. The human was impossible, but... hell, Ash hadn’t laughed so hard in a long time. Lifetimes, maybe.

When he finally recovered himself and wiped the tears from his eyes—how long had it been since he'd done *that*?—Tor was watching him in silence, shaking his head.

“You... are infuriating, Human.” He tried to make it sound like a growl, but it didn't come out the least bit threatening.

Tor's shoulder hitched in a shrug. “Probably shouldn't have told me you have to protect me, then, should you?”

“Apparently not. A tactical error on my part.”

“Not a problem,” Tor said, grinning. “Makes you seem more human.”

More human, indeed. “I make a terrible human.”

“You're telling me,” Tor muttered, almost-but-not-quite under his breath.

“And *you* would make a terrible frog.” Ash's annoyance didn't have the nearly the impact he'd intended, what with his lips wanting to quirk into a smile. “And I rather like you in my bed just the way you are.”

“Was that a compliment?”

“No, it wasn't. Now pay attention, Human, this is important. When we reach Vakar, you'll have to pose as my slave. You might as well start practicing now, since it appears that subservience is going to be a challenge for you.”

Tor frowned as he considered Ash's words, then said, “Sounds like a clever ploy to get me to carry your shit. Tell me why it's so important for me to pose as your slave and I'll think about it.”

Ash opened his mouth to threaten, then snapped it shut as it occurred to him that no threat he made was going to carry much weight. Not now that Tor understood that the leythe-bond they shared made Ash's survival contingent upon his own. And really, Tor's request wasn't unreasonable. Perhaps if the human understood the reasoning behind the demand, he'd be more willing to cooperate. “Because you lack the knowledge to pose convincingly as my associate or even my apprentice. You have no idea how to behave in polite society, and I haven't the time to teach you. Slaves are all but invisible to the nobility in this part of the world, and I'd rather nobody had reason to look at

you too closely. As my slave, you will attract far less attention than as my... well. Whatever else we might call you that would explain your complete lack of manners.”

The last thing Ash needed was for one of Kaldasha Valtari’s leythari to get close enough to Tor to discover what he was. He hated the idea of bringing the human right into Valtari’s lair, but he could see no other way. The Lord and Protector of Vakarra knew Ash in his current form. He was also the only such contact Ash had who could grant him access to a properly shielded workroom. He would need that workroom if he was going to use Tor to raise the power to break his exile.

Tor nodded at his explanation and bent to pick up the pack. “Makes sense. If you’d said that in the first place, I wouldn’t have kicked up a fuss.” He hoisted the pack over his shoulders and followed along.

They walked in silence. Ash kept a sharp eye out, scanning the terrain for movement and the leythe for signs of life. They were deep in the foothills of the Iceshards. The mountain range marked not only the northern border of Vakarra, but also the northern frontier. No human knew what lay north of the Iceshards; none who’d attempted the crossing had ever returned to tell the tale. Even these foothills were treacherous, riddled as they were with odd rock formations, hidden canyons, and networks of caves that wound their way deep into the earth. Such places were the favored hunting grounds of the rhyx and other creatures even more dangerous and less predictable.

After perhaps an hour of blissful silence, Tor trotted up beside him and said, “So what’s in Vakar? And how long will it take to get there?”

Ash turned to look at him while he debated how much to tell the human. “Vakar is the seat of power in Vakarra, the realm through which we currently travel. There we will find Kaldasha Valtari, Lord and Protector of Vakarra. He has something I need in order to break my exile. I will offer him my services in return for the use of it. As to how long it will take, that will depend on the terrain and the weather and what we encounter along the way. If we could take the North Trade Road, I’d say ten days or so. But with Vakarra at war—”

“War?” Tor looked alarmed. “What war?”

“Vakarra is at war with Daerne, its neighbor to the west.” Ash waved a hand off in the direction they were traveling. “So, in order to avoid patrols and awkward questions, I’d prefer to stay off the road entirely. This terrain is difficult enough, and sparsely settled enough, that we should be able to reach the city of Vakar without too much trouble. Sensible people tend to stay well clear of the Iceshards.” He gestured north, toward the mountains.

Tor turned to look, scanning the peaks. “Why?”

“Humans are fond of stories. There are all manner of tales regarding the horrors that come down out of the mountains when the weather turns cold.”

“Are they true?”

“You do ask a lot of questions, Human.”

Tor shrugged. “Not much else to talk about. We don’t exactly have a lot in common, now, do we?”

“No. We don’t.”

“Other than agreeing that you’re a pain in my ass.”

Ash laughed. He couldn’t help it. Some of the things that came out of the human’s mouth...

“Ash?”

“Hmm?”

“What happens to me when you break your exile?”

That was enough to wipe the smile off his face. What, indeed. “Hopefully, I generate enough power to send you back where you came from.”

“But you said we were bonded. How will that work?”

The truth would serve no one, and he doubted the human would take kindly to the notion that Ash’s escape would likely cost him his life. If the channeling process didn’t kill him outright, the shattering of the bond certainly would. As a creature of the leythe, Ash would share none of the agony of that broken bond. “It’s complicated,” Ash said, keeping his eyes fixed firmly ahead. “Leave working the leythe to those of us who understand it. If all goes well, you won’t have to worry about a thing.”

“And the darkness inside me? Will it still hurt?”

“No, Tor. It won’t hurt,” he said softly. “I can promise you that.”

CHAPTER NINE

Icefall

Tor staggered to a stop and leaned against a tree trunk. His feet hurt, his legs burned, and he couldn't remember ever being so cold.

The temperature had been dropping steadily over the last two days. Ash had told him yesterday that a storm was moving in. He'd insisted on traveling long after dark, hoping they could reach the village of Icefall before the storm hit. This morning, after far too short a night shivering in the open, they'd woken to a heavy, gray sky.

Tiny, hard bits of ice masquerading as snowflakes stung Tor's face. The thin blanket he had clutched around his shoulders like a cloak did little to keep out the cold or the wind. Ash had used the leythe to warm it for him a few times over the last couple of days, but Tor wasn't about to ask him for help. The scathing, superior look he'd given Tor the one time Tor *had* asked had made Tor so angry that he'd decided he'd rather freeze to death than ask Ash for *anything*.

Ash walked a few steps farther on, then stopped and turned to face him.

"I can't," Tor said. "I'm done."

"Humans," Ash said with a derisive curl of his lip. He moved back to the tree Tor was leaning against and ran his hands over Tor's blanket. Tor wasn't too proud to snuggle into the blissful warmth. For one moment, he allowed himself the luxury of imagining that he was about to sink down on the ground and finally rest. "Thank you," he muttered, and hoped he didn't sound as pathetically grateful as he felt.

Ash laid an arm across his shoulders and pointed in the direction they'd been heading. "There."

Tor squinted, but he couldn't tell what it was he was supposed to be looking at. "I don't see anything. Except snowflakes."

"Icefall is just ahead. If you can keep going for a little while longer, there'll be a hot meal and a hot bath. And we can sleep in a real bed tonight."

Tor eyed him narrowly and tried to dredge up some enthusiasm from the depths of his exhaustion. “Sleep? Really? Didn’t think you knew the meaning of the word.”

Ash ignored the gibe. “Or we can stop here and camp. There might just be room for both of us under that pine tree over there.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Does it need to be?”

Tor considered his options. The thought of another night out in the open was almost more than he could take. Ash might use the leythe to warm the bedding, but he could do nothing to soften the hard ground or keep the wind off. He could keep going if it meant warmth and a soft bed out of the wind. He hoped Ash wasn’t just dangling a carrot in front of him. He wasn’t sure he’d survive another night shivering under a tree, even if he was wrapped up in Ash’s arms.

He pushed himself away from the tree. “All right, let’s do it. But I’m warning you—if we stop again, I’m done.”

“A little while longer” proved to be a good two hours. It was full dark by the time they staggered into the Icefall Inn. Even Ash looked like he was ready to drop as he stood at the ancient wooden counter and negotiated with the innkeeper for a room and a meal.

Tor looked around dully. He knew he should be curious about his first glimpse of civilization in this strange world he’d come to, but he couldn’t muster the energy to focus on anything other than staying on his feet.

Ash grabbed Tor’s arm, jerking him out of a standing doze, and guided him into the common room. A haze of smoke from the oil lamps that lit the stone and timber building hung on the air, the smell of it mingling with that of roasting meat. He was pushed down on a bench in front of a table close to a blazing fire. He sagged with relief, still shivering as his body soaked up the heat.

Tor ate what was put in front of him, noting only that it was hot and that it was a good thing it was stew, because he was almost too tired to chew. When they’d eaten their fill, Ash hauled him to his feet and led him up the stairs. Tor

stumbled along after him. When they reached the room, Ash pushed him down on the bed and left him there while he supervised the inn's staff, who were bringing in a large wooden tub and buckets full of hot water.

Tor didn't mean to doze off, but Ash woke him by shaking his shoulder. "Do you want that bath now?"

He blinked up at Ash, who slipped an arm behind his shoulders and helped him sit.

"Come. I know you're tired, but it will be worth the effort."

Ash started working at Tor's clothing. He removed it carefully, as if Tor were a child in need of help rather than a whore he couldn't wait to use. When he had Tor stripped, instead of pushing him down and taking his pleasure as he normally would, he helped him to the tub.

Tor sank down into the hot water with a sigh and closed his eyes. He could fall asleep here so easily. He started to drift off, then jerked awake as something rough and wet was dragged across his chest. Ash had a washcloth in hand and was... bathing him? He blinked up at the man, wondering why he was suddenly being so gentle and concerned.

"You looked like you were too tired to do it yourself," Ash said before he could comment. "And I don't want your filthy body in my nice clean bed tonight." The gentle hands, however, belied the harshness of his tone.

"Ah. So your reasons for helping me are entirely self-serving," Tor said, struggling to keep his words from slurring.

"Always," Ash told him. "You would do well to remember that, Human."

"Why do you always call me that?"

Ash frowned. "Human? It is what you are."

"Right, but... I don't call you Asshole. I have a name, you know. We've been traveling together for over a week, and I can probably count on one hand the number of times you've used it."

Ash's violet eyes narrowed. He pressed his lips together and continued washing Tor without further comment. When he'd gently cleaned every inch of Tor's skin, he untied the scrap of leather Tor had been using to tie his hair

back. Ash ran his hands through the wind-tangled snarls, then stopped suddenly. “What is this?”

Tor twisted around in the tub to see Ash examining a long strand of jet-black hair, nose wrinkled in apparent disgust. “Is that a trick question? Because it looks a lot like my hair to me.”

“Does it? Really?” Ash buried his fingers in Tor’s hair again, and Tor let out a moan as they rubbed deliciously against his scalp.

Tor relaxed against the side of the tub and tilted his head back, nearly whimpering with pleasure as those strong fingers worked their way through his hair.

“There. That’s better.”

Tor sighed. “Thanks for that. I’m not sure how it’s any better, though. You didn’t even get it wet.” He opened his eyes and Ash pulled the whole mass over Tor’s shoulder, letting it spill down onto his chest, clean and silky, untangled and... and its natural gold color. “What did you do?”

“Restored it to its natural state. Do not contaminate yourself in such a way again, Human,” Ash said, picking up a section of hair and running his fingers through it. “This is beautiful—the color of the desert sands in morning sunlight.”

Tor stared at him. He’d been dyeing his hair for years, part of the Goth look that served to keep people at a distance, and he hadn’t been planning to stop anytime soon. “I’ll do whatever the fuck I want with my hair,” he said, snatching the silken strands away. “You don’t own me.”

Ash’s eyes narrowed for a just a moment. If Tor hadn’t known better, he might have sworn the man looked almost—hurt? Then his lips curved in that arrogant smirk that Tor hated so much. “That’s not what you said last night.”

“Hard to say anything with your cock rammed down my throat.”

Ash gave him a long, appraising look. “An excellent suggestion. Don’t bother getting dressed.” He picked up the clothing he’d removed from Tor. “In fact, I’ll deal with these. They’re hardly appropriate for the weather.”

Ash bundled Tor’s jeans and T-shirt together and left the room. Tor sank back into the tub to enjoy the silence.

When Ash woke him again the water in the tub was cold. There was a fire in the fireplace, which must have been burning for some time, as the room was now pleasantly warm. Tor stepped out of the tub and Ash wrapped a towel around him, then pointed to a pile of clothing on the chair beside the hearth. “That should be a bit warmer than what you’ve been wearing.”

Tor dried himself off and went to examine the clothing. There were two pairs of thick breeches and two shirts similar in style to the ones Ash wore, as well as a scarf, a pair of mittens, and a thick, woolen cloak. On the floor next to the chair was a pair of sturdy fur-lined leather boots.

He glanced over at Ash, who was waving his hands over the bath water, presumably to warm it. “Thank you.”

“It’s only going to get colder,” Ash said. “Can’t have you freezing to death. That wouldn’t be merciful *or* compassionate, and I’m sure she’d take offense.”

Tor got into bed. It felt like Ash had already warmed it. He pulled the covers up over his shoulders, then turned on his side so he could watch Ash strip.

Ash groaned as he sank into the tub. “There are some things about being human that almost make up for all the inconveniences of these bodies.”

Tor looked at him askance. “You’d trade god-like powers for a chance to wallow in my filth?” he asked drily.

The ghost of a smile flitted across Ash’s face. It was gone again before Tor was even certain it had been there. “Absolutely not. But since I’m stuck in this form for the time being, I might as well get as much pleasure out of it as I can.” He scrubbed himself clean, but didn’t wash his hair. That got the same treatment Tor’s had, minus the color change.

When he was finished Ash stepped out of the tub, wet skin glistening in the flickering firelight. Tor watched the play of muscle under golden skin as Ash dried himself. Even though he wanted sleep, the sight of that body started a delicious heat simmering low in his belly. All he could think of was Ash’s skin, hot against his own, those strong, sculpted muscles straining against him, and that long, thick cock buried deep inside him.

When Ash turned to face Tor, the heat in his eyes said he'd been having similar thoughts. Tor threw back the covers and licked his lips. "Come on, then," he said in a husky voice. "Show me what you've got."

Ash's lips quirked in a half-smile. He sauntered over to the bed, moving like a big, powerful jungle cat stalking its prey. Tor decided that he didn't mind being prey if Ash was the hunter.

The hunter climbed onto the bed and straddled Tor's hips, then leaned forward to capture his mouth in a bruising kiss. Tor's eyes slid shut. His hands trailed over lean hips, taut abs and an impressively sculpted back as the kiss deepened. When Ash broke the kiss and moved to Tor's neck, Tor tilted his head back to bare his throat. Ash made a growling sound deep in his chest.

Ash kissed and nipped his way down Tor's body, moving lower and lower. Tor moaned and bucked his hips, wanting friction and heat. Ash gave him a wicked grin and pinned his hips to the bed. Feather light kisses and aggressive little nips followed.

"Please..." Tor whispered.

A breath of laughter ghosted across the skin of his belly, followed by the swipe of Ash's tongue. "You beg so nicely. What do you want, I wonder?"

Tor squirmed, trying to free himself, desperate to *move*. Ash's fingers dug into hips, hard enough to bruise. Ash bent his head and dragged his tongue along the length of Tor's cock. Tor bit back a moan and lifted his head, wanting to watch. Ash hadn't done anything like this to him before. It was always fast and hard, and he never got to see Ash's face.

Ash lifted thick, black lashes and fixed him with violet eyes that were dark with desire. Tor couldn't look away—those eyes held him—and as he watched, Ash's lips curved in another wicked smile. Then he closed his lips around the head of Tor's cock and took him all the way to the back of his throat.

Tor's head fell back on the pillow, and he whimpered as his blood turned to fire. Ash pulled back slowly, then took him deep again. Tor fought to flex his hips, but Ash held him firmly down.

"Ash... *please*..."

But Ash wasn't about to relent. He continued the slow torture until Tor was reduced to incoherent moans and whimpers. Just when he thought he couldn't take any more, Ash stopped and positioned himself between Tor's legs, lined himself up, and pushed slowly into him.

Tor was used to the abrupt entry by now, and eased by Ash's use of the leythe as it was, there was little discomfort. Ash groaned, his head falling back as he buried himself inside Tor.

The sensations echoing through the bond were stronger than ever. Tor moaned as he experienced everything Ash did when he buried himself in the slick, tight heat of Tor's body. His vision blurred into a strange double image in which he saw Ash moving above him, but at the same time also looked down upon himself lying spread out on the bed. He closed his eyes and concentrated on tactile impressions instead—the heat of his own body gripping Ash tightly, the feeling of being filled so completely, the growing need flashing between them through the bond.

It was different, more intense than the last time, and instead of pounding him hard until he came, Ash set a leisurely pace. Tor could feel his own desire mixed with Ash's and reflected back at him twice as strong, until he felt like he was on fire with the need to come. Ash's gorgeous eyes locked onto Tor's, and he shivered under that gaze. Then Ash wrapped his hand around Tor's cock and stroked him firmly. Tor bucked and cried out as he came. Ash followed him, pushing in hard and then stilling and letting out a low moan.

Ash pulled out and collapsed beside him, and Tor dared to steal a kiss. Ash didn't push him away. After a few moments of watching him with half-closed eyes, he reached for Tor and pulled him close. "One advantage to the leythe-bond that I did not anticipate," he murmured.

Tor didn't respond. Sleep was already dragging at the edges of his mind.

"I'm sorry I pushed you so hard today," Ash's voice whispered in his ear. "It was worth it, though, yes?"

Tor managed to crack one eye open and give him a sleepy smile. "A hot meal, a bath, and you in bed with me? Definitely worth it."

Ash's arms tightened around him. "I thought so too, Hu—Tor."

CHAPTER TEN

Human Things

Ash retrieved the washcloth from the edge of the tub. He expended a breath of leythe energy to warm it, then used it to wipe Tor clean. By the time he'd finished and pulled the blankets up over him, Tor was fast asleep.

The human had been close to the end of his strength. Ash knew he'd pushed him hard. He'd decided it was better to push hard for a couple of days than be caught out in the storm he'd sensed coming. Tor had been miserable enough the past two nights. Ash didn't want to subject him to sheltering beneath a tree during a raging blizzard. Nor did he want to risk getting them lost and missing the village. Game would become sparse now that there was snow on the ground, and they would need the supplies he intended to buy here for the rest of the journey.

After wiping himself, he wrapped up in his cloak and sat on the end of the bed watching Tor sleep. He liked the human's natural hair color, soft gold with subtle red highlights that glinted like polished copper in the firelight, much better than that flat black. That hadn't suited him at all, what with that fair skin of his. And he liked—

The thought stopped him cold. With a muttered curse, he yanked his mind firmly away from all the things he liked about Tor. The human was nothing more than a tool that had fallen into his hands. He would do well to remember that. Given the most likely outcome of what he had planned for the human, there was no point in getting attached.

But Tor made things stir deep within him. Things Ash had no name for, human things that turned his thoughts in irrational directions.

He told himself it meant nothing that Tor had made him laugh until his belly hurt for the first time in forever. Meant nothing that he enjoyed the verbal sparring and the way Tor's silver-gray eyes flashed with wicked amusement when he stood up to Ash. It meant nothing that their bodies fit so perfectly together and that Tor's touch made his thoughts drift to things like *tomorrow* and *next time*, things that had no place in his plans.

It meant nothing that the thought of Tor not being here was like a cold wind echoing through a dark, empty place buried deep inside him.

Meant nothing that Tor seemed to trust him with his life.

“Oh, Tor...” he whispered. “You shouldn’t trust me. You should have run the other way.”

But he hadn’t.

And Tor would soon learn what a big mistake that had been.

Ash told himself fiercely that nothing mattered except finding his own way back into the leythe.

Human lives were so brief, the merest flicker of light in the vast energy matrix that was the leythe. So what if one was cut short? To a creature of the leythe, humans lived and died in the blink of an eye.

But, oh, they could shine so brightly in the short time they had!

Thinking about the shifting energies that made up Tor’s aura going dark and cold made Ash feel...

Alone. And empty.

He shivered, suddenly cold, and slipped into bed beside Tor. The human rolled over in his sleep, pressing his back against Ash’s chest. Ash draped an arm over his hip. Tor sighed contentedly and settled again, but Ash lay awake for a long time, staring into the flickering firelight while he tried not to think human thoughts.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Wild Things

Three days out of Icefall, Tor missed that nice soft bed terribly. They'd stayed at the inn for two blissful nights while they waited out the storm. While Ash had fretted about lost time, Tor had slept late, spent the day filling his belly with hot food, and the next night being filled by Ash.

The next two nights they'd spent huddled together in the dubious shelter of a sparse pine forest. Ash's use of the leythe, and of Tor, had kept them warm enough, but the wind had been brutal. The cave Ash had found for the night looked like a palace in comparison. Tor was looking forward to sleeping out of the wind with something resembling a roof over his head.

He set to work getting the bedding organized while Ash scoured the area for stones to pile up for a makeshift fire. Game had become sparse after the storm. Ash hadn't wanted to waste time hunting so they'd stocked up on trail rations in Icefall. Ash had purchased another pack to carry it all. Now they each carried a pack, although Tor had noticed that he was still burdened with the heavier of the two.

While Tor dug through their supplies and wondered how to put them together to make a palatable meal, Ash piled up the stones he'd gathered and used the leythe to heat them. He crowned the pile with cheerful orange-yellow flames, which he'd grudgingly conceded were more for light than child-proofing.

"We've got some bread left," Tor said, rummaging in his pack. "It's getting stale, so we should probably eat it. I'll toast it and we can put cheese on it."

Ash looked up from his spot by the stones where he squatted, warming his hands. "I'll go and set the wards, then." He rose and left the cave. Tor busied himself with cutting their last loaf of bread into thick slices and sliding them onto a sharpened stick to toast.

He'd just got the bread toasted to a nice golden brown when a scream that set every hair on his body to stirring cut through the night. The sound of it

froze his blood and seized his gut. It reminded him of those eerie howls he'd heard almost every night since he'd come here, and it was close. Close enough that it was not just a sound, but a feeling as well. Close enough to be right outside.

Knife in hand, he scrambled to the mouth of the cave and looked out. The moon was partially covered by clouds. He could see nothing in its dim light, but he could hear low growls and the sounds of a fight off to his right.

Shit. Shit. What to do? Ash could be in trouble, and if anything happened to Ash...

He heard another cry, this one familiar and full of pain. It was followed by a burning, stinging pain across his chest, as if something had raked his flesh. He stared down at his shirt, expecting to see blood, but there was nothing. He gripped the knife tightly and sprinted out into the darkness in the direction the sound had come from.

What he saw drained that burst of thoughtless courage right out of him. He stopped dead, fear rooting him to the ground. Ash faced a huge black creature that looked like some hellish cross between a wolf and a mountain lion. Tor glanced down at the knife he held and then back up at the beast, swallowing hard. Then Ash turned, and the moonlight revealed the tatters of his shirt, dark with blood.

His pain. It was Ash's pain Tor felt burning across his chest.

Before Tor could move to help him, lightning danced between Ash's fingers and lit his face with an eerie glow. The beast snarled and slashed at him with wicked claws. It moved more like a cat than a wolf, muscles rippling in a lethal combination of animal strength and liquid grace. Ash dodged the blow with surprising agility. A bolt of lightning flew from his hand, hitting the animal right between the eyes. The creature stopped, shuddered violently, then slumped to the ground with a dull thud.

Ash staggered back a few steps and pressed his hands to his chest. Tor slipped the knife into the sheath at his belt and hurried to help him. "Is it dead?"

"I hope so," Ash said in a tight voice. "I've nothing left."

“Are you all right?”

Ash lifted a hand and stared at the slick of blood on his fingers. “So frail...” he murmured, staring down at his hand as he swayed. He lifted his gaze to meet Tor’s. “Hurts... more than I... imagined.”

“You’ve never been wounded before?” Tor asked in disbelief.

“No. Never.”

“I find that hard to believe.” He tried to keep his tone light as he pulled Ash’s arm across his shoulders, tried not to think about what that burning pain across his own chest meant. He wasn’t sure if the fear that churned in his gut was his own or Ash’s. “Arrogant ass that you are, I’d have guessed people would be lining up to run you through.”

“Lining up to die, more like,” Ash muttered darkly, and leaned against him. “Fuck...”

By the time they reached the cave Tor was more than half supporting him, and Ash’s face was white as bleached bone. Shock, Tor thought numbly. He was going into shock. Tor tried to remember what it was he was supposed to do about that, but the only thing he could come up with was to call 9-1-1.

He helped Ash to the bedroll and laid him down on the bedding. When he pushed aside the ruined shirt, he froze, staring at the four deep gashes that ran across Ash’s chest from shoulder to hip. High school health class hadn’t covered anything like this. Tor fought back panic as he sliced the remains of the shirt away with his knife and mopped at the blood. Bile rose in his throat as he saw exposed ribs and torn muscle. The ragged tears in Ash’s flesh weren’t simple incisions that could be neatly stitched together, even if he did know what he was doing.

“Ash? This... looks bad. What do I do?”

Ash didn’t say anything, just stared up at Tor, eyes glazed with pain.

“Come on, Ash, stay with me! You’re supposed to be this powerful leythari.” He couldn’t keep the note of hysteria out of his voice. “*Do* something, damn it! Heal yourself. You healed my finger when I cut myself.”

Ash’s eyes focused on him and he drew in a deep, shuddering breath. Then he lifted his bloody hands and laid them over the slashes. “Move back,” he

whispered. “Don’t know how much... control I have... I don’t want to hurt you.”

Tor backed a little way off and crouched near the fire. Ash closed his eyes. He was still for so long that Tor thought he’d passed out. After a while, soft blue light began to seep from beneath his hands and trickled into the wounds. The light brightened and Tor felt the echo of pain in his own flesh begin to fade.

He waited, shivering and straining his senses for more howls. Were there more of the creatures lurking outside, waiting until he fell asleep? Had Ash finished setting the wards? And in his current state, would he even notice if something tripped them? Tor decided right then that he wasn’t going to sleep. Not until he was certain they wouldn’t be attacked in the night.

The blue glow beneath Ash’s hands finally faded. Ash’s body convulsed and then went still. Tor scrambled to his side, relief flooding through him when found a strong, steady pulse. He moved Ash’s hands aside and stared at the smooth, undamaged skin they had covered.

There was only dried blood to mark where those ragged tears had been. Tor covered Ash with his own cloak and set some water to heat. When it was warm, he cleaned the blood away, then finished undressing Ash and got him settled in the bedding. Through all his ministrations, Ash never stirred.

Tor prepared some bread and cheese for himself and heated more water for tea, and still Ash slept on. He sat up all night, listening for any sound that might indicate danger. He told himself he could rest in the morning, when Ash woke up.

But when dawn finally brightened the sky and Ash was still unresponsive, Tor started to worry.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Confessions

It was dark, his head hurt, and Ash couldn't seem to get warm. He shivered, huddling deeper into the blankets. He thought maybe it was light out, but he had no idea what day it was, and he couldn't even dredge up enough energy to open his eyes and find out.

He drifted in and out of consciousness for a long time. No matter how far into the darkness he wandered the cold followed him, settling into the very marrow of his bones and chilling his flesh from the inside. He became aware of a voice speaking near him. He knew the voice but he couldn't make out the words. He tried to think where he was and who he was with, but nothing came to him. The cold made it hard to concentrate on anything for very long.

He reached for the leythe, intending to warm the bedding. The pain in his head intensified and the wisp leythe energy slipped away. A deeper cold than before surged up from somewhere inside him. Shivers wracked him, making him shudder so violently he thought he might come apart. There was movement behind him. Then warm skin pressed up against his back and hot breath fell on his neck. An arm went around his chest and pulled him tightly against that warm body behind him.

“Ash? Can you hear me?”

He could, but damned if he could answer. He tried, but it was too much effort. He recognized Tor's voice, though, and once he did, it all came back to him.

The rhyx should never have been able to sneak up on him like that. And it wouldn't have, if he'd been paying attention instead of thinking about where he was going to put his cock as soon as the camp chores were done. Good thing it had been alone; it had taken almost everything he had to bring down that one, and he doubted the human would have done much more than wave his arms around and make noises.

He'd overextended himself badly, drawing too heavily on the leythe. Rationing a limited amount of power wasn't something he was used to doing.

He hadn't even considered it when he'd worked the leythe into a bolt of lightning and flung it at the rhyx. He certainly hadn't counted on needing more to heal himself. He'd recover, but he'd likely spend the next few days wishing he were dead.

Had he been in his natural form, it wouldn't have mattered. The leythe would have answered his call in a raging torrent, more power at his command than he'd ever had cause to use at one time. In that form, he could have flattened the rhyx and hardly noticed the energy expenditure. He'd never before had to consider that he might be using too much.

Or endure the consequences of doing so.

Leythe-burn was something *humans* had to worry about.

Yet another human weakness Jhara had stuck him with and not bothered to explain, damn her.

Of course, had he been in his natural form, the rhyx could never have surprised him in the first place, let alone touched him.

"Ash, you can't leave me." Tor's voice reached him through the cold. There was a note of fear there, and he could sense that fear rippling through Tor's aura. Fear made sense; if anything happened to Ash, Tor was stranded here.

Ash tried to respond, to reassure Tor, but he couldn't even open his eyes. He hated feeling weak and helpless. He hated even more that Tor was seeing him like this.

"Come on, Ash, you're scaring me. You feel so... far away. Like most of you is someplace else. I'm guessing that's bad. I need you to do something... anything. You healed your wounds, and you don't have a fever. I can't figure out what's wrong or what you need me to do."

Ash tried again to open his eyes, tried to speak, but his body refused to obey his commands. His limbs were too heavy, and he was so tired and so cold...

Fear flared through Tor's aura again, and it didn't feel at all like the selfish how-am-I-going-to-get-home fear that he'd expected. No, this was something deeper, more primal. Fear of loss... fear of...

“Look, I know I’m only just starting to get to know you, and I probably shouldn’t even be thinking this, but... I like being with you. You do something to me. Inside. When I’m with you, it feels like I’ve finally come home. And... and I don’t want to lose that.”

There was a soft kiss on the back of his neck, and then Tor continued, “So you need to come back to me now. I need to see that you’re all right.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Please be all right. I don’t think I can go back to a life without you in it. It hurts too much to even think about it.”

Something sharp and uncomfortable prodded at Ash as he considered Tor’s words in the light of his own plans.

If only you knew, Human. It’s going to hurt a whole lot more before it’s over.

Ash scowled as he dug through the packs and took inventory of their supplies. They’d spent four nights in the cave now, which was three nights too many. Much as he wanted to get back on the road, though, Ash knew he wasn’t ready. He knew enough about leythe-burn to know that a relapse was likely if he didn’t respect his body’s needs.

It had been over a full day before he’d been strong enough to speak. The two days that followed, he’d been weak as a newborn kitten. Tor had to help him sit, help him drink, and even help him piss, which was almost more indignity than Ash could take.

This morning he’d been strong enough to get up and dress himself, although given the way his hands were shaking, even that may have been more activity than he was ready for.

A shadow darkened the cave entrance and he glanced up to see Tor standing there with a pot full of snow. “What are you doing up?” Tor demanded. “You’re supposed to be resting.”

Ash dropped his eyes, not wanting to look at him. “I’ve rested for the last three days, Human. I’ve had enough of resting. I wanted to see how much food we have left.”

“I was going to bring that up today. I didn’t want to worry you until you were stronger.”

Ash heard the warmth and concern in Tor's voice and felt it in his aura. Uncertainty twisted in his gut. Although he'd given Tor no indication that he'd heard those words he'd spoken in the night, he found it difficult to meet Tor's eyes, knowing what the man had confessed to feeling for him.

Tor seemed to think he was embarrassed over his weakness, and gave him his space. For now, Ash was content to let him think that. Better he thought Ash was simply proving himself to be the arrogant ass Tor already believed he was than that he knew how unsettled he made Ash feel.

Tor set the pot over the fire. "So what's the verdict?" he asked, moving to Ash's side and squatting down.

"We'll need more supplies. Much as I hate to admit to such weakness, I think I need another two or three days before we can get back on the road. I don't want to risk a relapse. It would delay us much more than waiting an extra few days now."

"Are you sure that's enough time?" Tor sounded doubtful. "You've been flat on your back since you were hurt. If you need longer..."

"Three days should be sufficient. We'll have to make a detour to resupply, though. I didn't intend for us to be delayed for so long."

"I'm not in a hurry," Tor said quietly.

The more Ash thought about it, the more he realized that he wasn't in a hurry, either. Reaching Vakar would mean an end to their time together. Being stuck in bed for three days had given Ash plenty of time with nothing to do but think. In that time, he'd come to the rather uncomfortable realization that he was going to miss the human when he broke his exile and escaped back into the leythe.

Tor reached out and put a hand on his arm and squeezed gently. Ash glanced up at him and found himself caught in the depths of those silver-gray eyes. "You're shaking. You don't need to put on an act for me. And it's not a weakness to admit that you need more time. It's smart. What if we ran into another rhyx before you were ready? I don't mind staying here for a while longer. If you need to."

Annoyed with himself and with Tor for diluting his sense of purpose, Ash tore his gaze away and jerked his arm free. "What I *need* is to get to Vakar and

break my exile.” The sooner he got back into leythe, the sooner he could shake off the distracting thoughts and feelings that Jhara had saddled him with. His sense of perspective would return. Once he was back in his natural form, things would start making sense again.

Tor didn't say anything. His aura radiated hurt and disappointment.

“The village of Darkwood is a day south of here,” Ash continued. “We'll stop there to resupply and then continue on to Vakar.”

“Fine. We'll leave when you're ready.” Tor got to his feet and retreated to the fire. Ash shut out the uncomfortable feelings he sensed through the bond and turned his attention to repacking the supplies.

Damned if he was going to let a *human* make him feel guilty.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Vakar

Ash looked over the snow-covered landscape laid out before him. Ahead was the castle from which Kaldasha Valtari ruled Vakarra, an imposing stone structure that towered over the land below. It looked as if it had been carved out of the side of the mountain it stood upon.

“Is the whole city inside the mountain?” Tor asked, coming up behind him.

Ash pointed south, where the fenced pastures of some of Vakar’s outlying farms were visible. “The city of Vakar lies to the south. The castle is the home of the Valtari family, rulers of Vakarra. Though there is space enough inside to shelter most of the population of the city, should there be need.”

“You mean like if there’s a war?”

“War or a leythe-storm.”

“Leythe-storm?”

“Vakarra was built upon the mining of leythe-stones—crystals that can be used to tap into the energies of the leythe. Sometimes the miners hit an unstable vein, releasing large amounts of raw leythe into the world. Plays havoc with the weather. Not to mention what it does to human minds.”

Tor’s gaze shifted nervously from the castle to Ash and back again. “Does that happen often?”

“Not as much as it did in the past. The leythari monitor the mining operations carefully, but accidents can still happen.”

Tor didn’t look comforted by that, but he said only, “So, what next? We just walk up to the front door and introduce ourselves?”

“With Vakarra at war, I imagine we’ll be met by a patrol before we get much farther. They will escort us to the castle. *I* am known here—I need no introduction. *You* will follow along behind me, with your head down and your mouth shut. And you will *keep* your mouth shut no matter what I say. Both our lives may depend on it.”

Tor's eyes narrowed. "I thought you knew these people."

"I do. But I don't trust them. Nor do they trust me. And I won't know how safe we are until I have a chance to find out who is here and who is not. I don't sense Lucano in the leythe. I hope that means he's still at the border with the army." And hopefully he'd stay there. There was no way Ash could hide what Tor was from a leythari as powerful as Lucano.

"Who is Lucano?"

"First Consort of Vakarra as well as its most powerful leythari."

"Consort? As in... husband?"

"As in husband." Ash turned to see Tor giving him a funny look. "Not quite the way things are done in your world?"

"Hell, no, there are only a few places in the country I'm from where I could marry a man. And... well, in some places they're still fighting not to be killed for it."

"Humans," Ash muttered. "The variety of ways you come up with to make each other suffer never ceases to amaze me. If you applied just a fraction of that creative energy to building something instead of tearing it apart, you'd be a force to be reckoned with."

Tor was obviously still digesting Ash's last bit of information, for he frowned, then said, "So... how do they produce an heir? That's sort of important, isn't it?"

"That would be the Second Consort's responsibility. Last I heard, the Lady Malika had not yet managed to produce one." Ash started toward the castle, then stopped and turned to face Tor. "If Lucano shows up, you will stay out of his way—and out of his bed."

Tor glared back. "What, you think I'm some kind of slut? I'm not—"

"That's not what I meant." Gods of the leythe, the human took exception to every single thing that came out of his mouth. He was getting damned tired of having to explain himself all the time. "Lucano is powerful. And he uses that power to get what he wants."

Tor snorted. "Sounds like someone else I know," he said, almost, but not quite, under his breath.

Ash gritted his teeth. He found himself doing that so often lately, it was a wonder he hadn't ground them to powder. For the sake of avoiding yet another argument, he chose to pretend he hadn't heard. "You are nothing to these people. I can't guarantee your safety if he should take an interest in you, so don't do anything to attract his attention."

"I wasn't planning on it. The only bed I have any interest in is yours." Tor's expression softened. "Ash... if things don't work out here... I mean, if you can't break your exile and send me back home... I'm all right with that." He lowered his lashes and his voice dropped, almost to a whisper. "I could stay here. With you. It's not like there's anything much for me to go back to."

The feeling of unease that seemed to grow stronger every time he looked at Tor, every time he touched the man, flared to life. He locked it down reflexively, smoothing the energies of his own aura. He didn't want Tor to have access to his true feelings the way he had access to Tor's. He wondered how much longer he'd be able to shut Tor out. As the bond that connected them ever more deeply grew stronger, it took more and more concentration to do it. Soon it would be impossible to keep his feelings to himself. Ash's gut twisted and his chest tightened. He tore his gaze away. "Impossible," he said, and turned toward the castle.

"You have got to be fucking with me." Tor's aura radiated disbelief and disgust in equal measure. Ash turned from the dressing table in their guest suite to see him holding up a pile of finely-wrought gold chains.

"I will be, later," Ash murmured. "Especially if you go to dinner wearing that."

Tor's glare could have melted ice. "Wearing *what*? I don't see anything here to wear. When I agreed to play your slave, I thought that meant I was going to be lugging your shit around. I didn't realize you were going to put me on display for all your friends. I think I'll skip dinner."

The level of distress coming through the bond made Ash regret his comment. A few weeks ago, he might have found Tor's reaction to the clothing the steward had provided for him amusing. Now, Ash's first thought

was to reassure him. “I wasn’t intending for you to be put on display. The idea is to keep a low profile, and you’ll certainly attract attention if you wear *that*. Didn’t they send anything suitable?”

“Not for me.” Tor wrinkled his nose as he held up a few scraps of brightly colored silk. “Not unless this is your idea of suitable.”

“Have a look at the things they sent for me to wear. And choose something fairly plain.”

As Ash had predicted, they hadn’t gotten very close to the castle before they were met by a patrol. Several of the guardsmen had recognized Ash as Navaya, the mercenary leythari who sold his services to those who could afford them. The steward had also recognized him immediately, and was well aware that Kaldasha Valtari was quite fond of the wandering leythari. Navaya and his slave had been invited in with little fuss. After a short wait, the Lord and Protector had sent instructions that they were to be seen to a guest suite to freshen up and requested that Navaya join him for an informal dinner in his private study.

The steward had been sympathetic when Ash apologized for not having appropriate attire. Ash spun a tale of losing his pack horse while crossing the Icemist River on his way into Vakarra, a treacherous crossing even under the best conditions. The steward had promised to see to it, and a maid had just delivered a pile of clothing for them to make use of until Ash could employ the services of a tailor down in the city.

“You know, if you want to keep a low profile, it might make more sense to just leave me here,” Tor suggested hopefully.

“I’m not leaving you alone here. Lucano may not be present, but there are other leythari employed here, and your aura is... *different* enough that it may attract the wrong kind of attention.”

Tor frowned. “Different how?”

“Different because you’re from another world.” The lie fell from his lips with ease, and Ash ignored the little stab of guilt that prodded him as he spoke it. “Kaldasha cannot touch the leythe. All he’ll see is a pretty slave, and not very much of that, if we dress you in real clothing. You’ll be far safer with me.”

“*Pretty?*” Tor snorted. “Never been called that before.”

“Then the people around you were blind.”

Tor flushed and turned his attention to the pile of clothing.

Ash moved to his side to help, and selected a pair of dark blue breeches and a plain shirt of gray linen. “These will do nicely. They’re not too fancy for a pleasure slave, and they’ll hide your... charms from Kaldasha’s wandering eyes.”

“Wandering eyes?” Tor shot him a worried look. “Not sure I like the sound of that.”

“He will certainly look at you,” Ash told him. “But that is all he will do. The bathing room is through there.” He gestured across the room. Tor scooped up the clothing and headed off to his bath while Ash considered what services he might offer to Valtari in return for the use of his workroom. He was going to have to be very careful how he played this. Crippled as he was, many of the feats Valtari would remember him performing during past visits were no longer possible.

When Tor finally emerged from the bathing room, damp and flushed from the heat, he was dressed only in shimmering gold chains that encircled his hips, neck, wrists, and ankles. Ash drew in a sharp breath at the sight of him.

Tor’s color deepened and he lowered his eyes.

It took Ash a few moments to find his voice. “Gods of the leythe,” he finally breathed. He crossed the room and circled Tor slowly. He couldn’t tear his eyes from the hard planes of the man’s exquisitely sculpted body, the smooth swell of muscle across his chest, that firm, tight ass. He stopped in front of Tor and put an arm around his waist to pull him close, then kissed him possessively. His fingers traced the chain that encircled Tor’s narrow hips and dragged along the hot skin beneath it.

Tor responded eagerly, deepening the kiss. Ash could feel the heat and the hardness of him through his own clothes, his erection a burning brand against Ash’s hip. Ash broke the kiss and pulled away before he lost himself completely.

Tor leaned in to nibble on Ash's earlobe. His breath was hot against Ash's neck as he whispered, "Thought I'd wear these under my clothes. So every time you look at me, you can think about what's waiting for you when we get back here."

Ash's cock twitched at the thought. He wished there was time to take full advantage of Tor right this minute. "Oh, I will be. Every time I look down at you, kneeling obediently beside my chair."

"Kneeling beside your—" Tor choked off the words, fury and shame blazing through his aura and wiping out the arousal that been there only seconds ago.

"Like a good slave," Ash added. "Keep your head down and your eyes on the floor. You don't speak, you don't move, and you don't make eye contact with anyone. Is that clear?"

"Fucking *hell*, Ash, you damn well better make this worth my while."

Ash silenced him with a kiss. "I'm planning on it." He nuzzled Tor's neck and ran his tongue around the shell of his ear. "I'll be thinking about what's under your clothes. And you'll be thinking about what I'm going to do to you when I get you back here." He nipped Tor's earlobe lightly and pressed his palm against Tor's cock.

Tor shivered and the energies of his aura shifted again, fury receding as need and want overshadowed it.

"A long, slow fuck against the wall, maybe?" Ash suggested.

"Yes," Tor whispered. "Please."

Ash silently cursed the fact that he didn't have time to indulge in that particular fantasy right now, and pulled away with some reluctance. "Hold on to that thought, then. I know I will."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Slave Boy

Tor followed meekly behind Ash and the steward. He tried to memorize the route from the guest suite, but the castle was huge. There were so many twists and turns that he was soon lost.

They stopped before an ornately carved wooden door. A servant standing outside the door opened it for them, and Tor followed Ash in. He was relieved to see the thick rug that covered the marble floor of the study. The prospect of kneeling on the floor all evening was bad enough, without having to deal with the additional discomfort of a hard stone floor.

“Navaya!”

Tor glanced up through his lashes to see a handsome man in his mid-thirties moving forward to greet Ash. His thick, shoulder-length, chestnut-brown hair was tied back, and he had eyes of a vivid blue that reminded Tor of pictures he’d seen of the Caribbean Sea back home.

“Kaldasha Valtari,” Ash said, stepping forward to clasp arms with the man. “It’s good to see you again, Lord and Protector.”

“And you. It has been... what, half a year?”

“Something like.”

Valtari turned to Tor and took hold of his chin, forcing his head up and turning it this way and that. Tor had to fight to remain still. He felt as naked and exposed as if he’d worn only the golden chains. Ash’s hand settled on the small of his back, pressing firmly to prevent him from moving away.

The Lord and Protector of Vakarra looked him over like he was a piece of meat, then nodded approvingly. “Very pretty,” Valtari said with a hungry gleam in his eye, “if somewhat overdressed. Where ever did you acquire such an exquisite treasure?”

Ash inclined his head, accepting the praise. “The slave market in Akhat, when I was there at summer’s end. I wasn’t intending to make such an extravagant purchase, but he caught my eye, and I was unable to pass him up.”

“I can see why,” Valtari said, lifting a strand of Tor’s hair and turning it this way and that so it caught the light. “Truly captivating. I don’t suppose I might take the liberty of borrowing him for the night?”

Tor stared at the floor, face flaming. So much for keeping a low profile. Although, now that he thought about it, Ash *had* said that it was the First Consort he was most concerned about avoiding. A sharp spike of hot, possessive jealousy stabbed through him. It had to be coming from Ash through that damned leythe-bond. He forced himself to remain silent, trembling with a mixture of shame and fury.

Ash’s hand moved on his back in long, gentle strokes. A warning? Or a promise?

“Perhaps that is something we can negotiate later,” Ash said smoothly. Tor’s head snapped up, and he twisted slightly to stare at Ash in disbelief. If Ash thought he was going to whore him out for his own gain...

Ash’s hand moved to the back of his neck and squeezed hard enough to hurt. “Although you may not find him as compliant as you might wish,” Ash continued. “I am still in the process of breaking him in. He has yet to learn proper submission, and I fear his skills in the bedroom are woefully inadequate. He was high strung to begin with, and our difficult journey has done little to improve his temperament. I chose not to display him tonight in the hopes that it might help calm his nerves.”

Fuming, Tor dropped his head, staring down at the floor. He couldn’t see Valtari’s expression, though he could hear the suppressed desire in his voice. “Completely understandable. Though I must say, a bit of spirit can be... exciting. A nice change of pace, yes?”

“That it can, my lord,” Ash murmured.

“Very well—we shall speak of it later. After I have plied you with enough drink to weight the bargaining in my favor.”

Both men laughed. Tor bit his cheek so hard in his effort to remain silent that he tasted blood.

Once the two of them were seated at the table, Tor knelt beside Ash’s chair as he’d been instructed. He struggled to keep the simmering resentment off of

his face. Slaves were invisible, indeed. To hell with Ash and his long, slow fuck against the wall. They'd be having words tonight, and they would not be pleasant.

The door opened. Two servants entered with trays and began serving the first course. Tor's stomach growled, and he wondered when the slaves got to eat. Not, apparently, at the same time as their masters. Other than stepping carefully around him, the servants ignored his presence entirely.

Once the servants had left the room, Ash said, "You dine alone tonight, but for myself. Is the First Consort still at the border with the army?"

Valtari rolled his eyes. "*He* is in his element. Wild horses couldn't drag him away from a conflict."

"And the Second Consort? The pleasure of Lady Malika's company is what makes a visit to Vakar truly memorable. I trust she is well."

Tor watched through lowered lashes and saw Valtari's expression turn grim. "Lady Malika met with a terrible fate while returning from her family's estate after the harvest. Her carriage was set upon by brigands and she was killed. Along with the child she carried."

"Kaldasha, I'm sorry," Ash said, sounding genuinely distressed by the news. "I hadn't heard. I spent most of the autumn in Akhat."

"Not half as sorry as I. As you're probably aware, Malika was more of a... a means to an end than a love-match for me, and she was well aware that my passion was always for Lucano. She never made me feel guilty about that, nor did she ever pressure me for more than I could give her. We came to be great friends, Malika and I, and her absence grieves me more than I can say."

"A tragic loss. You have my deepest sympathy."

"I would have more than that, if you were willing," Valtari said quietly. "I would have your aid. But we shall save that for later, as well." His gaze drifted to Tor and lingered for a long moment. "Let us turn to more pleasant subjects while we dine. I would hear of your travels to Akhat, and any news you might have of the south."

Ash inclined his head. "As my lord wishes."

The conversation turned to politics and trade. Tor had never had any interest in those even back home, where he might have at least recognized some of the names and places mentioned. He tuned their words out and tried not to think about how hungry he was.

The brush of a hand across his cheek startled him and he raised his eyes to see Ash looking down at him, a mocking smile on his lips as he held a bit of meat out to him as if he were a dog. He curled his lip in a silent snarl. Ash's eyes narrowed in warning. Tor gritted his teeth and reached out to take the offering, but Ash pulled it away and held it to Tor's lips, like he expected... ah, hell, Ash had to be fucking with him... didn't he?

He glanced around and saw Valtari watching them intently.

Keep your head down and your eyes on the floor. Ash's words came back to him. He lowered his eyes and used lips and tongue to take the meat from Ash's hand. Ash didn't move his hand, so Tor licked Ash's fingers clean slowly, taking each finger into his mouth and swirling his tongue around it, using exactly the same technique he used on Ash's cock. It certainly had the desired effect. He had Ash's full attention, and he could feel the heat of his arousal blazing through the bond.

He took advantage of the moment to send a message of his own, and bit down hard on Ash's finger. Not enough to draw blood, but enough to hurt. He felt Ash's surprise, followed by a stab of anger. Ash jerked his hand back. His eyes narrowed as he leaned over to whisper a single word in Tor's ear: "Behave." Then Ash petted him like a favored animal and turned his attention back to Valtari.

The meal dragged on, with Ash feeding him tidbits from his plate and Valtari dividing his attention between Tor and Ash. Even with his eyes lowered he could tell whenever Valtari's gaze fell upon him, because the leythe-bond that he was now almost constantly aware of would suddenly flare to life with a hot stab of possessive anger.

It seemed like hours passed before the servants came to clear away the remnants of the meal. Tor was still hungry, but he dared not say anything. Valtari offered Ash a drink. Tor sighed and resigned himself to more waiting.

“To our long and mutually beneficial friendship,” Valtari said, raising his glass to Ash.

“To friendship.” Ash took a sip of his drink, then inclined his head in inquiry. “You spoke earlier of needing my aid. What would you have of me?”

“You have always been a valued friend, Navaya. And yes, there is a matter I would speak of to you. A matter that Lucano refuses to address. He counsels me to let it go and move on, but... I find I cannot. The anger festers within me, and I can no longer ignore it.”

“Speak with the certainty of my silence, old friend,” Ash said, nearly purring. Tor paid close attention. Valtari had just played right into Ash’s hands. He wondered just what kind of price Ash was willing to put on the use of whatever it was he needed to break his exile. And whether or not it was going to involve Tor ending up in the Lord and Protector’s bed.

“Djehan of Daerne has overstepped the bounds of propriety for the last time. It was he who ordered the attack on Malika’s carriage.”

“You have proof?”

“Proof enough. I would have him pay, Navaya. And pay dearly.”

Ash frowned and shifted in his seat, his expression giving no hint of the unease Tor could feel through the leythe-bond. “You would have me remove Djehan?”

“No. That would be too kind. I would have you deprive him of his heir, as he has deprived me of mine.”

Tor’s mouth went dry as he waited for Ash to refuse, for surely he would. Ash wasn’t the sort to kill a man in order to get what he wanted, was he?

“I assume you’ve already attempted more... traditional methods?” Ash asked.

“I’ve looked into the matter. My spies tell me that Stefan of Daerne is so well guarded that an assassin would have no real chance of reaching him. Djehan, however, has little trust in the leythe. He doesn’t have a single leythari in his employ—a weakness we can exploit. A powerful enough leythari could strike Stefan dead, even from here. Lucano is the most powerful leythari I have, and he tells me that such a thing is beyond his abilities. But you,

Navaya—you have demonstrated time and time again that, among leythari, you have no equal. If anyone could do this thing, you could.”

Ash went very still, but there was none of the panic Tor had expected to sense through the leythe-bond. In fact, he sensed only cool, calm calculation, which surprised him. If Lucano couldn't do such a thing, there was no way Ash could manage it. “Satisfying as it may be to strike Stefan down where he stands, I feel I must point out the benefits of something a bit less... direct, my lord. Something that cannot be traced back to this very castle when Djehan hires a leythari to investigate the matter.”

“Would he?”

“I should think so. I suspect Djehan's need to know who was responsible for such a devastating blow would override his distrust of leythari.”

Valtari leaned forward and licked his lips. “Then what would you suggest?”

A dark, wicked smile slowly spread across Ash's handsome features. “Something that will be drawn to Stefan's aura like a moth to a flame. Something that will hunt him down until it finds him. Something that cannot be tracked through the leythe because it has no aura of its own. I could create such a thing and send it out into the world, hungry for the blood of Stefan of Daerne.”

“Yes.” Valtari's smile was as fierce and grim a smile as Tor had ever seen. It sent a shiver up his spine. “Lucano has never spoken of such a possibility.”

“The creation of such a thing is a delicate, complex process. While the First Consort is powerful indeed, he lacks a certain... subtlety. I doubt he would have the patience for it. But if you can muster even a fraction of that patience, the deed will be done. Done in such a way that there will be no path through the leythe to trace back to your hand.”

“And the price?”

“Nothing too extravagant,” Ash said with a dismissive shrug. “I would request the use of one of your workrooms for some research of my own. One of the drawbacks of a life lived mainly on the road is the lack of access to a shielded workroom when one needs it.”

Valtari looked pleased. “Easily done. If you can do this for me, you shall have unlimited use of my workrooms whenever my own leythari can accommodate you. What resources will be required to set this plan in motion?”

“I’ll need two of your leythari. The more powerful they are, the faster the process will be.”

“You shall have them.”

Valtari refilled Ash’s glass and his own, and they drank to the success of their plan. Tor stared down at the floor. He was relieved that Valtari seemed to have forgotten him in his eagerness for vengeance, but deeply uneasy about Ash’s plans. Even in his ignorance of the political situation, Tor couldn’t see how assassinating the enemy’s heir could possibly be a good thing. It sounded as if it would only add fuel to an already raging fire.

And if raising the power required to send him home meant spilling the blood of innocents, Tor would damn well stay here.

Finally, Ash smothered a yawn. Valtari said, “Forgive me, Navaya, I shouldn’t keep you so late. You’ve had a difficult journey. Don’t feel you need to start on this project immediately. Take a few days to recover, if need be.”

Ash bowed his head. “I thank you, my lord. I shall retire to my bed then, so that I might be fresh in the morning. I would speak to your leythari at that time.”

“I will inform them that they are to serve you as they would serve me.” Valtari’s eyes settled upon Tor again. “However, I doubt that morning will find you refreshed if this exquisite creature accompanies you to your bed. It’s a pity Lucano isn’t here—he would very much appreciate this one. He’s simply stunning. That hair... gorgeous.”

The feeling Tor got from Ash through the bond echoed his own: it was a damned good thing that Lucano *wasn’t* here.

Tor kept his head down and his mouth shut as he trailed behind Ash to the guest wing. The subservient act only lasted until the door of their suite was closed and locked behind them. Ash leaned against the door and rubbed his face with his hands. Tor stood in front of him and pinned him there with a glare. “All right, *Navaya*, would you mind telling me what the hell just

happened in there? Because it sounded to me like you just agreed to help Valtari escalate this war of his so you can use his workroom to send me home.”

Ash lowered his hands and gave him a cool look. “And if I did?”

“You think Daerne is stupid? You kill his heir, he’s going to know it was Valtari’s idea. He might not be able to prove it, but he’ll know. And he’ll retaliate. You think I want the lives of all the innocent people caught up in this on *my* head?”

“You will not have to worry about the consequences, Human. It will not be you who shoulders the blame—it will be me.”

“Because of me.”

Ash didn’t reply. His eyes slid away from Tor’s face. Tor could feel that unease bouncing between them, his own, yes, but Ash’s, too, and there was something else there, something that felt a lot like... guilt? Or maybe regret?

“What are you not telling me?”

Ash’s lips curved in a condescending smile. “There are many things I’m not telling you, Human. I am not accountable to you.” His eyes raked over Tor, and Tor shook his head, too annoyed to want Ash’s attentions. He turned and stalked to the bedroom, wanting only to get himself out of Ash’s sight.

Ash waited only a moment before following him. Tor was suddenly hit with a flood of arousal so strong it almost sent him to the floor. He turned to see Ash leaning against the bedroom door frame, watching him with a predatory look that Tor had come to associate with himself about to be thoroughly fucked. “You think I’ve forgotten what’s under those clothes? Take them off. I would see you dressed only in the chains of a slave.”

“No. I’m not in the mood for this. We need to—”

“You need to take those clothes off, Human.” There was a dark, dangerous note in Ash’s voice that made Tor want to drop to his knees. “Come here.”

“No.” Tor drew a deep, shuddering breath and fought to ignore the hot waves of lust blazing through the leythe-bond and igniting his own desire. “I’m not doing this. I don’t want to do this. You need to listen to me.”

“Slaves don’t need to talk.” Ash pushed himself away from the door. As he closed the distance between them, the flames of Ash’s lust licked along Tor’s limbs. Tor’s own desire resonated with Ash’s, reinforcing it as the bond reflected it back and forth between them. It wasn’t long before he could no longer distinguish his own feelings from Ash’s, or hold onto the thread of what he wanted, *needed*, to say.

“Damn it, Ash... I can’t think...”

Ash took hold of his shirt, tore it down the front, and pushed it back over his shoulders. Tor tried to pull away, a last effort at resistance, but the moment Ash touched him his arousal increased until it all but consumed him. Heat swept through his body and turned his limbs to liquid. Tor whimpered, suddenly burning with a desperate need to be touched. Ash unlaced the breeches and turned him.

Tor found himself pushed forward until his chest hit the wall. His breeches were yanked down and his hair was pulled aside and wrapped around Ash’s fist. Warm lips moved against the back of his neck. “Slaves don’t need to think, either. Except about how they might please their masters.”

Ash’s fingers trailed along the chain that encircled Tor’s hips. Tor shuddered with need. He was burning up, couldn’t have answered if he’d tried. But deep inside him, a small voice protested that he *did* need to think, that something wasn’t right. If Ash would only stop touching him like that for one moment, he might be able to take hold of that feeling of wrongness and turn it into a coherent thought.

Ash didn’t stop touching him. The hand that caressed the chain around his hips moved lower. A finger slid between his buttocks and pushed into him. Tor groaned and pushed his hips back, wanting that finger deeper. He no longer cared that he was losing the battle. It was too hard to fight against something he wanted so desperately. With one last whimper, he gave himself over to the firestorm raging through him and welcomed Ash’s heat into his body.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lucano

Ash sat cross-legged on top of one of the tables lining the walls of the workroom. He rested his chin on his palm as he studied the creature floating in the stasis field in the center of the room. Below it, the large slab of glowing leythe-stone that powered the stasis field gave off a cold, blue light and cast harsh shadows about the room.

The creature's shape was modeled after something Ash had seen swimming in the sea years ago, a great flat fish, rippling like a cloak in the wind as it rode the invisible ocean currents. Its circular body was a matte black, as wide and as long as the average man was tall. Its long, whip-like tail was twice that length. It had a mouth on its underside with a sharp beak designed for tearing flesh. There were no visible sensory organs other than the short, slender tentacle-like appendages that covered its underside and flickered in and out of sight as they dipped into the leythe.

"Impressive, Navaya. Very impressive," said a voice behind him. Ash turned to see Kaldasha Valtari standing in the doorway of the workroom. "I can scarcely believe it has been only three days since your work commenced."

Ash shrugged. "Thank your leythari. Laine and Shae did most of the hard work. I merely supervised—gave them the patterns they needed, and showed them how to tie the thing into the matrix of the leythe in such a way that it casts no aura."

"Is it finished?"

"Nearly. It remains only for me to give it the energy pattern it will require to seek out Stefan. If you removed the stasis field now... well. Don't. It hungers for the leythe. Without a pattern of some sort to direct its hunger, it would go after me first, and then it would hunt down Laine and Shae and any other leythari it could find."

Valtari ventured into the room and circled the stasis field, examining the creature from all angles. "It looks like something that would be at home in the sea," he said finally.

“Very like. This creature rides the energy currents of the leythe, much as the creature that inspired it floats upon the currents of the sea.”

“And it feeds upon flesh?”

“It feeds upon the leythe. What you see is only its physical manifestation, and then only as much as your own senses can interpret. Much of the creature exists only within the leythe.”

“Feeds on the leythe?” said another voice from the doorway.

Ash went cold at the sound of that voice. He turned again to see Lucano Valtari striding through the doorway, tall and imposing. Lucano wore travel-stained robes in the black and silver of Vakarra. Strands of long, black hair that had escaped his dusty war-braid were plastered to his face, and Lucano looked as if he hadn't slept well in some time.

The First Consort's intense jet-black eyes fixed on the creature. He circled it as Kaldasha had done, expression calculating. “Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.” He looked over at Ash. “I thought I sensed your hand disturbing the leythe, Navaya. Your timing couldn't be better. This is exactly what we need to counter Daerne's latest insult.”

Kaldasha cast a brief warning glance at Ash. “Which insult would that be?”

Lucano scowled. “Djehan has done the unthinkable—hired himself a company of leythari. The men I command are brave and true souls, but they cannot stand against an army that can invade their very minds and turn their own nightmares against them. I am but one man. I cannot shield them all. But an army of these?” He grinned and clapped Ash on the shoulder. “This is the answer to my prayers. You will dine with us this night, and we shall speak of the army we will build using this magnificent creature as a template.”

Kaldasha nodded, looking pleased, and added, “And bring your lovely slave, Navaya. Appropriately dressed this time. Lucano and I would appreciate the chance to view all of his... assets. And perhaps the chance to talk you into letting us sample him.”

The cold feeling of dread in Ash's belly uncurled a little more, and he considered fleeing right then. The bond between himself and Tor had grown so strong that once they were together, there was no way Lucano would miss it. He feared it would pique Lucano's curiosity and compel him to look closer.

Unlike Ash, who was crippled to point that he'd needed to meditate deeply to learn Tor's true nature, Lucano was powerful enough that he would see it the moment he turned anything more than a casual eye upon Tor.

He wished there was a polite way to decline a dinner invitation from the Lord and Protector of Vakarra and his First Consort. If he took Tor and fled, leaving Kaldasha's project incomplete and Lucano wanting further services, he would certainly be pursued. Pursuit would be a problem in his present state. He didn't have the power to hide himself or Tor well enough to avoid Lucano.

He would have to brazen it out. Perhaps dressing Tor up in those gold chains would provide enough of a distraction that Lucano wouldn't bother looking deeper. One could always hope.

"I would be honored to dine with you, my lords," Ash managed to say.

Lucano nodded. "Until tonight, then." He strode out of the room, leaving Ash and Kaldasha staring after him.

"You've impressed him," Kaldasha said, voice approving.

"Not necessarily a positive development," Ash said in a low voice.

"If you should be instrumental in our victory over Daerne, you will earn yourself high favor indeed," Kaldasha said. "Perhaps even an offer of a permanent position here in Vakarra. A title. Land." He gave Ash a curious look. "How can that be anything other than a positive development?"

Ash just shook his head, mind racing to come up with some way he could hide Tor's true nature from Lucano.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Betrayal

Tor lay on the large bed in the guest suite, eyes tracing the curving lines of painted vines and leaves that adorned the ceiling. He'd spent the last three days cooped up in here, while Ash worked his ass off doing gods only knew what for Kaldasha Valtari.

Tor had attempted to voice his concerns the morning after Ash and Valtari had made their agreement, but Ash refused to discuss it. Tor had hardly caught a glimpse of the man since. Ash left their bed in the mornings before the sun was up and didn't crawl back in until Tor had fallen asleep. The few times Tor had seen him, he'd looked exhausted and had refused to speak of anything that didn't pertain to food or sleep.

Whatever he was doing, it was sapping all of his energy. He wasn't even interested in sex.

The only good thing that Tor could see about the whole situation was that he was being left alone. Servants left food on the table in the suite's main room several times a day, but other than that, he saw no one. He'd worried at first that Valtari might take advantage of Ash's distraction to force his attentions on Tor, but so far that hadn't happened. Now, after three days, Tor had finally managed to relax a bit.

He'd taken to sleeping a lot, because really, what else was there to do? Ash had confined him to the suite. While he chafed at the restriction, he could see the sense of it. He'd tried asking the servants if there was anything he could do to entertain himself, but his status as Ash's slave apparently put him beneath the notice of the staff.

Tension suddenly prickled through him. It was so intense that he half expected to see Ash standing in the room. The constant, low-level unease he'd been feeling ever since they'd arrived had grown stronger daily. The range of emotions he could pick up through the leythe-bond was also growing. He thought Ash was doing something to block it at least some of the time, because

sometimes the bond was so still he could barely sense it while at other times it quivered with Ash's agitation.

Now the tension level ramped up until it was so high that Tor clenched his own fists and looked around for whatever danger was near. He slid off the bed and padded into the main room of the suite.

The door of the suite suddenly opened. Ash strode in and slammed it shut with far more force than necessary, then turned and leaned heavily against it. Now that they were in the same room, Tor could feel something like panic vibrating between them.

"What's wrong?" Tor asked quickly.

Ash stared at him, violet eyes wide, then clenched his jaw. The panic suddenly faded back into that prickly, low-level tension. "Lucano's back. We're summoned to dinner."

"You mean *you're* summoned—"

"No, Kaldasha specifically requested that I bring my pretty slave. He wants Lucano to see you." He pushed himself away from the door and strode across the room, disappearing into the bedroom. A moment later, he returned with a handful of gold chains. He dumped them on the table where they sat in a glittering pile. "Get dressed."

Tor's own apprehension flared as he stared at the chains. "Not a chance. I'm not some fucking ornament you can haul around with you and put on display. I'm staying right here."

Ash was in his face and grabbing a fistful of his shirt before Tor could even blink. "You *will* get ready and you *will* come with me, and you fucking well *will* keep your head down and your mouth shut."

Tor glared. "What the hell? You're the one who told me to stay out of Lucano's sight and out of his bed. And now you're doing everything you can to make sure I end up there."

"The situation has changed. And if we don't play this exactly right, you ending up in Lucano's bed will be the least of our worries."

"It might help if you trusted me enough to tell me what the hell is going on," Tor told him.

Ash opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut and gave a little shake of his head.

“Can you at least tell me what’s changed?”

The tension vibrating through the bond kicked up a notch. Ash grabbed Tor by the throat and shoved him back a few steps until he hit the wall hard enough to rattle his teeth.

It wasn’t the threat of violence or the hand that tightened on his throat that finally convinced Tor to give in. It was the sheer, blind panic that suddenly screamed through the leythe-bond. Something was seriously wrong. Ash was holding onto his control by his fingernails. And if Ash, the most arrogant, overconfident bastard Tor had ever met, was in a panic, Tor figured maybe he’d better just go along with whatever Ash thought they should do.

“All right, all right. I’ll get dressed.”

Ash let his breath out in a long, shaking sigh. He dropped his hand from Tor’s throat. A moment later, he loosened his hold on Tor’s shirt and backed off a step, but he didn’t apologize.

Tor pushed past Ash and scooped the chains up from the table. He glared down at them in distaste. “*Undressed*, more like,” he muttered. Then he turned to face Ash and gave him what he hoped was a threatening stare. “If that bastard puts his hands on me again, I will fucking lay him flat.”

Ash’s eyes narrowed for a moment, but he said only, “You’ll do nothing of the sort. You’ll keep your head down and you’ll endure it. Like a good slave would. Do *not* draw attention to yourself.”

Tor snorted and held up the chains. “I’m pretty sure these will take care of that.”

“Not that kind of attention. Believe me, I know how distracting you are dressed in those. We can hope that Lucano will be distracted enough not to look any farther than your body.”

“*What?* Wait. I thought you didn’t *want* him paying attention to me.”

Ash didn’t answer that. “I’m going to try to shield you, but I don’t know how successful I’ll be. I’ve been working in the leythe for three days straight,

and Jhara didn't leave me much to begin with. In this form I'm no match for Lucano. Gods of the leythe, I hate that bitch."

Tor frowned. "Shield me from what?"

"Lucano. Just... look, it's too complicated to explain right now. Whatever happens, follow my lead. If I tell you to run, run like your life depends on it, because it probably does."

"But where would I—"

"Enough of your questions, Human! Shut your mouth and get yourself ready."

Only the fact that Ash's panic had grown stronger in the time he'd been talking to Tor stopped him from badgering Ash further.

The walk from the guest suite to Kaldasha's study was probably the longest walk Tor had ever taken in his life. Naked but for a few scraps of gold chain, he kept his head down and followed Ash in silence. He wished a hole would open up in the cold marble beneath his bare feet.

It might have been easier if Ash wasn't so edgy. Tor could feel guilt-laced anxiety vibrating through the bond all the time now. He could also feel the echoes of his own shame and humiliation reflected back at him. He wished Ash trusted him enough to explain what he was so afraid of; Tor hated the idea of walking blindly into what had to be a dangerous situation.

When they reached the study, Kaldasha and the First Consort were already seated, deep in conversation. Kaldasha waved Ash in. Tor slunk in behind him, sticking close and trying to make himself as small and unremarkable as possible.

It didn't work. He was suddenly pinned by a pair of cold black eyes that studied him in the same way a hawk might examine a mouse it intended to devour. Tor fought the urge to cover himself. He lowered his eyes, but not before he got enough of a look at Lucano Valtari to make his blood run cold.

Lucano was nothing like Tor had imagined when Ash had told him the man was a powerful leythari. He'd read too many fantasy novels, maybe, because

he'd had visions of a frail, scholarly sort, or a bumbling professor type. Nothing could be further from the truth. Lucano was built like a warrior, moved like a predator, and watched Tor intently with those shrewd black eyes. Kaldasha might hold the title of Lord and Protector, but it was the First Consort who held the power in Vakarra. No question in Tor's mind about that.

Tor waited until Ash was seated, then knelt awkwardly beside his chair. The tension in Ash suddenly spiked, and Lucano said smoothly, "I can see why you would want such an exquisite creature in your bed, Navaya, but don't try to tell me it was his looks that prompted you to purchase him."

Ash gave Lucano a small, tight smile. "As always, the First Consort is extremely observant."

Lucano snorted. "Hard to miss if one knows what to look for. Perhaps we might negotiate a trade. His services in exchange for... hmm... let's see... your life?"

"Lucano!" Kaldasha sounded scandalized.

Tor's throat went dry, and he had to fight his own instincts not to get to his feet and protest. His *services*? No way in hell was Lucano going to—

"Could you repeat that, Lucano?" Ash said in a smooth tone completely at odds with the rising panic Tor sensed through the leythe-bond. "I may not have heard you correctly, because that sounded a lot like a threat."

Lucano laughed. The sound of it sent a shiver rippling down Tor's spine. "Threat? Threats are hardly necessary when I have the means to take what I want."

"Lucano, please," Kaldasha said sharply. "Navaya is our guest, and I won't have you treating our guests in such a manner."

Those cold black eyes shifted to Kaldasha for a moment and then back to Ash. "Be quiet, my pet. You have no idea what he's brought me. Beautiful as he is, this slave is worth more than his weight in gold to those who understand what he is."

"And what would that be?" Kaldasha asked.

"A conduit straight to the raw leythe. With him, I could create an army that would crush Djehan's leythari."

“I did not bring him here for you to use in your war effort, Lucano.” Ash’s voice was frosty. “I brought him here for my own purposes. You will not take him from me without a fight.”

“Oh, come, come!” Kaldasha said, his alarm clear in his voice. “Lucano! Navaya! We’re all adults here. Why can he not serve both your purposes?”

Ash and Lucano both turned to stare at him, but it was Lucano who answered. “Because, my pet, the conduit generally doesn’t survive the channeling process.”

Tor blinked up at Ash as the pieces started to fall into place. Ash had never intended to send him home. Had known all along that Tor wouldn’t survive whatever it was he was going to do to break his own exile.

The guilt that flared through the bond when Ash met his eyes told him Lucano spoke the truth. “You—” he started.

Ash looked away to glare at Lucano, but before he could speak, the door of the study crashed open. Four armed guards entered and arrayed themselves around Ash’s chair.

“I hope you don’t mind me taking the liberty of protecting such a valuable commodity,” Lucano said. He nodded to the guards. Two of them hauled Tor to his feet and started dragging him from the room.

“Ash, damn you, do something!” Tor yelled.

Ash didn’t even look at him. Tor sensed an unsettling mixture of fury, regret, and cold-blooded calculation through the leythe-bond.

The guards forced him from the room and marched him down the hall. Tor stumbled between them, numb and dazed. He couldn’t believe that Ash could make him feel the things he had and then betray him so completely. He’d thought maybe he was even starting to fall in love with the man, even if he was an insufferable ass most of the time. Hell, he’d even thought Ash might be starting to care about him in return.

Idiot. You’re such an idiot, Tor. You’d think you’d know better than to fall for a gorgeous body and exotic eyes. He glanced down at the tattoo on his chest. It was supposed to be reminder. Instead, he’d taken it as a sign of some kind, that he and Ash were meant to be together.

The guards marched him to a door and then up a spiral staircase of stone. A tower. Of course. He should probably be thanking his lucky stars it wasn't a dungeon.

He was shoved through a heavy wooden door and found himself in a round room, bare except for a bed, a table, and a single chair. There were no windows and only one door, which slammed behind him with an ominous thud. A moment later, he heard the sound of a key turning in the lock. No escape, then.

Tor sank down on the bed and stared at the door with fear, anger, and betrayal all churning through his mind at once.

No wonder Ash hadn't looked him in the eye since they'd arrived here. He'd been planning this all along, maybe since the moment Tor had been pulled across the Void to land at his feet.

Tears pricked at his eyes, and he dashed them away with a swipe of his hand. He'd been stupid to think that anything would change. Stupid to think that he might not be alone.

He was more alone now than he'd ever been.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

No Threat

It took everything Ash had to lean back in his chair and survey Lucano with a calm expression. “The hospitality of this house is somewhat lacking, First Consort.”

“Dark times, Navaya, dark times. You are a guest in my house, and you cannot expect me to allow such a valuable thing to remain unguarded.”

Ash scowled. “Don’t patronize me, Lucano. We both know you have no intention of returning my property in the same condition it is in now.” He forced himself to shift his gaze to Kaldasha, who was looking both puzzled and alarmed. “I’m afraid the terms of our agreement will have to be renegotiated, Kaldasha. The slave was key to my purpose in using your workroom, and your Consort has seen fit to confiscate him for his own purposes.”

Kaldasha shot Lucano an unreadable look, then said to Ash, “I would not have you think us thieves. Name your price. Gold. Land. Another slave, to replace the one Lucano has taken... name it.”

“I have no interest in material things, my lord. I would request that you replace what Lucano has seen fit to take. If you think you can.”

“You know as well as I how rare a thing he is,” Lucano said. “His price is beyond measure. You’ll not find a replacement.”

Kaldasha turned to Ash. “I’m sure this is all a misunderstanding, Navaya,” he said in a smooth voice. “The First Consort has no desire to anger you—”

“Oh, shut it, Kaldasha,” Lucano snapped. “The Navaya who sits before us is but a shadow of the one who visited us but half a year ago. His aura has faded considerably since last I saw him. A mere candle, where once he burned like the sun. He’s no threat to me. If he was, he’d never have allowed me take his slave into custody.”

Real fear tightened his gut. Lucano had seen right through everything, as he’d feared he might. He’d never found himself in a situation like this:

helpless before a man who had the power to take everything from him. He didn't know what to do. "Lucano, please..."

"Begging, Navaya?" Lucano's smile was mocking. "For what, I wonder? Your slave's life or your own?" The smile widened to become a wolfish grin. "Oh, yes, I'm well aware of the leythe-bond you share with him. And I'm aware that you will likely share his fate. Rest assured, my leythari will do all they can to see that you survive, even if he does not. I owe you that much, at least, for delivering the means to defeat Djehan into my hands."

Ash shuddered. He understood all too well the kind of agony a broken leythe-bond would condemn him to. If Tor was going to die, he didn't think he wanted to survive. "And after that?"

"Should you manage to survive the breaking of the bond, we shall discuss what knowledge you might trade in return for your continued survival. Or for a quick and merciful death, should that be your preference." Lucano nodded to the guards who stood behind Ash's chair. Ash was seized by several pairs of hands and forced to his knees. Lucano rose from his seat and strode around the table, grabbed a fistful of Ash's hair, and forced his head back. From his pocket he produced a vial and pulled the cork out with his teeth.

Ash struggled, but too many hands held him still. Behind him he heard the door open and more guards entering. Lucano pried his mouth open and forced the contents of the vial down his throat. Ash choked and tried to spit out the cold, bitter liquid. When Lucano pinched his nostrils shut, he had no choice but to swallow so he could breathe.

"There." The note of smug satisfaction in Lucano's voice infuriated Ash. "That is how one deals with a troublesome leythari. Not that this one is powerful enough to be troublesome. Put him with the slave for now."

Ash didn't try to fight. What was the point? The power Jhara had left him with was insignificant compared to that which Lucano commanded. And there were enough guards that there was no hope of fighting his way out. Even if he could somehow free himself, he couldn't leave Tor here, although the reasons for that were a bit muddled in his mind.

Part of it was sheer fury at Lucano's audacity.

Part of it...

He didn't want to think about that part.

It was only going to make things more difficult.

Ash stumbled as the guards shoved him into the tower room and slammed the door shut behind him. Whatever Lucano had given him, it had a bitter aftertaste that he didn't recognize. It was already making his head swim. He dropped to his knees and closed his eyes, wishing the room would stop spinning.

He was completely unprepared for the flying tackle from the side that sent him sprawling the rest of the way to the floor.

“You bastard!”

A naked Tor, still wearing the golden chains Ash had forced him to put on for dinner, straddled him as blows rained down on his body. Ash groaned and tried to throw him off, but the drug had sapped his strength and robbed him of his coordination. All he could do was squirm and flail his arms weakly.

Tor grabbed his wrists and pinned them to the floor. “Come on, damn you, fight me!”

He couldn't. He wanted to, but the drug that was inexorably working its way through his bloodstream was making that impossible. What in all the human hells had Lucano given him? More than a simple leythe-blocker, that was certain. He could feel Tor's anger through the bond, but it was dim and fading with every moment that passed as the drug shut down his ability to sense the leythe.

“Damn you, Ash, were you even going to tell me what you were planning? Or were you just going to let me walk right into it, thinking you were trying to help me? Poor, stupid human, too dumb to know you were just stringing him along so you could use him.” Tor's voice broke on the words, and it occurred to Ash that it wasn't just Tor's anger he was getting through the bond, but pain and betrayal as well.

He tried to speak, tried to tell Tor that he wasn't sure he could have gone

through with it. The drug made the words tangle on his tongue. All that came out was an inarticulate moan.

Tor got to his feet and stared down at him, venom in his eyes. “Fuck you, Ash.” He backed away, out of Ash’s sight. Ash struggled to hang onto consciousness, desperate to explain. The pain that ripped through his heart had nothing to do with the beating Tor had just given him, and everything to do with the bitter disappointment in his lover’s eyes.

Somehow during their journey to Vakar, Tor had come to mean so much more than just a way to satisfy the needs of his body. It was suddenly imperative that he tell Tor that. He might not get another chance. The idea that he might succumb to the drug and wake up to find that Tor had already been sacrificed for Lucano’s ambitions terrified him.

Damn Jhara for doing this to him.

And damn her for making him care.

“Tor... please...” was all he managed to get out before the darkness swallowed him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Channeling the Leythe

Ash woke alone. He was lying on the bed, a blanket covering him. His head ached and his body hurt. His heart stuttered as he remembered the look in Tor's eyes when he'd realized that Ash had intended to sacrifice him all along. He searched for the bond that tied him to Tor, but he couldn't feel it. He sat up quickly, looking around for Tor.

His chest tightened as he realized that Tor wasn't in the room. They'd already taken him. Even now, he could be...

No. He'd feel it if Tor were dead. Not even the drug would be enough to block the psychic agony he would feel from a broken leythe-bond. He focused on the bond, trying to sense something, anything to reassure himself that Tor was still alive.

There was nothing. He was completely cut off from the leythe. From Tor.

He wondered which would be worse: dying when the bond broke, or surviving it. Either way meant death. Survival meant living with the knowledge that he would never touch Tor again, never argue with him, never watch him sleep or see him smile. Never feel Tor's body straining and bucking under him as he sought release... Survival would force him to endure the loss of Tor while his own energies bled out into the leythe through a wound that would never heal.

Death would be far less painful.

Lucano could make all the promises he wanted. Ash knew very well that the breaking of the bond would likely send him into shock so deep he would never regain consciousness. If he'd been able to stick to his original plan, he would have shed the bond along with this body as he slipped back into the leythe. Tor might well have died, but Ash wouldn't have suffered for it.

He wondered if Jhara was watching, even now. Watching her errant child and laughing at the way he'd trapped himself trying to thwart her will. There would be no help from that quarter. Jhara was all about balance. She would tell him he deserved all that was coming to him.

Would she let him die when this body did?

Stupid question. After seeing some of the things she'd allowed to happen in the name of balance, there was no doubt in his mind that she would.

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stone landing outside the door, and a moment later the door banged open and half a dozen of Lucano's guards entered the room.

They drugged him again. Chained him. And forced him down the stairs.

Down and down they went, deep into the roots of the mountains, far deeper than the workroom where Kaldasha had him building his creature for the past few days. The air grew chill as they descended. Ash shivered at the thought of the weight of all that stone over his head.

The stairs finally ended. They walked a long way through a worked stone tunnel, which eventually opened up into a workroom. The near end was brightly lit with stones that glowed with the leythe. The far end was shrouded in darkness, but the feel of the air and the way their steps echoed gave Ash the impression of a vast chamber extending far beyond the lit area.

In the center of the lit area were two slabs of clear, blue leythe-stone, the largest Ash had ever seen in the hands of a human. The leythe danced and flickered within them, writhing and twisting in on itself to form impossible shapes that turned his stomach.

Above the smaller slab floated the leythe-eater Ash had constructed for Kaldasha. The thing Lucano planned to use as a template for his army. Bound to the larger stone was Tor, still wearing only the fine gold chains Ash had made him put on the night before. Lucano stood over him, a dark glint of triumph in his eyes.

Ash moved forward, trying to reach Tor, but the guards held him back. Lucano looked up and gave him a thin, humorless smile. "Navaya, how nice of you to join us. I thought you might enjoy witnessing this. I doubt you've ever seen a leythe-working of this magnitude before."

"You'd be surprised at what I've seen, Valtari," Ash growled.

"Yes, well, whatever it was, it didn't help you protect your... *property*. Or yourself. Did it?"

Ash tried to wrench himself away from the guards, but they gripped him tightly.

On the crystalline slab, Tor moved weakly and let out a low moan. His eyes were closed. Ash sensed only a dim flicker of fear through the leythe-bond. He wondered if Lucano had drugged Tor as well.

“I don’t see your Lord and Protector,” Ash said. “Surely he would not miss your moment of victory over Daerne.”

Lucano gave him a frigid look. “Kaldasha has other matters to attend to. Defense of the realm is my responsibility. Now be quiet or I’ll have you gagged.” He looked down at Tor and closed his eyes, an expression of concentration on his face.

Something stirred in the leythe, a seething, growing sense of imminence. Ash felt it even with his drug-blunted senses. Tor’s eyes snapped open and he struggled against the leather straps that held him. “No...” he moaned. “No, no, no...”

Lucano raised his hands high in the air. His lips moved, but Ash was too far away to make out the words. Tor’s body went rigid. His back arched and he let out a scream that Ash felt as much as heard, like a white hot needle stabbing through his head. Glowing wisps of blue light appeared above Tor as the leythe began to condense out of the air itself. Across the room, the leythe-eater began to glow.

Tor’s screams echoed through the darkness beyond the work area. The light grew stronger, the wisps slowly coalescing into swaths nearly too bright to look at. Tor’s body began to glow, blue and violet light swirling in hypnotic, sinuous patterns just under his skin. The bond suddenly came alive with Tor’s pain as it finally became too strong for the drug to block. Ash groaned and sagged between the guards.

Lucano’s hands moved over Tor. He drew the light from Tor’s body into the space above him, where he wove the wisps of light into an intricate energy matrix. Ash could barely look at it; the matrix twisted and folded in upon itself in ways that were impossible to comprehend with human eyes.

In his true form Ash could have read the matrix easily, could have

shattered that shape with his will alone, could have banished those wisps of dancing energy back into the leythe.

Could have saved Tor.

In human form, all he could do was watch in horror and fight to stay conscious as he struggled to break free of the men who held him.

The matrix Lucano was forming grew brighter and more complex, and Tor's screams became more desperate. Tears streaked his face and his struggles became weaker. Ash fought harder. Tor's only chance of survival lay in him somehow stopping this, but the guards were too strong, there were too many, and he couldn't reach Tor, couldn't save him.

Even dulled by the drugs, the pain that leaked through the bond was almost unbearable. Ash couldn't even imagine what Tor was going through. He knew now that he'd never have been able to use Tor the way he'd planned. Even if he'd started the process, he'd never have been able to complete the task. He could not have been responsible for putting Tor through this agony, even if he himself could have functioned through the pain.

As if a dam had broken, a blast of light and cold slammed through the bond, driving Ash to his knees. The pain was so intense it locked his muscles and froze the scream in his throat. Lightning flashed, briefly illuminating everything in harsh blue-violet light, and Ash caught a glimpse of rank upon rank of the rippling black leythe-eaters filling an enormous cavern that went as far back as the light could reach.

Tor screamed again, a weak, desperate sound. Ash pushed his own awareness into the now wide-open bond. If he couldn't reach Tor physically, he might be able to reach him through the leythe. If he couldn't save him, maybe he could at least make sure he didn't die alone.

And then it all exploded, and the last thing Ash remembered was the agony of the bond stretched beyond all bearing as he was swept away in the raging torrent of Tor's pain and fear.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Leythe-Burn

Ash woke to gentle hands shaking him and a quiet feminine voice encouraging him to open his eyes. He expected agony, but there was only exhaustion. The bond...

The bond was there, but it felt wrong, stretched thin as if it were about to break.

He opened his eyes to see Lucano's leythari, Shae, standing over him. Her soft brown eyes were worried. "You've been asleep a long time, Navaya."

"Tor?" he asked, and was surprised at how harsh his own voice sounded.

Her eyes lifted and settled on the spot next to him. Ash turned his head to see Tor lying beside him. He was too pale, too still, and the glowing light of the leythe was a sullen flicker beneath his skin, moving in sluggish circles.

"Leythe-burn," she said quietly. "I've never seen the like. He'll not last the night. And even if he did..." Her eyes lowered. "I fear his reason gone. Driven from him by prolonged contact with the raw leythe."

She told him nothing he didn't already know, but hearing her give voice to Tor's fate was somehow far worse than just knowing it. Human minds couldn't survive contact with pure leythe energy. If leythe-burn didn't kill them, the shock of the conflicting realities pouring through them robbed them of their reason.

"Leave us," he told her.

Shae bowed her head and left. Two guards followed her out. He heard the sound of a key turning in the lock.

Ash sat up slowly, surprised to find himself reasonably strong, and not at all surprised to find himself back in the tower room. He wondered how much time had passed. Not that it mattered. If Shae was right, Tor didn't have much longer. He needed to see for himself, so he sank himself into the leythe to examine Tor and the bond that connected them.

Tor was dying. Even if he hadn't felt the thin, almost painfully stretched leythe-bond, he couldn't have failed to notice the way the energies of Tor's aura were bleeding out into the leythe.

In this frail, human form, with his pitiful human skills, Ash could do nothing but watch him die. Not even Lucano could help him now.

A lump filled his throat, and his eyes burned. He gathered Tor's unresisting body into his arms and held him close. Too late, he understood what it was he felt for Tor. All of those things he'd blamed on Jhara: the way his stomach did flips when the man was near, the way Tor made him laugh, the way everything felt so right and good when he buried himself deep in Tor's willing body...

It wasn't some curse Jhara had placed on him.

No, it was that most troublesome of all human frailties: love.

Tears slipped down his cheeks. If he had it to do over... "I'm so sorry, Tor," he whispered, then sank himself back into the leythe and sent a whispered plea out into the Void. *Jhara, I beg you... if you have any love for me, any patience, any compassion... I would offer my life in return for his... please. Help me, Mother.*

Not that she would hear him. He wasn't strong enough to call her. All he could do was hope that she might be listening, might take pity on him.

A tear in the matrix of the leythe spilled golden light into the room. An old woman in a black cloak stepped through it. She pulled the rip closed behind her and then stood at the foot of the bed, hands on her hips, violet eyes narrowed slightly, as if she faced a particularly troublesome child.

"What shall I do with you, Ashnavayarian?" she said with a very human sounding sigh of exasperation. "You beg for the life of this one human, but have you even given thought to all the others your actions here have doomed?"

An image rose in his mind, the dark shapes of the leythe-eaters floating in menacing silence across the night sky. He watched as they terrorized villages, running down anyone with even the faintest connection to the leythe.

The image disappeared abruptly. Ash shook his head. "I did not call these things into being, Mother. That was Lucano Valtari's doing."

“You gave him the pattern, child. The knowledge. And you knew him well enough to guess what he would do with it.”

He bowed his head. Fresh tears streamed down his face, blurring his vision. “I’m sorry, Mother. I sought only—”

“I know what you sought. You think I’ve not been watching your little drama unfold? Have you learned *nothing* in your exile?”

Ash raised his eyes to meet hers, unashamed of his tears or of the desperate need coursing through him. “I’ve learned much, but I fear I’ve learned it too late,” he said softly. “Please, Mother. I didn’t understand before. He is my life. My soul. I cannot—” He couldn’t continue past the lump in his throat, the pain tearing through his heart. He looked down at Tor, lying so still in his arms. The thought of those silver-gray eyes never opening again was almost more than he could bear.

How did humans live with such pain?

How would he?

“Yes. You do begin to understand. He has pointed you in the right direction at least, even if you are reluctant to set your feet upon the path.” She moved around the bed and he felt a light touch on his face as she lifted his chin, forced him to look at her. “I am not without mercy, Ashnavayarian. I will give him back to you.”

The relief that coursed through him made his body tremble. “Thank you, Mother. I promise—”

“Do not,” she said severely, “make promises you have no intention of keeping. And do not mistake my purpose, Ashnavayarian. I am not in the habit of bestowing gifts upon those who deserve punishment. His life comes at a price.”

“Name it,” he whispered, ready to do anything she asked, if only she would do what he could not.

“Your actions here have further disturbed the balance of the leythe. You will continue to walk this world as a human, though I will restore *some* of your power to you. You will need it if you are to cage this evil that you have loosed upon the world. Fail me and I *will* take him from you. I will break the bond

between you and you will feel the echo of his loss tearing through the leythe for all of time. Stay true to your purpose, and when your task is complete, I will welcome you both home.”

Ash blinked at her, hardly daring to hope. To have Tor by his side through a human lifetime seemed miracle enough, but... “You would allow me to bring him into the leythe?”

“He *belongs* to the leythe,” she said quietly. “And he has been trapped in human form far longer than you. He has no conscious memory of any other existence, but he knows there’s something more, something missing, and he feels its lack every single day.”

He heard her words, but couldn’t quite process their meaning. Tor belonged to... “But... you mean he’s... one of *us*?”

“Mmm. Part of my effort to teach *you*, my headstrong child,” she said. “He’s become quite good at being human; he’s had to. You would do well to listen to his counsel, rather than just looking upon him as a means to satisfy your *human* needs.”

Ash felt his face burning as he remembered Tor’s attempts to talk to him following his agreement with Kaldasha. Attempts he’d ignored in favor of indulging his own desires.

“Prove yourselves worthy and I will see you both home in the leythe. But make no mistake, Ashnavayarian. You were the one who gave these humans the ability to touch the leythe in the first place. You must be the one to restore the balance. You will *not* be returning home until you have done so.”

He bowed his head. “Yes, Mother.”

“Remember this: you cannot possibly understand how your actions will affect the balance of the leythe if you have no understanding of the creatures you manipulate. That is the *why* of your exile. If you understood human nature, you would never have put yourself in Lucano’s power.”

“Yes, Mother.” There wasn’t much else to say to that. His own determination to thwart Jhara’s will had blinded him to all else.

“And if you *truly* understood how much damage these humans you think of as frail can do to the balance of the leythe, you would never have taught them how to touch the leythe in the first place.”

“I’m sorry, Mother. I did not understand.” He lifted his head and met her eyes. “It is obvious I have much to learn.”

“And you would do well to remember it.” She looked about herself with a frown. “Hmm. You’ll need a bit of help to get out from under Lucano’s thumb. A head start, perhaps. You’d do well to remove yourself from his realm as quickly as possible. He will not be pleased when he discovers you’re missing.”

The leythe seethed and swirled around him and Ash felt the dizzying sensation of crossing the Void as humans experienced it. The brief touch of the leythe scrambled his human senses and made him feel sick, dizzy, and disoriented.

When he opened his eyes and sought to reorient himself, he was still in bed, Tor still clutched against him, but they were in the room they’d stayed in at the Icefall Inn.

Almost afraid to breathe, he looked down at Tor. His color was back, the leythe energy was cleared from his body, and he appeared to be sleeping normally. Ash let out a whimper of relief, pressed his face against Tor’s chest, and let the tears fall.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Human Feelings

Something wet dripped onto his cheek. Tor struggled to wake. In his dream he was folded in a miserable huddle under a pine tree, shivering in the cold rain. Every so often, a strangely warm raindrop would fall from the wet branches above and splash on his cheek. He knew he should get up and find someplace warm and dry, but he was so very tired.

He forced his eyes open and found himself staring up into a pair of violet eyes swimming with tears. “Ash? What—”

Ash’s arms tightened around him. “Tor... I feared if you did ever open your eyes again, you wouldn’t know me.”

Tor shuddered as he recalled his last few hours of consciousness. Ash had meant to take his life for his own gain. The pain that came with that understanding had been far worse than any of the pain that had followed. The knowledge that none of the things Ash had made him feel had any meaning for the other man was an ache that left him feeling far more empty than the void in his soul ever had.

The depth of Ash’s betrayal had stunned him into numbness.

He hadn’t even cared when Lucano’s guards had taken hold of him and locked him in the tower.

The numbness had been burned off by his fury when Ash had been shoved into the room not long after, but he’d worked that off in a hurry. There was no satisfaction in beating a man who couldn’t fight back. Once Ash had lost consciousness, Tor had carefully put him to bed in a fit of remorse.

Lucano’s guards had come for him in the night. They’d taken him to that deep, underground workroom where he’d been bound and drugged, naked and helpless. He’d awakened to find Lucano standing over him. Cold, brilliant agony had torn through him, diamond sharp, burning places deep inside him that he’d never even known existed.

And Ash had been there watching him scream and suffer.

Been there and done nothing.

Tor swallowed hard and tried to pull free of Ash's fierce embrace. "Let me go," he choked out. "You would have killed me."

"No," Ash said quickly. "No, Tor, I wouldn't. I couldn't have. I didn't... I didn't want to admit it, not even to myself, but I could never have hurt you that way. It nearly killed me to have to watch Lucano do it."

Tor closed his eyes. "You let him." A gentle hand stroked his cheek. He flinched, turning his face away.

"I had no choice. He drugged me and forced me to watch." There was a bitter edge to Ash's voice. "And I died inside when I thought I'd lost you. Tor, please look at me."

He didn't want to, but there was something in Ash's voice, something that was echoed in the feelings of fear and vulnerability shivering through the bond that joined them. He opened his eyes and turned his head to face Ash.

"I should never have taken you to Vakar. I knew the risk. I knew what you were and I knew what Lucano would do if he found out. And I knew that in my present form, I wouldn't be able to stop him. It was a calculated risk. A risk I had no right to take, not with your life. I'm sorry, Tor."

The worst thing about the leythe-bond was that it didn't allow him the option of refusing to believe Ash. The depth of Ash's regret and sorrow came through quite clearly. Tor could sense how bewildered Ash was by the strength of the very human feelings that had him tied up in knots. He could feel the bitter echo of the anguish Ash had experienced when he'd believed Tor to be dying.

And threaded through all of that was something good and pure and fierce in its intensity. Something that felt like it fit into the empty places in Tor's soul.

"Please," Ash whispered. "I didn't understand. I didn't know. I've never... never *needed* anything. But I need you." He closed his eyes and as Tor watched, a tear slid slowly down his cheek. "I love you, Tor."

The truth of Ash's words was echoed through the bond. Tor reached up a

shaking hand to wipe the tear away. “Good thing for you I love you, too, then, isn’t it?”

Ash’s smile lit up his face. “A very good thing,” Ash whispered, and kissed him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A Daunting Task

That night, Ash lay awake for a long time watching Tor sleep, watching him breathe, hardly able to believe he'd been given a second chance.

Tor's eyes fluttered open and glinted in the firelight as he stared up at Ash. "Can't sleep?"

"I can't stop thinking about how close I came to losing you."

"I'm right here, Ash. And I'm not going anywhere."

Ash met that gaze and those silver-gray eyes pulled him right in. "Good. Because I want you right here with me."

Tor stared up at him, eyes darkening with desire. "Show me."

"Gods, yes." Ash pulled Tor against him and locked his mouth to Tor's, hands sliding over the hard muscles of his back. Tor moaned into his mouth. Ash wrapped his arms around Tor and held on, still hardly able to believe that Tor was here with him, warm and alive and wanting him.

Ash took his time, worshipping Tor's body with lips and tongue. By the time he'd tasted every inch of his skin, Tor was nearly desperate with need. He was like liquid fire in Ash's arms, hot and writhing beneath him.

When Ash finally moved between Tor's legs and reached for the leythe to ease his entry, Tor put a hand on his arm. "Not so much leythe," he whispered. "I want to feel it tomorrow, know you were there. Make me yours, Ash."

Tor's words sent a surge of heat blazing through him. "You're already mine. But I'll be happy to leave you a reminder." He used only a whisper of the leythe, just enough to ease the way.

Ash groaned as he pushed into that tight, hot channel. Tor's eyes locked onto his as he welcomed Ash into his body. Ash, in turn, finally welcomed Tor into his mind. He stopped trying to fight the bond and allowed all of his human feelings—relief, desire, and yes, love, too—to flood through the bond so Tor could feel them.

Afterward, when Tor lay in the circle of his arms, Ash stared into his lover's eyes for a long time, then said quietly, "There's something I need to ask you, Tor."

"What, I'm not 'Human' anymore?" Tor teased.

"Not to me," Ash said. No, Tor would never be "human" again. There was far more to him than that, and Ash hoped he'd get the chance to help Tor find that out. He wanted to prove them both worthy in Jhara's eyes. Wanted to bring Tor home with him into the leythe, where Tor would finally understand just where it was he belonged. But only if Tor wanted it, too.

Tor frowned. "What am I if I'm not your human anymore?"

Ash bent his head to kiss him and nuzzle his neck. "My life," he whispered. "My reason for being."

A grin spread across Tor's face. "Hell, I should almost die more often. I kind of like you all sweet and cuddly and poetic."

"Don't push your luck," Ash said, just a hint of a growl in his voice.

Tor grinned, and Ash couldn't help but kiss him again. Then he pulled back a little and met Tor's eyes, holding his gaze. "After all I've done to you, I owe you whatever you ask of me. If you want it, I'll do everything in my power to find a way to send you back to your world."

Tor's eyes widened and his body tensed. Ash sensed his confusion through the bond. "Is that what you want?" he whispered. "To send me home?"

"No," Ash hastened to reassure him, sending every bit of love and warmth he could muster through the bond. Tor's smile returned and his body relaxed against Ash as he got the message. "I want you by my side. But it must be because you want to be there—not because you have no other choice."

Tor stared up at him, silver-gray eyes serious. "There's nothing for me there, Ash. There never was. I didn't understand how empty I was until I was filled. I want to stay with you. I need you. Like I need air. You... you put color in the world. You're my life."

Ash smiled as Tor echoed his own words to Jhara. He kissed the top of Tor's head and tightened his arms around him. "As you are mine."

Tor sighed contentedly. “Then I don’t want to hear any more talk about sending me home.”

“You should understand that if you choose to stay here with me, your life will be neither quiet nor peaceful. Jhara has set me a task that I must not fail.”

“What kind of task?”

“Lucano used the power he channeled through you to create an army of leythe-eaters. He plans to send them to Daerne, to kill the leythari Djehan hired.”

Tor shuddered in his arms. “I remember,” he whispered. “That dark shadow, floating in the air... I could see it in my head. He used *me* to make an army of those things?”

“He did. But you would never have fallen into his hands if it wasn’t for me,” Ash said. “I gave him both the pattern and the means. It falls to me to stop him. If I can.”

Tor regarded him with a serious expression. “I’m not a leythari. Or a fighter. Hell, I don’t even know how to skin a rabbit. But I’ll do whatever I can to help you.”

“You can help keep me... human.”

Tor snorted. “That’ll be a full-time job.”

Ash’s lips twitched in the beginnings of a smile. “Dangerous, too, I expect.”

“I’m starting to think that’s just the way things are around you,” Tor said drily. “I’m willing to take the risk.”

“It will be a daunting task. And at the moment, I have no idea how we’ll accomplish it.”

“We’ll think of something,” Tor said with far more confidence than Ash felt. “We have to. All those lives...” He took hold of Ash’s hand, laced their fingers, and squeezed gently. “We’ll do it,” he said firmly, eyes locking onto Ash’s. “We’ll do it together.”

Ash squeezed back, and in that moment, he felt like he could do anything,

even with his very human frailties, as long as Tor was by his side. “Together,” he said, and it felt like a promise.

THE END

Author Bio

Jaye McKenna was born a Brit and was dragged, kicking and screaming, across The Pond at an age when such vehement protest was doomed to be misinterpreted as a “paddy”. She grew up near a sumac forest in Minnesota and spent most of her teen years torturing her parents with her electric guitar and her dark poetry. She was punk before it was cool and a grown-up long before she was ready. Jaye writes fantasy and science fiction stories about hot guys who have the hots for each other. She enjoys making them work darn hard for their happy endings, which might explain why she never gets invited to their parties.

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