

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

VOLUME 11

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance Collection

Volume 11

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 11.

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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LOYALTY DESERVED

By Kathryn Sparrow

Photo Description

A young man with neatly trimmed brown hair, thick eyebrows, and piercing hazel eyes stares at the camera, looking determined. His torso is bare except for leather restraints surrounding his neck and wrists. A rope is wrapped around his wrists several times and through a ring on the leather cuffs, and holds his hands suspended next to his head.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

A moment of inattention and I found myself in the hands of my enemy. I was captured, restrained, interrogated for information I don't even have. No one is coming for me; I knew that without his taunts. But if he thinks I'll surrender, he has another thing coming.

**Sci-fi or fantasy setting please*

Sincerely,

Amanda

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: military, spacemen, abduction, captivity, enemies to lovers

Content warnings: mentions of past rape

Word count: 15,630

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LOYALTY DESERVED

By Kathryn Sparrow

CHAPTER 1

Connor wrapped his hands around the rope that imprisoned him, trying to ease the throbbing in his shoulder muscles. He had woken to find himself hanging by leather cuffs around his wrists. He shook his head, hoping that would somehow clear the cloudiness that seemed to slow his thinking.

He realized he was able to stand and relieve some of the physical pain. That surprised him. He expected the rebels to suspend him by his wrists with his feet barely touching the floor. Instead the rope just kept him from moving around the room, but didn't physically dangle him. Still, the mental anguish continued. What did the rebels have in store for him?

He cursed his own stupidity.

It had just been a routine shuttle run. One he'd made a million times. He'd only looked away from the controls for a moment. Nothing was supposed to happen. Instead, a big-ass rebel ship appeared and tractorized his shuttle before he could run evasive maneuvers. The damn autopilot countermeasures were totally useless.

When his ship had been pulled aboard, a sickly-sweet smell, like a sugar shack boiling down maple syrup but mixed with cough medicine, permeated the cabin. The next thing he knew, he was here—a generic, dorm-style room, a bed in one corner, a table with chairs on the side. Of course, the bars on the window and the hook he was attached to in the ceiling didn't fit the whole happy-home theme.

His uniform was gone, not surprising since several locaters were sewn into the seams. They let him have baggy sweatpants but no shirt and no socks, and some kind of collar had been strapped around his neck. Would they use the collar to choke him? Goose bumps covered his skin although the temperature in the room was mild.

They had him and he wasn't going anywhere.

He waited, unsure how long, with aching shoulders and sore feet. This was part of the game, or so his instructors had said. Letting him stew and worry about what they had planned. That was the rebel's way. Kill, maim, torture. Anything to bring down the Democration of Planets.

Connor had no idea what was coming, but he wouldn't betray the Democration. His planet, Dex-G9, had been a member for hundreds of years. The rebels started bombing worlds when Connor was sixteen years old. He wanted to be the first to join up to protect innocent lives, but his parents said no. Two years later, when his mother was killed in a rebel bombing attack, his father gave his blessing.

It had been a huge culture shock, leaving his peaceful agrarian home and joining the military. Six months of crazy training, learning to fly shuttles, and trying not to get his ass shot off during drills. But he made it and had been flying solo for the last two years, bringing supplies to the ships on the front lines. It was lonely work—not a lot of action either—but he was proud to serve, and his father wanted him out of harm's way.

Damn rebels.

He licked his dry lips, wishing for some water, and tried to shift his wrists away from where the cuffs chafed. What did they want? It's not like he knew anything. He flew cargo where they told him, unloaded, and picked up more crates with contents unknown. Lather, Rinse, Repeat.

The door opened slowly, admitting a tall, lean brunette. Sunglasses obscured her eyes and her hair was pulled back from her face except for her wispy bangs.

Her black tank top exposed shapely arms and hugged petite breasts. But Connor wasn't fooled. They hoped to use her attractiveness against him. Fortunately, he didn't swing that way. He did like her tank, however. Very retro with frayed edges along the neck.

She walked up to him and pressed something cold and flat to each of his temples.

He braced himself, wondering what she was attaching and what it would do.

Circling him, she asked in a crisp voice, “Name?”

He kept his eyes trained forward and his tone neutral. “Connor Spaulding.”

She ran a finger lightly along his bare shoulders as she walked. “Rank?”

His skin twitched from her touch like a horse shaking off a fly. “Shuttle Pilot.”

Stopping in front of him and meeting his eyes. “Current mission?”

Connor closed his mouth and refused to speak. Name he would give, rank too, but that was it.

“Tough guy, huh?” She circled around him again and then got right up in his face, her breasts brushing against his chest, her breath mingling with his. Although she smelled of mint, she just made him nauseous.

She opened her mouth, and then her face blanked for a minute. She looked up at the camera in the corner of the cell. “You sure?”

She stood silent for a moment, then nodded and cocked her head to one side, her eyes slipping to him. “Later, Connor.” She left the room, never having given her name.

Time passed. Minutes? Hours? His shoulders burned. His legs ached. This was only the beginning.

The next time the door opened, it admitted someone a little more interesting. He had short black hair, and strong biceps. An abstract tattoo adorned the man’s left shoulder. It was traditional on some planet, but Connor couldn’t remember which one. This guy wore the same style black tank top, but it looked better on him. He carried a tray with food.

“Let me just set this down, and then I’ll untie you.”

As soon as his arms were released, his hands fell forward, throbbing with pain as the blood rushed to his extremities.

He felt hands massaging his shoulders and turned his head to meet the other man’s eyes. A sweet smile adorned his captor’s face. The man was attractive, no doubt, but Connor wasn’t buying this act, either.

“Here, come, sit. You must be starving. I’m Dan.”

Connor let himself be led to the table and eyed the tray suspiciously. What were the chances the food was untainted?

“Eat. It’s just food. Look.” Dan took a forkful of the rice and lifted it to his mouth. He tasted the peas and the chicken as well.

Connor waited a few moments before deciding to eat, but his growling stomach and parched lips made him decide to take a chance. It was tricky bringing the food to his mouth with his hands still cuffed together, but he was so hungry. How long had it been since he last ate?

“So, your name is Connor?”

“Yup.”

“You’re a shuttle pilot?”

“Yup.”

“Tell me about yourself, Connor.”

“Nope.”

“What?”

“This isn’t a date. I’m Connor Spaulding, Shuttle Pilot for the Democration.”

Dan looked up at the camera and nodded his head.

“Where are you from?”

“I’m Connor Spaulding. I’m a Shuttle Pilot for the Democration.”

Dan tapped his ear and listened, nodding.

Connor turned and looked directly at the camera. “Whoever the hell you are, why don’t you come in here yourself? Afraid of a half-naked shuttle pilot in cuffs? Seriously. I’m Connor Spaulding. I’m a Shuttle Pilot for the Democration.” Connor sat back in his chair, wishing he could cross his arms.

Dan tried a few more questions, but eventually left the room.

Connor went and laid down on the hard cot in the corner. No pillow. No blanket. But at least he wasn’t hanging.

CHAPTER 2

Connor snapped awake to the sound of his cell door closing. Another tray had been delivered. His shoulders were still sore but had improved. He eyed the food suspiciously and took a sniff of the oatmeal. Hunger won out, and he ate.

Pacing the cell, questions raced in circles around his head. Why had they taken him? What did they really want? Could he escape? But there were no answers.

His hands twisted in the cuffs and he tried to fiddle with the collar on his neck but both were locked.

When the door opened Connor looked up and saw a man that took his breath away. God, this guy was hot. He was about six foot two with spiky dirty-blond hair and a serious five o'clock shadow. His left eye was brown with a golden starburst pattern around the pupil, but the most surprising thing was the eye patch covering his right eye. Was it an affectation, or a covering for some injury?

“You wanted to see the man behind the camera. Here I am.”

The man was dressed the same as the others, black tank top, black pants. Same uniform, but somehow, on this guy it looked... more than good, it looked delectable. Between that, the musky scent rolling off of him, and his gravelly voice, Connor found himself half-hard.

But it didn't matter. This was the enemy. Connor lifted his chin and looked down his nose at the man. “I'm Connor Spaulding, a Shuttle Pilot for the Democration.”

“We've established that and actually a good bit more, farm boy.”

Connor scowled, but he stayed silent.

The man lifted a tablet and swiped his finger across the surface. “Dex-G9. I had to look that planet up. I'd never heard of it and I can see why. It makes nowhere look central.”

Connor knew his planet was small and remote. He didn't need this prick telling him so.

“You know there’s no one coming for you? Even if they did know where this base was. The Democration doesn’t rescue prisoners of war. They rarely even trade for them and then only someone of high rank, like a member of one of the government families. Not someone from the hind-end of East Bumblefuck.”

Connor knew what he said was true. That had been part of the training. Don’t get caught. The government didn’t negotiate with terrorists. That’s all the rebels were. Terrorists who killed civilians and tortured prisoners to further their agenda.

One thing puzzled him—what did he mean by government families? He wasn’t about to ask.

But if he thinks I’ll surrender, he has another thing coming. Connor stood a little straighter and glared at his captor.

The rebel’s eyes twinkled. “You a badass? I bet you know what we do to prisoners. Heard all about it in basic training.”

Connor tried to keep his expression neutral but knew he failed. He had heard. The stories had been horrific at best. Torture: electric shock, rats, stretching on the rack, burning, tainted food, imprisonment in underground dungeons, the list went on and on. They had even been shown pictures of a rickety elevator leading to a dim corridor lined with old-fashioned cells, with actual bars. He had been forced to watch a few movies that had been smuggled out, “at great expense”, of actual tortures being performed. They’d been sickening and barbaric.

“Yeah, we’re not gonna do that. We never do that. It’s more fucked-up Democration propaganda. But I need to know what you know. Where is the fleet heading?”

How in fuck would he know that? He was just a shuttle pilot. Not that he would tell if he did know. And what did he mean, *we never do that*?

“Look, I’m Nic. Nic Maltisse. I’m gonna unbind your wrists now. We’re the good guys here. I bet you don’t know half the shit your beloved Democration does.”

The man uncuffed him and Connor rubbed his wrists. When Nic removed

the collar, his finger brushed Connor's neck, and he quivered as a shot of want passed through him.

Nic reached out and slid the discs from his temples as well. "A little bio-feedback to get to know you better. I think we don't need these anymore. I'm going now. I'll be back. Maybe we can talk then." Nic backed up to the door and knocked; it opened, and he slipped through.

Connor fell back heavily on the cot. What was this guy talking about? More lies from a terrorist? But he didn't look evil. Okay, maybe the eye patch looked like a pirate from the ancient holovids, but the guy was young and appealing and seemed sincere somehow.

I'm so naïve. Clearly they kept sending people in until they found someone I reacted to. It's all part of the game.

Nic headed across the compound away from the makeshift cells used to hold prisoners. They were really just converted cabins with bars added to the windows.

He cursed again under his breath.

Connor.

Nic knew he shouldn't have gone in there with the man. He could already see it through the camera. Connor was adorable. He had that naïve courage that just cut right through Nic, and his body was smokin' hot. The way he pouted and tried to hold back his fear of what might happen just slayed Nic.

He went back and forth between two extremes. On the one hand, he wanted to fuck the innocence out of the young man and show him what the world was really like. On the other hand, he wanted to protect him from the universe. The Democration would have eaten this poor boy alive if he had ever gained the notice of anyone.

Of course, that problem was solved now. The rebels would question him for a few days and then relocate him to one of their internment camps.

The camps were basically glorified farms. Connor would be right at home. He hated sending anyone there, condemning them to an indefinite time away

from family and friends, but he wouldn't kill prisoners in cold blood, and he couldn't return them to the Democration just for them to fight him again. It sucked being a rebel leader.

The Democration didn't deserve loyalty from anyone, much less someone as idealistic as Connor. Nic had seen firsthand just what the people in power would do.

CHAPTER 3

Connor woke from a fitful sleep to the sound of the door opening.

Nic entered the room. “Good morning, farm boy.”

Connor stood and faced his captor. “Connor Spaulding, Shuttle...”

“Yes, yes. We’ve been through all of that. Here’s breakfast.” Nic set a tray with some warm oatmeal and a glass of milk on the table. “The milk’s not farm-fresh like you’re used to, but it’ll have to do.”

“I’m not going to tell you anything.” He couldn’t. He didn’t know squat.

That didn’t matter. He wouldn’t tell, even if he did know something. The rebels killed his mom, and he’d taken an oath not to allow others to suffer her fate. He would stay strong, even if Nic did look hot with his tank top and bad guy eye patch.

Nic sat at the table, opposite the food. “Go ahead and eat. It’ll get cold.”

“Why do you care? I know you’re going to torture me. Can we get to it?” His stomach twisted inside.

Nic’s brows rose. “Why? Do you have some pressing engagement or perhaps some pain fetish I should be aware of?”

Pain fetish? This guy thought he wanted to be tortured? Was he insane? “What? No.”

Nic’s lips quirked up in an alluring smile. “Have you ever even had sex?”

Connor’s cheeks burned. He wanted to look away but forced himself to meet Nic’s gaze... or at least the bridge of his nose. “What? Why would you ask me that?”

Nic’s eye crinkled at the corners as a full smile bloomed on his face. “Cause you have that too-innocent-for-words look about you.”

“I’ve had sex.” Okay, so it was only a couple times with a guy back home.

The bastard looked like he was holding back laughter. “I bet you’re a total man-whore.”

The room seemed to spin a little. “What? No.”

Nic grinned as he shook his head. “You say *what* a lot, man-whore.”

“I’m not a man-whore.” Connor tried to think. Why was he arguing with the crazy terrorist? He should just stay silent. Why did he care if the man thought he was innocent or a whore? So what if Nic was gorgeous, the guy was just trying to get him talking, and... damn, it was working.

However, some part of his brain wanted this guy to find him attractive. His stomach twisted in knots. How could he be interested in someone who blew up civilians just to cause fear?

Nic’s lips pressed into a thin line but his eye still held a twinkle. “I’m not going to torture you. We don’t do that.”

Connor made sure his voice dripped with sarcasm. “Right. You’re just gonna let me stay in these luxury accommodations, give me three square meals a day, and then let me go back to my family?” He hardened his face. “No one ever returns when they’ve been captured.”

“True, no one does. We send them to a place. Lots of open land, everything they need.” Nic waved his hand as if gesturing to a field. Then slapped it lightly on the table. “No way to leave.”

Yeah, right. How could a struggling rebel movement do something like that? “So send me. I’m not telling you anything.”

Nic looked up at the ceiling then back at Connor. “So you say.”

“So I say.”

Nic stood and looked down at Connor, his hands clenched into fists. “You really are infuriating.” Then he left the room, the door slamming behind him.

What the hell was that?

Nic paced back and forth in his quarters. He’d seen tougher men. He’d seen hotter men. Why was he so hung up on this one? Something about Connor just reminded Nic about what life could be like, should be like. *We should all be able to have such faith and loyalty because the people in charge earn it. Not steal it through propaganda.*

In the normal course of events, Connor would never have left his planet and joined the army. But Nic had to lead his rebellion. Okay, so maybe he had

a good reason, and maybe the rebellion would have happened anyway since he was one of several leaders.

I need to get laid. That was all this was. Just some pent up sexual need. There were a few candidates around who were more than willing, and had been pleasant in the past, but none of them seemed appealing now.

An image of Connor, his lean, hairless chest and his penetrating hazel eyes blazing with determination, filled Nic's mind. Suddenly, his dick woke up, ready for action.

He made the plan before he could talk himself out of it, grabbed his tablet and strode out across the quad to Connor's cell.

He knocked, although he knew how stupid that was, and then had the guard give him access.

Connor was doing pushups on the floor. Nic couldn't blame him. There wasn't much to do in the cell. When Connor stood, sweat dripped down the side of his face and dots of moisture spotted his lean chest. Nic wanted to lick them off.

He placed the pad on the table and sat, gesturing for Connor to do the same.

"The Democrations rule by controlling the flow of information. I'm going to show you what they hide."

Nic tapped an icon on the screen and swiped down. "Do you recognize this picture?"

"That's Simon Valdovas, the first Democrat of the Democrations of Planets."

"Very good." He swiped a few more buttons. "Who's this?"

"Thaddeus Valdovas, the current Democrat, and the great, great, several times grandson of the first Democrat."

"Interesting, right and wrong." A few more taps. "These are all of the official portraits of the Democrat for the four hundred years the Democrations has been in place. Notice how they all look the same."

"Of course. One family has been elected to that seat since the beginning, and they've served us well."

“No, look. Really, look. They aren’t similar. They’re identical. It’s the same person. If they had been offspring, some traits of their mothers would show through. But they don’t. This is the same man.”

“Are you on drugs? Look, sometimes their eye color changes.” Connor pointed to the current holder of the office.

Nic smiled tightly. “Not only does facial recognition software confirm this is the same person, but I’ve seen him in person, and his father. Never together, of course. They’re the same man. The eyes are a whole different story.”

Connor’s head shook. “You’re delusional.”

“The tech exists to prolong someone’s life indefinitely. It’s just very expensive and the person’s body gets more frail as it ages. So they solved that with organ transplants.”

Connor’s eyes widened. Nic could imagine they probably popped forward but he had no depth perception.

“What?”

“There’s that *what* again. Organ transplants. Really any part of his body that breaks down is seamlessly replaced by donors. These donors are not volunteers.”

Connor’s hand waved through the air in a dismissive gesture. “You’re nuts.”

“Am I? Let me tell you how I lost my eye.”

A snort escaped Connor. “Let me guess. It was some unprovoked terrorist attack that killed thousands of innocents. You should’ve lost more than your eye.”

“Ah, yes, *we’re* terrorists. *We’ve* never attacked a civilian target. Military only. The Democration has done all of the *supposed* terrorist attacks and then blamed us.” Nic knew he sounded acerbic, but he couldn’t help himself. His enemy made lies seem true. “But that’s not what happened to my eye.”

“Yeah, okay, right. What did happen?”

Connor’s tone was cutting, but his body language was a whole different matter. He was leaning forward almost reaching for the screen. *Maybe, I could show him the truth.*

“My father was a senator and an advisor to the Democrator. I spent a lot of my childhood in the Prime Home. I attended school there.” Nic remembered the countless hours he had spent exploring the enormous residence.

Nic pinned Connor with a stare that made the pilot recoil as he continued. “When I was sixteen, the Democrator stopped by class, gave me his winning smile, and asked me to join him. I was stunned. What had I done to earn his special attention? I was also apprehensive. I knew Valdovas was a man not to be crossed, that my father’s position could be at stake. So I went, my stomach flipping the whole time.”

Connor looked fascinated. Was that hero-worship in his eyes? Of course, this would sound like a great honor to him.

“He brought me to his room and he tried to... to... I wanted to stop him. I said no, but that just made him angry and his guards made sure I had no choice.”

The color drained from Connor’s face and he wrapped his arms around his bare torso.

“When my father learned what had happened, he confronted Valdovas, who lied of course. He said that such an accusation required an apology. He needed a new eye. So he took mine.”

Connor stared at him, mouth open.

Nic couldn’t decide if he wanted to smile at the shock on Connor’s face or look away from the pity in his eyes.

“My father never believed him. He worked for months, in secret, gathering evidence of Valdovas’s deception. But the Democrator has eyes everywhere. His forces came at night, took my fourteen-year-old sister, and killed my parents. I heard them and hid.”

Nic remembered that night too well. The sound of blaster fire, the smell of seared flesh, his sister’s screams. His blood racing and his throat dry as he hid in the secret room behind his closet. Just a fun place to play. He wanted to go out and help his family, but he had no weapons.

“My sister was brought to the inner sanctum to be a member of the Democrator’s private harem. He kept all the boys and girls that caught his

fancy, loaning them out to favored advisors. I was desperate to find her... save her. I found others like me, and we banded together. They helped me look. We got the resources to get her out. By the time I found out where she was being held, I learned she'd committed suicide."

Nic got right into Connor's personal space. He had to make Connor see the truth. "So tell me, is this the government you serve?"

The look in Connor's eyes was difficult to read. Fear, loathing, pity, but for what? "I..."

Too close. I'm too close. I care too much what this guy thinks. "Forget it." Nic stood quickly and left the room before the tears started streaming down his face.

Connor watched Nic leave, frozen in place. On the one hand, the stuff he was spouting was total nonsense. *Wasn't it?* The Democrator didn't do stuff like that. And the idea that the Democrator was, what, 400 years old? Was this Nic guy nuts?

On the other hand, his chest tightened as doubt filled him. He had never heard of so many members of the same family tree looking identical. How had he never noticed this before? Or that he had never seen the father and son together. It didn't bother him so much, that one man could rule, but that he lied about it. What other lies had he told?

Connor shook himself. He was still standing, staring at the door. He should rest and he needed to think, needed to make sense of all of this.

All his training told him he would be tortured if he were ever caught. That hadn't happened, at least not yet. In fact, nothing was as he expected. Where was the long hall with stone cells with bars? The one they explained was purposely made to look like it was on medieval Earth. The cold, dank, stone walls designed to create a feeling of hopelessness that would break prisoners faster. Had his superiors in the Democrator told him the truth? How could they have been so wrong?

And the look on Nic's face as he told that story about his eye, about his family, his sister. Connor's eyes stung. The man should be in the holovids

because he looked... *wrecked*. Totally, completely, devastated. It only lasted a moment, but Connor had seen it and it looked so genuine.

Or was this all part of some ploy to get him to trust them and give them the intel they wanted? Another trick. He had attended several days training on how to fight psychological manipulation and this tactic seemed particularly devious to him.

He walked over to the wall, punched it, and then shook his hand as it throbbed in pain.

Manipulation was wasted on him. He knew nothing. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself and focus.

How had Nic really lost his eye? If it had been in a fight, the scar was small enough that it fit under the eye patch. Did someone get a lucky shot?

The worst was this voice inside his head urging him to trust Nic, to believe him. The man seemed so honest and appealing.

I can't think with my little head. Sure Nic is hot and attractive, but he looks every inch the bad boy and I never go for that type. But he acts like this earnest, thoughtful, caring person. Fuck!

The thoughts spun around in Connor's head, raising questions but no answers.

CHAPTER 4

Nic stalked across the courtyard from Connor's cell to his room, glaring at anyone who made the mistake of approaching him, almost daring them to comment on the wetness on his face. Dan walked up to him, stopped short, eyes wide, then backed away slowly. Nic finally reached the door to his cabin. He let himself in, closed the door, turned and slid down it, wrapping his arms around his knees.

Who was questioning whom? Why was he spilling his guts to this Connor guy? The man barely spoke. Everything Nic had learned about him so far was from the files they had hacked from the Democration mainframe. Granted, the Democration had incredibly detailed records on every citizen. Much more invasive than anyone imagined, so he actually knew quite a bit about the man.

He knew how Connor had saved a friend when a barn caught on fire when he was twelve. He knew that Connor had two brothers and a sister. He knew Connor's mother had died when he was sixteen in a supposed terrorist attack while she was off-world marketing their planet's produce.

He even had Connor's grades, showing he was an above-average student. He had a recording of Connor's eighth grade piano recital and video of every sporting event he had ever participated in, his birth certificate, his height, weight, and Apgar score at birth, and a variety of other minutiae.

He also knew the Democration had staged the attack that killed his mother, knowing how much more outraged people would be at the interruption of the food supply. No one noticed that the government always had plenty, even when those around them were on short rations.

Connor was brave, smart, and loyal. It had been a long time since Nic met anyone quite like him.

He stayed away for several days, trying to get over these inconvenient feelings. When his subordinates asked why they kept the prisoner around, and didn't send him to "the farm", Nic knew they were right. They never really expected to learn anything from Connor. He had been captured for his cargo and nothing more. His interrogation should have been quick, a routine formality.

The whole situation made him furious. Connor was so smart. He should be able to grasp the truth. Nic had to show him.

He stormed up to the door and had the guard let him in.

Connor was on the floor stretching. “Do you finally get it?” Nic bit out. “The people you serve think you are less than nothing.”

Connor continued to lean over his right thigh. “All I see is someone who is trying to manipulate me.”

Nic wasn't sure what frustrated him more, the fact that Connor continued to stretch like nothing Nic had to say was important. Or the fact that he could see Connor's point of view. Connor believed he was an unprincipled terrorist who would do anything at any cost to get what he wanted. “I... I just want to show you that they are using you.”

Connor stood and stared right in Nic's eye. “Connor Spaulding, Shuttle Pilot.”

Nic's hands clenched into fists as his eye fell shut. He inhaled slowly, opened his eye, and got in Connor's face. “What's it gonna take to show you that your loyalty is misplaced?”

Connor stared at Nic, silent.

Nic was so close to Connor. He could feel the man's breath on his face. Their lips were inches apart. The urge to take those lips overcame reason. He closed the distance, pulled the man into his arms, and kissed him.

At first, Connor was stiff and unmoving, and then he seemed to melt into the kiss as the unspoken chemistry between them ignited. The answering response of Connor's body inflamed Nic. He needed more. Connor had the potential to be someone to him. Nic pulled the man close, but then he felt something solid pressing his chest.

Connor pushed hard on Nic's torso, forcing him back. “No, damn you. Connor Spaulding, Shuttle Pilot.” His head dropped as he tried to control his ragged breathing.

Nic took a step back, panting. Connor's face was hard, his eyes narrowed, even as his lips were swollen from the kisses.

Revulsion filled Nic. *I'm no better than the Democrator, forcing myself on him.* He backed to the door and signaled to the guard that he was done.

It had taken every ounce of Connor's willpower to push the man away. Even now, his erection was not entirely gone. Memories of that kiss kept reviving it.

He shouldn't be attracted to Nic. He was the enemy. The evil terrorist who threatened the lives of the citizens of the Democration. For all he knew, Nic could even be the man responsible for his mother's death.

How could he reconcile that with the serious, sad, attractive, thoughtful man that was Nic? Connor tried to convince himself it was an act. The images Nic had shown were doctored, weren't they? The Democration couldn't have been the real culprits behind his mother's death.

How could he have been lied to his whole life? How could Nic be a terrorist? Someone somewhere was wrong and it tore Connor up inside.

The door to his room opened and two guards walked in, with Nic behind them, as if they were a shield. The guards made him stand with his arms behind his back and he was cuffed again. Was the torture going to begin? It had all been an act.

Nic didn't meet Connor's eyes. "We're letting you go. We'll take you to a planet where you will be found. We'll have to sedate you so that you won't know how long the journey was. We can't have you leading them back to us."

Connor's brows shot up and his heart started racing. "What? Why?" he said in a high-pitched squeak.

Nic seemed to find the ceiling fascinating. "Because... because that's the way it's going to be."

Connor's mind spun in turmoil. It was a trick. Why would they let him go? Why did some part of him want to stay? It all came down to Nic.

"What about my shuttle? My cargo?"

"I'm afraid we're going to have to keep that. We need it for our cause."

He opened his mouth to speak, not completely sure what he was going to say, but it was too late. The prickly, cool feeling from a spray syringe penetrated his skin. His eyes closed as sleep claimed him.

CHAPTER 5

Connor came awake wrapped in a warm sheet and blanket. His eyes blinked open. He lay in a large bed, its headboard centered on one wall of the room. The blanket, the walls, and the carpet were all a bland shade of beige. A still life of pale flowers in a vase adorned the wall to his right. A holoivid plate stood on the faux-wood dresser across from him.

Clouds drifted through his mind. Connor struggled to focus, and realized he must be in a hotel or inn.

He spoke to the air. "Lights on."

The two bedside lamps flickered to life as Connor pulled himself into a sitting position against the headboard.

How did I get here? Was I drugged?

His memory returned slowly. Capture, questioning, spray syringe.

Nic.

Where was he?

In the bathroom, he splashed cold water on his face. He found a room key fob by the bed and pocketed it before leaving in search of answers. In the hotel lobby, he found an information terminal near the concierge desk. He walked up to it and started scrolling through local attractions. An advertisement for Pelenda beach came up on the holoivid, pure white sand stretching off into the distance and azure skies.

The next advertisement was for a children's camp program that promised an underwater excursion using child-safe breathers. The kids would get to swim with various sea creatures while their parents could go enjoy the rest of the Malamy-Pre resort.

Connor stepped outside the hotel into bright sunshine. A hint of salt filled his nostrils, and in the distance he heard waves crashing against a shore. A sign pointed the way to Felek Beach.

There had been bright green grass and oak trees outside the window of his cell. This place had white sand and palm trees.

A bungalow across the way was labeled *Tourist Information*. He headed toward the bungalow in a daze, trying to process all that had just happened to him. Capture, fear of torture, and a scorching kiss, then release to where? He thought the name Felek Beach sounded familiar. Where was he?

The gift shop in the bungalow brought clarity. There was a section for clothes with the logo of Mirandian Pre, a resort planet he had heard of but never dreamed of being able to visit. A second section had items labeled with the name Amendor-Mirandian, the name of a medium sized island on Mirandian-Pre.

He knew the where, but not the how. He headed back to his room almost on autopilot. His mind refused to do more than put one foot in front of the other. Other than the key fob, his pockets were empty. The only thing that kept him moving was a driving need to contact his superiors in the Democration.

In his room, he picked up the communication unit, an old-fashioned handset that he had to hold up to his ear, and asked to be connected with the local Democration offices.

A bored female voice answered, "Office of the Democration, Mirandian-Pre division, how may I direct your call."

"I'm Connor Spaulding, a Shuttle Pilot assigned to the Fifth-Detan battalion and I need assistance contacting my superiors."

"Excuse me?"

Connor sighed. "I'm Connor Spaulding, a Shuttle Pilot assigned to the Fifth-Detan battalion. I have been separated from my assignment and I need to contact my superiors."

"Is this a prank call?"

"No ma'am. I would never do such a thing. Can you please help me get in contact with my superiors?"

"Please hold."

A discordant set of soft notes shot from the unit, while Connor waited. He was starting to think he should earn a PhD in waiting. His stomach tied in knots. What was taking so long? His request was simple and made according

to protocol. Wouldn't they want to get him back to his battalion? He was eager to report what had occurred and to be reassured that he had done the right thing, because right now his mind was littered with doubts that had a name—Nic.

A new, crisp voice came through the receiver. "Shuttle Pilot Spaulding, wait outside the hotel, a car will be there momentarily to pick you up."

The car arrived, and a man in a dark suit with sunglasses and a Democration badge motioned for him to get in. He slid in to the back seat to find another dark-suited man frowning at him.

Goose bumps travelled down Connor's back. "Where are you taking me?"

Neither man responded. They just drove until he arrived at a nearby shuttle port. The sun beat down on his neck and face as they escorted him to a security station.

"What's going on?"

One of the men gestured inside a holding cell. "Please wait in here."

He was away from the rebels. He should be happy, but instead he found his skin was crawling. After yet another eternity, he was escorted to the military section of the port and taken out to a waiting shuttle. Longing rose up in him. This was the same model he flew. He could have been the pilot.

Two heavily armed men debarked the shuttle and moved quickly toward him. "Come with us, sir."

Before he could join them, one of the men grabbed his arm, pushing him toward the open hatch.

That made no sense. He glanced at the stern expressions of his escorts—no, not escorts he realized with a sickening lurch, but guards.

"Hey, I'm on your side," he said as he tried to yank his arm free.

It did no good. "That has yet to be determined," said the guard, leveling a pistol at him.

As they pushed him through the ship, he passed through a few security checkpoints in the area that would have been the cargo bay in his shuttle and was led into a hall with holding cells. They led him to an empty cell, and

shoved him inside. The cell was standard Democration issue. He had never expected to be inside one, but he recognized the stark, utilitarian lines. No tables, no chairs, no ports to the outside. Three pristine steel walls plus a fourth transparent barrier held him inside. He had better accommodations with the rebels.

He sat on the cot until a major with a regulation haircut and a crisp, dress Democration uniform arrived. The officer stopped in front of the invisible wall.

Connor leapt to his feet and came to attention, trying not to think about the basic black shirt and pants that the rebels had dressed him in. Maybe he should have shaved and spruced up a bit, but he had nothing.

Squaring his body into a perfect military pose, every line ramrod straight, the officer looked at Connor with narrowed eyes. “Shuttle Pilot Connor Spaulding?”

“Yes, Sir.” Connor resisted the urge to duck his head and look away. He had done his duty and had nothing to be ashamed of, but the man facing him looked angry.

The major locked eyes with Connor. “You have been missing for several weeks. Where have you been?” he growled out.

Connor’s mouth went dry and he swished his tongue trying to get enough moisture to speak. Why was he more intimidated now than when he was a prisoner of the enemy? “I was a prisoner of the rebellion.”

The man scoffed. “Are you telling me that you escaped from them?”

“No.” Connor paused. Why was this guy so hostile? He was telling the truth. “They let me go.”

“That’s impossible. The rebels don’t free prisoners.”

“I don’t understand it myself.” Connor shook his head. “I think Nic decided to let me go.”

“Nic? Nickolai Maltisse?”

“Yes, Sir. He tried to convince me that the rebels weren’t responsible for the atrocities. When I wouldn’t budge, he drugged me, and I wound up here.”

“Maltisse is one of the cruelest men in the rebellion. He has a personal vendetta against the Democrator. He would never have just let you go.”

The questions went on for hours. He was allowed no food, no water, no sleep. Did they think he was a rebel? He answered every question fully and held nothing back. He described the room where he had been held and the people he saw.

He was hungry and exhausted. How could his own people treat him this way? “What do you want me to say? I’ve told you everything.”

A man in a lieutenant’s uniform approached the major and whispered something in his ear.

“Understood.”

Hungry, he was given meager rations of food, basically bread and water. Then, he was hyposprayed into a deep sleep.

Connor was awakened by two large men. They took custody of him and brought him to a group shower room, forcefully scrubbing him from head to toe. They yanked his head back by his hair to wash his face. He spluttered as water kept filling his mouth and his eyes stung from the abrasive soap.

Connor was screaming inside. He wanted to fight, to run, but these were his people. Still his body instinctively twisted in their grasp, earning him a wrenched arm. He tried to keep his tone even, but his voice broke as he asked, “Why are you doing this?”

Neither of the goons answered.

He was strapped into a chair where his hair was trimmed and styled, and they shaved the beard he had started to grow. His face burned where the razor ran over his skin.

“Please, I’ll cooperate.”

Silence again as he was unstrapped from the chair and shoved into a formal suit.

Resentment rose in Connor. This was his reward for loyalty?

Then he was escorted to a shuttle and strapped into a seat. There were no windows in the compartment so he could not see where he was being taken,

but he felt the pull of a planet's gravity as the shuttle shuddered in a landing sequence.

After exiting the shuttle, he rode in a limousine through a large city. At first, he was unsure where he was, but looking out the window he soon saw the famous landmarks: Victory Way, the Democration Founding Monument (a gigantic statue of the first Democator). He was on DiPurna, the capital planet of the Democration. *Why would they bring me here?*

He passed several security checkpoints. No one spoke to him. He arrived at the residence of the Democator, the Prime Home.

Holy shit!

The word *home* always made Connor think of the small, humble houses on his planet, but the Prime Home was neither small nor humble. The five-story brick structure resembled a castle from the holovids. It was surrounded by a large stone courtyard. The main entrance was surrounded by a two-story white arch and flanked by two uniformed soldiers.

They escorted Connor inside, through several security checkpoints. Each time Connor was required to identify himself, his trepidation grew, his chest tightened, and his mouth went dry.

One corridor he was led down was lined with portraits of each of the elected Democration since the beginning of the Democration, their too-similar faces staring down at him. Finally, he was led into an ornate antechamber and escorted into a very famous room, the Democator's office chamber, the Prime Office.

The man himself sat behind a large, gleaming hardwood desk. Guards flanked him.

Connor's mouth flew open as he tried to pull himself into a proper attention, awe at being in the presence of the great man filling him.

A good-looking man, Democator Thaddeus Valdovas projected a casual air with the way his brown hair was brushed back, but Connor suspected it was a calculated effect. He had a bit of stubble, just like in his Vid appearances—it always seemed to say he was so busy working for the people that he didn't have time to shave properly.

Most striking was his single blue eye versus his single brown eye. Connor took a moment to study the brown one. It had the same golden starburst pattern as Nic's left eye. A small gasp escaped him as his stomach sank.

Valdovas stood and moved around the desk to circle Connor, like a predator stalking his prey, or sizing up an opponent. Connor stood stock-still at attention. This was his supreme commander, the man to whom he owed all his loyalty as the living embodiment of the Democration.

But Nic's words kept going through his mind. Was the man really the same one that had been elected since the Democration began? He'd be hundreds of years old.

"Connor Spaulding. Shuttle Pilot. Taken captive by Nickolai Maltisse and his rebels. Held for ten days, fed, clothed, drugged and gently put to bed to sleep off his hangover on Mirandian-Pre." The Democrator's voice was low. Dangerous, and would be almost seductive if it weren't so creepy.

Connor's eyes widened and a trickle of sweat ran down his neck. "I was held prisoner."

"You're the only soldier ever to have been released by our enemy. Explain yourself."

Not the only one. High level prisoners returned. "Explain myself how? You already know all the details—that's what happened."

Valdovas shook his head. "That's what happened. And this doesn't strike you as odd?"

Connor struggled to control his breathing and his voice came out higher than normal. "Sir. I can only tell you what I know. Nic didn't give me a reason."

Valdovas continued to circle Connor. "Nic didn't give you a reason? And how is Nic? I haven't seen him in years."

Connor blanched, his stomach threatening to spill its contents. Nic's story about his treatment at this man's hand swirled through his mind.

"What did he tell you?"

Connor struggled to get the words out, hoping for a denial from Valdovas. "Lots of stuff, lies. He said you took his eye."

Valdovas stopped right in front of Connor, focused on his eyes, and leaned right into his personal space. “Actually, I did.”

Connor was speechless. He stared at Valdovas while his heart hammered in his chest.

Valdovas smirked. “His father, former Senator Maltisse, was a traitor. It was part of his punishment. I had injured an eye and needed a donor. This,” Valdovas said pointing to his eye, “seemed fitting.”

Connor’s brain whirled into overdrive. *Nic told me and I didn’t believe him. What else was Nic right about?*

The Democrator stepped back, crossing his arms over his chest. “You seem very familiar with Nickolai Maltisse. One of the rebellion ring-leaders, a terrorist, a man known for his cruelty and depravity. He lied to you. Brainwashed you. Pulled you into his insane, violent worldview, turned you over to his cause, and sent you here to infiltrate Democration forces!” Valdovas’s face was hard. His eyebrows drew down over the mismatched orbs.

“No! I...”

The Democrator’s brows shot up and his head tilted to the side. “No? You don’t think so?”

“Sir, I... I only ever told him my name and rank, as protocol dictates. I love the Democration and everything it stands for.”

Valdovas took a step toward Connor. “I know. My advisors believe you’re a spy, but I don’t see it. I see something else in those piercing hazel eyes.” He reached out and ran a finger down Connor’s cheek. “I see loyalty.” Valdovas spun abruptly and addressed the two silent goons behind his desk. “Bring him to my chambers.” He turned and swept out of the room.

CHAPTER 6

Connor was led down halls and up stairs until he arrived at a private bedchamber. He had never seen or imagined a room like this. It was bigger than the shuttle he flew and decorated with gold accents. To one side was a platform with a huge four poster bed that looked coated in gold and rich maroon draperies hung from the canopy frame.

A *humongous* fireplace, big enough to stand in, dominated the wall on the other side of the room. It was surrounded by an ornately carved gold mantel. A fire crackled in the grate, filling the room with the aroma of wood smoke, and made the gold in the room glint and waver. A formal sitting area was arranged with the fireplace as a focal point.

Murals of historical moments from the Democration decorated the upper part of the wall. One was the signing of the Articles of Democration. Simon Valdovas stood front and center, pen poised over the document. Another was of Philip Valdovas, setting foot on Clenton to accept that planet's surrender. A third was of Bartholomew Valdovas commanding the battleship *Righteous Vengeance* during the battle to convince the Emperor of the PelovianSky that democracy was a superior form of government. After that battle, all six planets in the Empire signed on to be member worlds of the Democration.

Looking at the various murals of the Democration, Connor was reminded of Nic's accusation that this was all one man. The murals had clearly been painted by different artists, but each one highlighted the man in a glowing light. If it was one man, he slept under the paintings of all of his past triumphs.

One area where a mural should have been had been painted white, as if primed and ready for a new frieze of their exalted leader.

Connor walked over to a velvet upholstered couch by the fire, his footsteps echoing on the tile floor. He sat primly on the cushioned seat, wondering why he was here.

A side door opened and the man himself entered. He had changed into a white bathrobe with the flag of the Democration on the lapel. His hair was slicked back as if he had just left the shower.

Connor leapt to his feet, stood at attention, and watched the man approach. His heart sped like a racehorse.

Valdovas sauntered over to where Connor stood and trained both his blue and brown eye on Connor. His voice could have been called seductive if Connor hadn't heard the hint of mockery in it. "Well, it's time to show me your loyalty."

"Yes, Sir."

Valdovas reached up and ran his fingers through Connor's short brown hair, then cupped his hand around the back of Connor's head and pulled him in for a bruising kiss.

Connor was shocked enough that he let himself be pulled forward. He could smell the clean scent of soap and taste a hint of mint. He could feel the Democrator's stubble rubbing his face.

One thought shot through his mind. *This is wrong*. He didn't want this man. What was he going to do? This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

He reached up and pushed away, causing Valdovas to stumble back, eyes flying open wide.

The smile the Democrator gave him was at once winning and almost feral. "Come on, don't be like that. I'm honoring your commitment to me and the Democration."

"I am committed to the Democration, but I don't feel that way about you. Don't you have a wife?"

"Sure I do. She doesn't mind if I indulge in some harmless recreation."

"I'm not that kind of guy."

"Excuse me?" Valdovas tone was shocked but something was off in his body language. "Do you mean to say you would betray the Democration?"

Connor's stomach clenched and the bile rose. "Being loyal to the Democration doesn't mean I'm gonna have sex with you."

"Of course, it does. I *am* the Democration."

"No, you're the elected Democrator. Anyone can get elected."

The Democrat laughed. “You’re adorable. I can see why little Nic was taken with you.”

Connor wanted to vomit. What if the things Nic said were true? He was in serious danger here. He backed up a step.

“I want you. What I want, I get. It’s that simple.” Valdovas crooked a finger. “So come here and kiss me.”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“I could force you, but it’s more fun to convince you. I’m sending you to prison, to await execution. Most of my advisors will be delighted. None of them trust you. If you change your mind, just let the guard know. Otherwise, you’ll get to choose between death by firing squad or lethal injection in two days. Later.”

Valdovas tapped a button on his wrist. Two guards entered the room and hustled Connor out of the chamber, as the man turned and walked away.

They led him through the halls to a back elevator that looked barely fit for use, ready to break down at any moment. Connor tried to make sense of what just happened. He was in deep trouble, but at the same time, he was surprised Valdovas hadn’t just taken what he wanted. Goose bumps rose on his arms and the back of his neck as his chest tightened, while he considered his options.

They rode down, deep into the bowels of the Prime Home. The door opened into a dank hallway. His skin shook with the chill. This was what he had been told to expect from the rebels—stone cells with old-fashioned bars lining the walls. He realized with a start that it was this very hall his instructors had shown him as belonging to the rebels. Another lie.

They stripped him naked and pushed him into a cold cell. The floor and walls were made of rough-hewn granite. The ceiling was covered in stone as well, but a few pieces had fallen away to expose dull steel. The room reeked of blood, sweat, and urine.

He paced and rubbed his arms trying to keep warm. What else had Nic

said? Was it all true? He had followed his training and instead of being welcomed back, he was given a devil's bargain.

Could he bring himself to have sex for his life? The Democrat was older than him, in his forties or perhaps much older—in his *four hundreds*. He could get through that.

He pictured himself on Valdovas bed, on hands and knees, the man thrusting into him, and he shuddered. *No, this is wrong. I don't want this. I'd rather die.*

He shook himself. *Would I really rather die?*

He knew what was holding him back.

Nic.

Memories of Nic's lips on his. The look on Nic's face when he pushed the man away. The fact that Nic let him go. Nic was a leader in the rebellion, but did not abuse those around him, use them, even his prisoners.

His instincts had said to trust Nic and he had denied them. Would he pay a horrible price for his mistake?

Death was final. Could he bring himself to survive this experience and maybe seek out Nic when he was free? But some instinct told him the Democrat would never free him. If he did this, then the man more than commanded his loyalty, he owned him.

What should he do?

While he pondered his dilemma, he explored his cell to see if there was any way out.

Connor awoke from a fitful sleep on the hard surface of the cot to a strange scraping noise above him.

A whisper shot down, "Connor?"

The sound was familiar. One he had been thinking of for hours. "Nic?"

A hatch opened in the ceiling, and a pair of shorts dropped down, along with the end of a rope.

“Get dressed and grab on.”

Connor slipped on the shorts, grabbed the rope, and looped it around his waist. The scratchy feel of hemp was abrasive in his hands. He was pulled into the air, swinging like a pendulum although the motion was jerky. When he reached the narrow opening in the ceiling, a hand reached out and connected with his arm, pulling him the rest of the way into the narrow vent.

The vent was darker than space, except for a light shining from Nic’s forehead. His rescuer slipped a band holding a light around his head as well.

A tight grin split Nic’s face. He started to reach for Connor but stopped himself. “This palace is littered with secret passageways, and has been renovated so many times that sometimes they don’t realize the security holes.”

“How did you know about them?”

“My father was a senator. I played here as a child. I got into lots of mischief.”

The two crawled along single file. There was no room for them to stand or go side-by-side. Connor’s bare knees were soon scraped raw.

“Why did you come?”

“I screwed up. I should’ve known our beloved Democration would assume you were a traitor for being captured by me. I couldn’t ask anyone else to risk themselves for my mistake and I couldn’t let you die.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think? Why do you think I let you go?” When Connor didn’t answer, Nic spoke, “No more talking. These are secret, but that doesn’t mean they’re sound-proof.”

The path they took was not straightforward and Connor had to trust that Nic knew the way. They turned at some junctions and went straight at others.

“This passage opening is over a vehicle hangar. I have a car there with clothes for you. We’ll take it to a waiting spacecraft.”

Nic took a tool from his belt and twisted it in a notch in the metal. A panel slid with a scraping sound. Nic took another tool and extended it down to see if the coast was clear. He gasped. “Shit, I’m sorry.” Nic handed the viewing tool to Connor letting him see what awaited them.

There were five men stationed in a circle right beneath them, with guns pointed at the opening. Another ten men surrounded those, and others were trained along the passage they had just crawled through. Several suspicious packages were attached to the ceiling.

Well out of reach, the Democrator stood with two guards flanking him.

“You can both come out now,” Valdovas announced. “We have this entire area covered with directional explosives. We’ll blow up the tunnel with you in it if you don’t surrender.”

Nic dropped through first, his hands in the air, and Connor followed.

Valdovas’s face lit with a huge smile. He walked over to Connor and clapped him on the back. “Well done, Shuttle Pilot Spaulding. I knew my good friend Nic well enough to know that if he cared sufficiently to let you go, he wouldn’t let you die. Or at least he would try not to. You have managed to capture one of the ringleaders of the rebellion. Thank you for pretending to be in prison.”

Connor felt the bile rise inside him. He had been used to capture Nic. Nic who wouldn’t leave him to die.

“I... I didn’t do that. Nic, you have to believe me. He said I had to... to... or die.”

Valdovas’s grin never wavered. “That still stands, submit to me or die.”

The Democration was a lie. The people were manipulated by one crafty, evil, old son-of-a-bitch. Everything Nic said had been true. His instincts had said here was a man he could trust, a man who deserved his loyalty and maybe more—maybe his heart. Nic *had* come back for him, and that made his choice an easy one.

“I choose death, then.”

“No, Connor,” Nic urged. “Live.”

“Nic, I can’t do what he wants. I won’t.”

The two men were cuffed and dragged back to the cells. Connor was right back where he started from, weld lines now sealing his would-be escape route.

Nic was stripped and placed in the cell across from him. The metal entrance clanged and echoed as the guards closed and locked it.

The two men faced each other through the bars. Connor's eyes travelled up and down Nic's bare form and then he looked away, his face heating.

When he raised his eyes again, Nic looked like he was about to speak, but a holoimage of the Democrator was broadcast in front of them. He gave a speech about how Nickolai Maltisse had been caught, and he and the traitor, Connor Spaulding, had been sentenced to death.

CHAPTER 7

Connor wanted to say something to Nic, apologize, but just as he started to speak they hauled Nic away.

Connor waited, again. Would he ever see Nic again or were they just going to execute him? He tried to rest and conserve his energy but the creatures in his stomach—which certainly were a hell of a lot nastier than butterflies—propelled him up to pace.

Hours later, two guards dragged a panting Nic between them and threw him into the cell where he collapsed in a heap.

Connor watched the guards head off down the hall and then ran for the bars, reaching out for Nic even though his cell was too far. “What happened?”

Nic’s right brow rose above the eye patch. “They questioned me.”

Connor eyed Nic up and down, elated that he was still alive, and tormented at the pain showing in every line of his body. He searched Nic’s bare form for any injuries that could cause such agony, but saw nothing that could account for the quivering flesh. Seeing such a magnificent figure in such pain brought tears to his eyes. “You look like you feel awful, but there are no marks.”

Nic pulled himself to sit up leaning against the bars. “No, they can inflict pain without leaving any signs. Besides, their hearts weren’t in it. They knew I had nothing to tell.”

“What do you mean?”

“Before I came here, I had a ForgetMe.”

“Forget me?”

Nic’s eye softened. “You really did just fall off the turnip truck. ForgetMe is a procedure where critical memories are downloaded and erased from your brain. They are safe... somewhere. Waiting for me. It was surgical, so I remember my position in the rebels but don’t know any information like who the others are or how to find them.”

Connor looked away for a moment, his chest tightening. “You remember me?”

Nic sighed and smiled. “Yes, of course.”

The words poured out of Connor. “I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

Connor gestured to the cells with his hand palm up. “Why did you come for me?”

“I couldn’t let you die. I never should have sent you back.”

“Why did you?”

“I... I was starting to like you. I knew what you had been told about us. I knew you were terrified, but you stood firm, loyal. I didn’t agree with what you were loyal to, but I respected who you were.” Nic gripped the bars that held him in his cage. “I thought I had a vibe... that maybe you were interested too. So I kissed you, but you pushed me away and I realized I had become like the man I hated, forcing myself on others. I couldn’t be that.”

Connor leaned against the bars. He knew it was stupid but he wanted to be as close to Nic as he could. “You aren’t. I... I was interested.”

“Kind of you to say, but don’t.”

“No, I was, but I was also confused. I thought it was another trick, or I don’t know...”

The words hung in the air between them.

“And now?”

“You were right. About everything. He’s a monster and I’m interested in you. You weren’t what I expected at all. I wish you were safe.” The enormity of what he just declared weighed on him, pushing him down to sit on the cold concrete floor. He and Nic could have shared something special, but now it was too late. They were going to die.

Nic directed his gaze at Connor. “I should have sent you to the farm with the others. You would have been safe there. You would have hated me, but you would have been alive and well. But I... I couldn’t. Not you, but I should have known better. Known they wouldn’t have believed you and let you go back to your life. He wanted you, didn’t he?”

Connor’s face heated. “Yes. But I couldn’t. I... you...”

Breathing out hard, Nic's eye narrowed. "So he used you instead. To get to me. He's a crafty bastard."

Connor took a deep breath and looked up at Nic, willing him to see the caring, the regret for what might have been. "I wish we could go back to that kiss. I wish I had thrown my arms around you and never let you go."

Nic looked directly into Connor's eyes. "You have to promise me something."

Connor pulled back an inch from the bars and consciously forced himself to breathe. Nic looked so serious. "What?"

"When they ask, choose the lethal injection. Not the firing squad. Promise."

Confusion filled Connor. "Why?"

His face softening, and his eye wide, pleading, "Just promise."

"Not until you tell me why."

"They send the bodies back, to the families, or sometimes the rebels. The injection is quick and painless, the bodies are at peace. The firing squads aren't that accurate. Before the, quote, *live broadcast*, unquote, they dub the feed to make it look like the kill-shot was humane and caused instant death, but it doesn't work that way. The victims bleed out slow and their bodies are riddled with holes. Just do what I say, for once. Promise me."

Connor considered. He wasn't a coward. He deserved the pain for what he had done to Nic, but here he was doing it again. He had to trust Nic. "I promise." The least he could do was keep the promise.

They spent the night talking.

Nic's eye was starting to droop and Connor was drifting off when the guards arrived, dressed them in orange jumpsuits, and dragged them out into the blinding morning sunlight in an inner courtyard of the Prime Home.

The courtyard was empty except for two tables attended by a female in a white lab coat, the firing squad, and strategically placed cameras, carefully aligned so they weren't in the picture. Like a set for a holovid.

The Democrator stood on a balcony. "Wondering where the crowd is? We'll dub that in later. We don't need witnesses if we have to fix the tape."

Can't have you making some noble speech or anything." The man turned his attention to Nic. "I might have let you both live. You are still awfully pretty, Nic, in spite of your deformity," he said, tapping his brown eye. "But the ForgetMe was irritating, so, time to die."

A man in a military uniform came out and read the charges and the sentence before addressing Nic first. "Nickolai Maltisse, how do you choose to die?"

"Lethal injection."

Valdovas snorted. "Coward."

"Connor Spaulding, how do you choose to die?"

"Lethal injection."

The two men were led to the tables. Connor's heart pounded and his head felt light. The world seemed tilted somehow as he moved onto the table and was strapped down. He got one last glance of Nic, his head held high in defiance. He hoped he looked half as brave.

Tubes were connected to each arm, as a tear streamed down his face. Everything he believed was a lie and he had no chance to change anything.

"Commence."

"See you on the other side, Connor," Nic called out.

The other side. Connor wondered if he would be welcomed in the afterlife. Surely Nic would. "I'm sorry, Nic."

"I know."

His arm felt cold as the liquid started flowing into his right arm. Then the one on his left felt warm, hot, almost burning. Then numb, so numb, cold, hot, numb, tired, sleep...

CHAPTER 8

Connor's eyes slid open to a stinging in his neck. He tried to reach up to slap the bug, but his arms were restrained.

"We have to hurry." A woman's voice Connor didn't recognize whispered.

"It worked." Nic's voice.

Nic. It's Nic. Connor asked the first question that popped into his head. "Am I dead?"

The woman came closer. "No, Connor, you're very much alive."

Chilled fingers brushed his wrists as the straps came undone and the blood rushed to his newly freed hands. Connor moaned. "Where are we? How?"

He looked up at the woman. She wore a white lab coat and had short brown hair streaked with blonde. Her face was serious but her eyes were soft. He recognized the woman now. She was the one that operated the lethal injection.

His would-be executioner spoke. "You're in the morgue in the basement of the Prime Home. Put these on, we need to hurry."

His heavy limbs moved sluggishly as he groaned, removing his one piece outfit and pulling on a pair of nondescript pants and a T-shirt. Nic moved with equal slowness, a grimace on his face as he pulled a shirt over his head.

"It'll pass. It's the drugs. Moving will help." She led them out a door and through a tunnel. They climbed a ladder and removed a manhole cover. When they climbed out, a vehicle was waiting for them. They ducked inside and she drove, Nic taking the other front seat. The car ride took hours as they left the city and headed through the suburbs of the capital of the Democracy, snacking on food that had been stashed for them.

Connor wanted to reach into the front seat and do something. Maybe hold Nic's hand or rest his head on Nic's shoulder. Something, but his head was still foggy from the drugs and he felt shy around this new person. "Could someone explain to me what just happened?"

"I'm Dr. Amanda Renault. My title is personal physician to the

Democrator, but my role, more often than not, is executioner. What he doesn't know is that I'm a rebel. I feed them information."

Nic looked over his shoulder at Connor. "Amanda cooked up a scheme to switch the drugs a while ago. I contacted her right before I came to get you, just in case."

"The drugs I gave you mimic death but are reversible. After I declared you dead, I brought you to the morgue and revived you."

Nic turned to face her. He looked so concerned. "Amanda, they are going to figure out what happened. You have to come with us."

Did Nic have feelings for her? Connor wanted to question him, talk to him, but not in front of her.

She shook her head. "No, they won't. I've planned for this for a long time. They'll never know. I already have two bodies set up to look like yours."

Nic reached a hand for her shoulder. "Still, if they check the DNA?"

"They won't. I'm trusted, and because of that I can do more good here and you know it. I appreciate the risks—they're mine to take."

After four hours of driving, they arrived at a space port big enough for local shuttles only. Amanda handed them false papers and bid them farewell, driving away as they prepared to board a craft heading to one of the large orbiting space stations.

They kept their heads down as they began a series of short hops—space station to a planet jumper to another planet jumper—hoping this would elude any pursuit. The news vids showed their "executions" over and over.

Connor's eyes were glued to the holovid in sick fascination. He watched the fake roaring crowd, screaming for their end. It conveniently drowned out any words they spoke so that reporters could "quote" them instead. He was personally attributed with having said that he defied the Democrator for money and power.

Then the scene cut to the Democrator on his balcony. He looked directly at the camera, distinguished with his perfectly coiffed hair, his stylish Democrator uniform, and his mismatched eyes. "Now here is a message for

the rebels. You know who you are. We know you're out there. We will find you and you will be destroyed."

Connor's stomach sank as a panic filled him. It felt like the Democrator was looking right at him. Speaking right to him, but Dr. Renault had assured them she had it covered.

Then they showed him being strapped to the table. He imagined his father, his brothers and sisters watching this. Would they believe the lies that he was a self-serving bastard? Would they be sickened to watch him die?

He watched as his eyes fell shut and his breathing stilled. Dr. Renault pronounced him dead.

It had all been a show.

Arriving on KendleNar, a planet that had no near neighbors, they drove into the countryside and found a ship waiting, the *Veritas*.

Nic shook the hand of a man waiting on the boarding ramp. "Captain Nigel Bromwich, meet Connor Spaulding. Nigel is the commanding officer of the *Veritas*."

Bromwich shook Connor's hand. "Commander Maltisse, we sure are glad you got out okay."

Nic chuckled. "Thanks, Nige. Why so formal?"

The Captain grinned and reached up to pat Nic on the back. "Sorry, Nic. I'm just relieved you're okay."

Nic took the offered hand and gripped it. "It's good to be among friends."

"The other leaders are waiting for you to conference in. Please come with me."

Nic turned to Connor. "Will you be all right on your own for a bit?"

Connor quivered inside. He didn't want to be separated from Nic. He wanted to go somewhere private with him, but he knew that was selfish. Nic had responsibilities. "I should be."

Captain Bromwich signaled to a crew member standing inside the hatch. "Show our guest to some quarters."

Connor was led to a lift and rode up several levels before he was brought to quarters. There wasn't much for him to do so he turned on the Holovid.

He watched a few programs, and started to see the subtle propaganda placements in each. He never would have noticed how every program reinforced that one should be loyal to the Democrator.

A news program came on, showing the latest sports scores and other mundane items. He was relieved that at last, his execution was old news.

He woke from a doze and realized he had fallen asleep with the Holovid still running. Another news segment was playing. At first, Connor didn't pay much attention until a name caught his eye.

The home of Dr. Amanda Renault, personal physician to the Democrator, had been broken into in the middle of the night. The place had been ransacked and her body had been found brutally beaten and tortured. Written in her blood on the wall was a message, "For Nickolai Maltisse."

Connor ran to the bathroom just in time to vomit in the toilet. Renault had been caught and the rebels had been blamed. He already believed Nic about what the Democrator did, but this felt more personal, and he was sure it meant they knew he and Nic were alive.

She had died to save his life. A shiver passed through him. How would he live with her death on his conscience? He knew he had to find a way to make her sacrifice worthwhile.

He turned and left the bathroom to see if he could learn any more information from the Holovid.

Democrator Valdovas entered the image. "This is a sad day for the Democrator. I knew Amanda personally, and she will be missed. She was irreplaceable. It seems Nickolai Maltisse has reached out from the grave and continues to trouble our fair people. We will find those who act in his name. We will stop this rebellion so that our good citizens can live in peace."

Connor understood the message. Valdovas was looking for them, and he wouldn't stop.

Rushing into the hall, Connor needed to find Nic. He looked right and left,

trying to decide which way to search first. He went right and crossed a hallway intersection. He looked down that hall and saw a crewman of the *Veritas*.

“Can I help you?”

“I need to find Nic, uh, Commander Maltisse.”

The crewman pulled out a communicator and called the bridge. Captain Bromwich told the man to lead Connor to Nic’s quarters.

Connor’s heart raced, but the moment Nic’s door slid open, his breathing slowed. “Did you hear?”

Nic’s lips curled up in a half-smile. “I’ve heard lots of things.”

“Dr. Renault was killed.”

Nic motioned Connor inside, called up the newscast, and watched the report, a frown marring his face.

Connor turned to face Nic. “She died for us.”

Nic’s eye seemed to lose focus, his voice came from deep inside. “I told her to come with us but she wouldn’t listen. She was...”

A surge of fear shot through Connor. “What? Was she someone to you?”

Focusing again on Connor, Nic reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. “Connor. She was a stubborn woman. We were friends, nothing more. She wasn’t my type.”

Breathe. Connor inhaled. “No?”

“No. Wrong fiddly bits.”

“Fiddly bits?”

“At least, you’re not saying *what?*”

Connor wanted to smile at that and play the game, but there was more he had to say. “The Democrator knows we’re alive. He’s after us.”

“I know.” Nic squeezed Connor’s shoulder. “It’s not new for me. I’ve had a target on my back for a long time now. I’m sorry this happened to you. I know you didn’t choose it.”

“You didn’t choose it, either. You didn’t choose what happened to you.”

Every line of Nic's body hardened as he pulled his arm away and wrapped it around his midriff. "No, I didn't."

Connor reached out to Nic. He looked so lost, so broken. All he could think of was comforting the man. He wrapped Nic in his arms and pulled him in close. Nic stiffened for a moment before his arms came around Connor. Having Nic in his arms felt so good, so right. He was warm, and Connor leaned into his neck, breathing in his musky scent. He turned his head and brushed his lips across Nic's, gratified by the returned pressure as Nic's arms came around him, pulling him closer.

Connor opened his mouth and Nic slid his tongue inside. Connor let his hands drift down Nic's back, stroking. Nic's tongue left no corner unexplored as it perused Connor's mouth. The delicious tangling sent flashes of need to Connor's groin. Nic moved to Connor's jaw and neck, planting nibbles and kisses as he went.

Connor wanted to see Nic, wanted to see his bare flesh. He had just reached for Nic's shirt when an alarm sounded, and "*Battle Stations*," echoed throughout the ship.

Nic gave Connor one last kiss. "I have to go."

Nic slipped out of his room.

CHAPTER 9

Nic marveled at the quiet efficiency of the bridge crew under such stressful conditions. The Democraton vessel, *Absolute Loyalty*, had found them and was giving chase. They were still out of weapon range, but that wouldn't last.

The communications officer put a transmission on the speakers for the bridge to hear. "This is the *Absolute Loyalty. Veritas*, you are ordered to come to a stop and prepare to be boarded."

Captain Bromwich signaled for the com officer to maintain silence while the navigator plotted evasive maneuvers.

"Options?" Bromwich asked his bridge crew.

The helm officer, who seemed to bounce in his seat suggested, "We could slingshot around the sun."

Bromwich smiled. "We'll keep that in mind, Lieutenant. Other options?"

The first officer spoke. "Fight or run."

Turning to his second-in-command, Bromwich asked, "Can we outgun them?"

"No."

"Can we outrun them?"

"Maybe."

The door to the bridge slid open and Connor ran in. "I have an idea." His breath came in short pants.

Nic turned to look at Connor whose eyes blazed with determination.

Captain Bromwich gestured to Connor. "Speak."

"*Absolute Loyalty*. This is Captain Nigel Bromwich of the *Veritas*. The *Veritas* is a legally registered Democraton cruise ship. Why are we being stopped?"

"*Veritas*. Hold your position and prepare to be boarded. Failure to comply will be considered a hostile act and we will open fire."

“Relax, *Absolute Loyalty*. We are complying.” Bromwich signaled the helm to hold position as the *Absolute Loyalty* approached.

The communications officer piped Nic’s voice for the crew to hear. “Shuttle bay to Bridge. We’re off.”

Bromwich replied, “Godspeed.”

A shuttle launched from the bay of the *Veritas*, and immediately started sprinting away from the ship. It took only moments before the *Absolute Loyalty* went off in pursuit. The little shuttle was fast, but not enough to escape the battle cruiser, and soon was being tractored aboard the Democration naval vessel.

“*Veritas*, our sensors show this shuttle contains two known fugitives, Nickolai Maltisse and Connor Spaulding. Your ship is impounded and all of you are under arrest.”

Bromwich pointed to his communications officer and leaned back in his seat. “*Absolute Loyalty*. How is that possible? Weren’t Maltisse and Spaulding executed?”

“Sensors don’t lie. We’re boarding and taking you into custody.”

Bromwich huffed a sigh as a trickle of sweat slid down his face. “How could we know they were here? We shouldn’t be arrested.”

The *Absolute Loyalty* pulled the shuttle into its bay and closed the doors. Everyone on the bridge held their breath as the *Absolute Loyalty* exploded. Bright reds and oranges filled the forward viewscreen as pieces of the former ship shot away in spiraling tendrils of smoke.

The door to the bridge slid open. Connor and Nic stepped out onto the deck, satisfied grins splitting their faces.

Captain Bromwich turned to Connor. “How’d you know how to spoof their sensors? Make them think you two were on board and not the explosives?”

“I’m a shuttle pilot. I spend a lot of time flying missions with very little to do. I started playing around with the shuttle controls, replicating DNA. I learned a few tricks. Never knew they would come in handy.”

Nic draped his arm around Connor. “We better get out of here and hope no reinforcements are on the way.”

They arrived at Nic's home base and Connor finally thought they had a chance at survival. This place almost felt safe.

He looked around the large open quad. A set of small cabin-like buildings with bars on the windows lined one side. That must have been where he was held. A large building flanked another side of the quad. Delicious scents of cooking meat rose from it. Another set of cabin-like buildings were across from the cells. These had no bars. A couple of large buildings made up the fourth side. All of the buildings were painted a cheerful yellow with white trim. A few people played Frisbee in the middle of the quad.

When they arrived, one of Nic's people whisked him away. Connor tried to go with him, but Nic smiled and said they were just going to restore his memory. He kissed Connor quickly and then he was gone.

One of Nic's people, Amy, led Connor to one of the small cabins across from the cells. Exploring the room, it became clear that these were Nic's quarters at the base.

It was fascinating to get a glimpse into the man he cared about. Connor explored the items Nic chose to display. Some of his books had spines so filled with creases that the titles were no longer visible. The bed was hastily made and a black tank top was tossed over a chair in the corner.

He inhaled deeply, breathing in Nic's musky scent. It gave him comfort while he waited to finally talk to the person he was coming to care deeply about—and he hoped do so much more.

The door wasn't locked, but where would he go? One of the rebels—he had to learn their names—at least brought him food, so he ate and waited, unsure what to do next. He found a book, *1984*, that looked like it had been read and re-read. It had a note hand-scrawled on the inside cover: *We need to make a happy ending*. Intrigued, he took it outside into the sunshine, the sky just a tad more green than home, and settled in a chair to read.

Hearing footsteps approach, he looked up to see Nic. "You're free to go. Anywhere you want."

Connor's mouth dropped open. The expression on Nic's face was unreadable. *Now that he remembers, he doesn't want me*. Connor's heart raced. He should just go. It had all been a lie.

He took hold of himself. Why else would Nic have come to rescue him? It was time to take a chance. "I want to stay here, with you."

Nic's face was neutral. "Why?"

Connor vowed to never play poker with the man. He stood and faced Nic. Swallowing hard, he answered Nic's question. "Wasn't that clear on the ship? To see where this thing between us leads."

Nic's face softened a little, but his lips curved down. "It's not safe here."

Connor lit up inside. Nic was worried for him. "It's not safe anywhere, but here I can help with the cause. I want to make Dr. Renault's death mean something. I think I've shown I can be useful."

Nic smiled. "I guess you are good for more than tending crops."

"Most of all, I want to be with you. If you'll have me?" Then he closed the distance between them, threw his arms around Nic, and kissed him.

Nic melted into the embrace and his arms came around Connor. Their lips parted and their tongues joined, tangling, twisting, dancing together.

Sparks of need shot through Connor, making his nerves tingle and his cock harden. Nic kissed down the side of his neck, licking, and nibbling. Then he lifted his head and looked Connor in the eyes. "Stay. Be mine."

A sense of rightness settled over Connor. Finally, he'd found something, someone, worthy of his caring and loyalty. "Yes."

Nic led him back into his room and Connor's heart pounded in a whole different way.

Nic lunged, smashing their lips together. The kiss was hot before, but now its fire was burning straight through Connor. Nic walked Connor back towards the bed until his knees bumped the mattress and he fell back onto it.

Nic grabbed Connor's shirt and pulled it over his head. Connor tugged Nic on top of him and removed Nic's shirt as well.

With their chests pressed together, they shared more passionate kisses. Connor's hands were on Nic's back, his nails scratching down, making Nic's skin quiver beneath his fingers, and his lover's groin thrust forward, pressing against Connor's erection.

Nic reached up and grabbed the hair on the back of Connor's head, pulling to get access to his neck, his ear, his jaw, kissing and nibbling while Connor thrust up against him.

Connor whimpered, "Too many clothes."

Nic rolled to the side and shimmied his pants off while Connor did the same, and then took a moment to admire the man before him. Strong pecs, a flat stomach decorated with a treasure trail leading to a long, hard prick, the head purple with need. Connor dove for it and ran his tongue along the top.

"Oh."

Connor ran his tongue all around the ridge under the head, hitting the sensitive nerve bundle on the underside, smiling at the way Nic's hips bucked. Then he ran his tongue up and down the smooth length, so similar, and so different from his own. He reached up, tickling Nic's balls, while Nic's head thrashed to the side and his hand grabbed Connor's hair again.

Then Connor engulfed him, taking him deep into his mouth. He reveled in the little mewls of need falling from Nic's mouth when he felt a tug at his head. He lifted off and looked up at Nic, seeing his pupil blown out in lust.

"W... Want you. Want to be inside of you. Please? Can I?"

Connor couldn't think of anything he wanted more. "Yes."

Nic reached toward the side table and grabbed a bottle of lube and a condom from the drawer while Connor crawled up to kiss him. He heard the snap of the bottle and the trickle of liquid.

Encouraging Connor onto his elbows and knees, Nic knelt up. "Have you done this before?"

"A couple times. It's been a while."

Nic's hands parted Connor's cheeks and then a digit pressed against his needy pucker. His cock jumped as Nic pressed in slowly, gently, and inexorably. The finger went in deeper and deeper, stretching Connor, preparing him.

White-hot need warmed Connor as sensation shot to his prick. He moaned when Nic's finger nudged his sweet spot inside.

When his guardian muscle relaxed so the finger could move smoothly, Nic added another, spreading them, and then he added a third.

Connor twisted to look over his shoulder. “Do it Nic. Don’t make me wait.”

“Pushy.” Nic smiled.

Nic knelt behind Connor and pushed into him, inch by inch, until he was fully seated. It felt so good to have him inside. Connor laid his head sideways, his cheek pressed onto a pillow at his head, as Nic pulled out and then thrust inside him.

“Oh, yeah,” escaped his lips.

Nic worked into a rhythm, pushing in and out of Connor.

“Oh, God, yeah.”

Connor pushed back, meeting him thrust for thrust, as Nic nailed him right on his sweet spot. Connor reached under himself and started pumping his prick in time to Nic’s thrusts, struggling closer to orgasm.

Nic’s arm reached around his chest and pulled him to kneel up while still pounding into his ass. Connor turned his head so their lips could join in a sloppy kiss filled with tongues and desire.

“Nic. So close.”

“Let go.”

Connor pumped his cock a few more times and then spurts of pleasure shot out of him while he threw his head back onto Nic’s shoulder. Nic pounded his ass until he suddenly stilled, filling the condom.

The two men collapsed together, Nic holding him close. Connor’s eyes drooped, he was warm and content. As he slipped into a deep sleep, his last thought was that he would stay with Nic.

Together, they would face the future and whatever the Democration and its Democrator threw at them.

THE END

Author Bio

Kathryn Sparrow has had stories spinning around in her head her whole life and finally decided it was time to write them down. Until recently, she worked in the Software Industry as a Software Quality Engineer, so she gets a particular thrill including geeks and tech in her stories. Now she is a full time wife and mom for her geek husband and adorable, infuriating young daughters, who are too smart for their mommy's own good. She is working on her first novel, Alpha Coder, an M/M story about werewolves at a Software Company. If she had spare time she would spend it knitting, crocheting, cross stitching, and doing any other handicrafts that catch her fancy.

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CARTOON LOGIC

By Andrea Speed

Photo Description

Two guys in a friendly hug.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I would love a story with a lot of laughter, bad puns and jokes, as well as love. Emotions are the important thing here, sweet discovery. The prompt:

Cartoonist Found Dead in Home. Details are Sketchy.

(Think Huffington Post or CNN)

Who would've think these two would come together over the death of a comic/cartoon strip creator?

HEA, if possible.

AU? Cool.

Magic, mayhem, mystery, and murder, all encouraged.

Sincerely,

Lori

Story Info

Genre: fantasy, contemporary

Tags: comic strip, face punching, comedy, death, furies, alliteration

Word count: 5,032

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CARTOON LOGIC

By Andrea Speed

It was bad enough to find your father dead. It was somehow even worse to find him dead in a big teddy bear outfit with the crotch cut out.

Brandon really didn't blame the cops who stepped outside to laugh, but it still annoyed him. Yeah, it was weirdly hilarious, but it was still his dad, no matter how estranged they'd been. And no, he had no idea his father was a "furry". Dad had definitely been letting his freak flag fly since he'd divorced Brandon's mother.

Once the medical examiner had packed up his dad's body—and God, was he relieved when they zipped him up in a body bag—Brandon really had a chance to deal with the fact that his dad was dead. He felt bad about it, sure, but not as bad as he felt he should have, which was a guilt spiral threatening to turn into a hurricane.

As soon as the house was empty, the silence really hit him. This was the same two-story house he grew up in—well, until the divorce—and it was like it had been caught in a time warp. Same couch, same carpet (or at least the same carpet color, a sort of pale brown that reminded him of dead leaves), same curtains, same dining room furniture. He wondered if his room would be just as he'd left it, right down to the socks on the floor. He almost went to check, but didn't.

The medical examiner said it looked like a heart attack, but they'd know more once they got his dad to the lab. Just recalling it made Brandon snort. A lab? That was a nice way of saying autopsy table, wasn't it? Maybe even coroners watched too much *CSI*.

He rubbed his eyes, a bit surprised to find them moist, and wandered off towards his father's drawing room. He had his computer in there, right? But did Brandon really want to look at his dad's history? Oh God—what if it was just furry porn? Pages and pages of furies.

You know, Brandon *was* gay, and he had friends into the leather and the drag scenes. He knew that everybody had their own thing, and sex, like any other taste, was personal, and what you found sexy might be disgusting to someone else. But... furies? It was like watching high school mascots boink in costume. Or those poor bastards who sweated inside big headed outfits at discount amusement parks. How was that sexy? How was a guy in a bear suit fucking an Easter bunny sexy to anyone? He just didn't get it. Somehow it figured that his dad, who had the hardest time accepting that his only son was gay, would have a kink that Brandon couldn't understand. His father was nothing if not difficult.

What he called his dad's "drawing room" was really a home office, as that's where Paul Sedlak drew *Dex Dart*, the syndicated comic strip *his* father (Brandon's grandfather) created. Brandon's father took it over when Granddad retired, which meant it was a "legacy" strip. His father had hoped Brandon would take it over, but Brandon couldn't draw for shit, which was just the first disappointment of many. As it was, *Dex Dart*, one of those holdover "adventure" strips, was dead anyway. The syndicate that distributed it was going to stop doing so next month. Dad's comic strip days were over; the final strips had been done for a while. Time moved on, and newspaper comics were dying faster than newspapers themselves.

The office was large and well lit, with a picture window overlooking the backyard and a skylight for added "natural" light. Once upon a time, his dad actually drew them by hand, before Wacom tablets and computers digitized the whole thing. Technically, Brandon could take over writing and drawing the strip, using cut and paste and templates in his father's computer, but the strip was dead. And while he'd tried his hand at writing, he didn't think a comic was his medium of choice.

Yes, his father's office was just as he remembered it. The drafting table he used to use was tucked in a far corner, between the bookcase and the window, while a small, open-frame metal desk now took up the center of the room, the computer monitor and Wacom tablet sitting on it like prized possessions. Brandon was looking around, curious how his father kept the place so clean (he definitely had a very dedicated housekeeper), when something on the wall caught his eye.

Brandon had left the door open when he came in, so most of the door obscured what looked like a poster on the wall, so he had to shut it before he could really see it. It was a life-sized drawing of a door. Beside the actual door. What kind of weirdness was this? Had his dad gotten whimsical in his old age, along with developing a taste for pants-less bear costumes?

There was green at the bottom, suggesting grass, or at least a more colorful carpet than industrial beige. But it wasn't a wildly detailed picture, despite its size. It was just a basic door, drawn and colored in ink and chalk.

There was a hidden bit of wall by the corner, and he found himself wondering if his father had hidden something else weird there. He was looking for it and finding nothing (maybe his father had hidden some kind of clue on the bookshelves...) when a male voice said, "You're not him."

Brandon wasn't all that surprised. He figured it for the gardener, or maybe one of the housekeeping team, but when he turned to respond, he found himself staring at the most ridiculously gorgeous man he'd ever seen in his life.

A gorgeous man, who had opened the drawing of the door and was now standing on its threshold.

Was this what a psychotic break felt like? Brandon always thought you'd know if it ever happened to you, that reality would fracture and you could feel your sanity slipping away like dust through your fingers. But he felt nothing. He had been inhabiting the real world and now... now he was deep in Crazytown, population: him.

The handsome man walked out of the picture, which was no longer a picture, but an actual door with a brass knob that looked out on a lawn of too-green grass, a sky far too blue, and Brandon actually thought he could feel a lukewarm breeze and air faintly scented of... crayons? Oh, come on!

"You're not him," the too-handsome man said again. His hair was impossibly glossy, and a strange kind of blue-black, falling over his forehead and almost hiding his Windex-blue eyes. "But you're related to him, aren't you?"

"Him? You mean my father?" Brandon finally replied.

The man smiled, and he had brilliant white teeth that reflected sunlight so well Brandon had to shade his eyes to prevent being blinded. “You’re Paul’s son? You must be Brandon.”

Wow. This must have been a full-blown psychotic episode. “You know me?”

“The son of the Creator? Of course I know you!” The man clapped one of his big mitts on Brandon’s arm. For a single second, it felt like paper brushing his skin, but then it was just warm skin touching his. Wow, this was some episode he was having. Could the trauma of his father’s furry death really have made him snap so completely? “Come, Brandon, we need your help.”

“We?”

“Yes. All the inhabitants of Shadow Valley. Don’t you recognize me?”

“Um...” Shadow Valley was the name of the fictional city where much of Dex Dart was set.

“I’m Dusty.”

“Dusty?”

“Dusty Dart.” He began gently but firmly pulling Brandon towards the open door. “Come, we have to stop Dick Dastardly before he puts his final plan in motion.”

Brandon had forgotten about all the painful alliteration in the damn strip. And the too-on-the-nose names like Dick Dastardly. But he scoured his memories. Dusty Dart? He vaguely recalled Dex having a floppy-haired, adventure-seeking son, but Dusty had been what, seven? Of course, that was the last time he’d seen the comic. How long ago was that? “Uh, what? I don’t understand; what’s going on?”

“Come with me. It’s easier to see than explain.”

Brandon didn’t see that he had a choice in the matter, since Dusty had pulled him almost all the way to the doorway. And he could feel a breeze, hear a wind, and that was just fucking nuts. There was just no way in hell any of this could be happening, and his brain’s strong denial of all this craziness caused him to delay acting until Dusty had pulled him through the paper doorway and into another place.

It was a different world. It looked kind of Earth-like, but just slightly off, enough that it all seemed insane. The colors were hyper-real, for one—everything was super-saturated, from the too-green grass to the too-blue sky, and even the gray asphalt roads looked more silver than anything else. There was a sun above, but it was a disc, a bit more white than yellow, and very much a perfect circle.

Brandon turned to see the door Dusty pulled him through was freestanding in a grassy field, and while open, it showed his father's office. It looked almost drab next to such bright colors. Even the nearby trees had bark so vividly brown, it was like they were semi-opaque and being lit from the inside. "What is this place?" he asked, but even as he asked, he already knew. The silver ribbon of road lead down to a bay of almost neon-blue water, while dwellings in vibrant colors were spotted along the far hillside like brightly colored birdhouses. If he wasn't mistaken, it looked exactly like the background of the first Dex Dart book.

"I told you, Shadow Valley."

"The home of Dex Dart," Brandon said, continuing to look around. There was no way in hell this was happening.

"You know my dad? Cool. That'll make everything easier," Dusty said, pulling him along.

Brandon should have stopped Dusty, but he was honestly too shocked to do much of anything. How was this possible? He'd never hallucinated before, but this seemed way too vivid for such a thing. The air smelled clean, save for that lingering hint of crayon, and he could hear water lapping against the shore. And birds! The wind was moving his hair! And he could feel Dusty's gentle yet still firm grip on his arm. But if this wasn't a hallucination, what the hell was it?

"We think Dick is moving tonight. Everyone is gathered at City Hall. We were waiting for Paul, but—"

"Paul's dead."

Dusty stopped suddenly and turned to face Brandon, his big cartoon eyes suddenly filling with tears. He was so incredibly handsome it was a little distracting. "What?"

“Yeah, I just found him...” He didn’t know about the passage of time between here and there. Where was here, exactly? There was no way it could be the comic strip, because that was just bat-shit crazy. “...dead.”

“How?”

“Umm...” Could he tell this poor, fragile cartoon character that he found his dad in a crotchless bear outfit? “It looked like a heart attack.”

Dusty gasped, clapping a hand to his mouth, tears spilling over the lids. It was somehow attractive sadness, like a drawing. That figured. “Could... Dick didn’t get him, did he?”

For some reason, Brandon first thought of an anatomical dick before the other kind, even though he knew his dad wasn’t into that. Oh god, why did his mind go there? He almost asked if Dick had a thing with crotchless animal costumes, but then didn’t. “I don’t know. Could he have?”

Dusty thought about it for a moment, hand still clamped over his mouth. It looked really silly, but Brandon knew he couldn’t laugh without looking like a complete asshole. Finally, Dusty removed his hand, and said, “Maybe. He has threatened to kill all of us. Maybe he went after the Creator first.”

“How?” After asking that, Brandon immediately regretted it. But he couldn’t take it back now.

“He does have access to toxicissium! Maybe he poisoned him.”

“Come again?”

“Toxicissium! The most deadly substance known to man?” Dusty gave him a stricken look. “Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of it.”

The idiotic, on-the-nose name alone told him it was something his dad made up for the strip. Brandon rubbed his eyes, a bit surprised to find his own eyes were still wet. “I doubt that killed him. He was old.” And probably engaged in activities that would strain anyone’s heart, as well as possibly humiliate someone to death.

“But he was the Creator!” Dusty exclaimed. Brandon could almost picture the word bubble over his head, studded with at least three exclamation points. “He can’t just die! I’m sure Dick is behind it. That creep.”

Dusty suspected someone was guilty of murder, and the best he could do was call him a creep? Wow. Brandon was never going to understand comic strip logic. “Well, I’m sure a dick was involved.”

“I knew it!” Dusty replied, still all exclamation points. “Oh, that... that *creep*! He’ll pay for what he’s done.”

“So what exactly is he trying to do?” Brandon asked, mostly out of curiosity. He had this mad urge to walk to the road, and then follow it until he found City Hall, because he was sure it would be marked with a sign labeled “City Hall”. Because he expected everything to be labeled—from a store called “Store” to a house clearly marked “Dex’s House”. Because it wasn’t a comic strip unless it was all marked so obviously it seemed to insult your intelligence.

“He’s trying to buy up homes so he can start ‘underground mining’, because supposedly there’s a huge mellurite deposit underneath Shadow Valley. But Honey and I discovered he’s lying, and he just wants to buy up the land so he can sell it at twice the price to an oil exploration company that will tear up all of the Valley and make it uninhabitable. But we can’t prove it because he destroyed the only evidence. He’s been charming everyone and convincing everyone they’ll be rich, but we know it’s a lie.” Dusty finally turned and walked on, with the air of a man who had misplaced his glasses but was sure he’d left them in his car. Dusty wasn’t known for his genius, was he? Come to think of it, was anyone in Dex Dart?

“Honey?”

“Yes. Honey Potts, the famous reporter?”

Oh Jesus, more stupid names. Was there no end to them? He tried to remember, then gave up, as he figured he’d deal with each idiocy as he came upon it. “So you can’t just tell these people he’s a liar and have them believe you? His last name *is* Dastardly.”

“Yeah?” Dusty stopped so suddenly Brandon almost walked into his back. “Hey, I never put that together before! Wow! How does everyone not know that?”

All Brandon could do was shake his head. “No idea.”

Dusty clapped a hand on Brandon's shoulder, and almost drove him to his knees. Not only did Dusty have big hands, but he had a lot of farm-boy strength. "I'm glad you're with us, Brandon. You're smart." Dusty grinned at him, showing eerily-even, eerily-blinding teeth, and Brandon realized, suddenly and worryingly, that he was really fucking cute. Too bad he wasn't real. Sure, he was a little dumb, but hey, that wasn't so bad.

Dusty led him to City Hall; which did indeed have a marble sign reading "City Hall", and seemed to be nothing but a series of large steps leading to a door that opened on the main meeting room, which was a true design nightmare. Was the lobby in the back?

There were many disturbing people at the city hall gathering. They appeared to be flesh and blood people, and yet some of them had hair with obvious crosshatching, and faces that didn't quite work in 3-D. In most cases, they had unfortunate wardrobes of clashing colors, and a uniform similarity of body types that suggested everybody was related. Except for Dusty, of course, and probably everyone else in the Dart family. (As the stars of the strip, they'd be unique.)

"Hey everyone," Dusty said, leading the way down the aisle. "This is Brandon, son of the Creator, and he has some news."

Brandon had been so distracted by all the strange people it took a moment for him to realize what Dusty had said. "Wait, what? What news do I have?"

Dusty's look was painfully earnest. "About Dick."

"Are you shitting me?" But even as he asked, he knew Dusty was incapable of shitting anyone. His character was about as goody-goody as Dex. As soon as they were up at the city hall stage—Did real city halls have stages?—Brandon noticed all the weird-faced people staring at him, and it made him intensely nervous. "Um, Dick's last name is Dastardly. So, um, he's *dastardly*."

There was an audible gasp, like everyone had been sucker-punched, and the sound reverberated through the hall like he'd just announced that not only was god dead, but he'd also been a hermaphroditic drag queen called Miss Demeanor.

Brandon kind of resented their idiocy, but was that fair? They were just as the strip dictated. If they weren't this stupid, then Dick Dastardly would never almost get away with anything, and what would the protagonists of the comic have to deal with then? Oh, there were those awful *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-inspired strips, where Dex was an artifact-recovering hero, but the less said of those the better. They probably proved the point that Dex needed an antagonist.

Murmurs filled the hall, a tiny wave of audible worry, and Dusty put an arm around Brandon's shoulders and gave him a big, beaming smile. "We've got him now."

"Fantastic," Brandon said, wondering why he couldn't have had a decent psychotic break. He'd never really cared for his dad's strips.

Hell, maybe that's exactly why he was having this kind of hallucination. Maybe it was guilt for never becoming a cartoonist and following in his dad's footsteps. Maybe he was damned to live in this strip until he dealt with it.

Now that would be hell.

Dusty raised his arms and said, "People, don't panic. Now that we know the truth, we can shut him down and run him out of town for good."

"Oh, can you?" a man said, and there was more gasping as everyone turned to look at the man who now appeared at the end of the aisle. He was funny-looking too, but in a distinctive way. His eyes were smaller than usual, and his blue-black hair looked slicked back and positively glistening, while his body was lean yet angular—like his mother was a crowbar and his father was a protractor. "Somehow I doubt that, Dusty Dart."

"Dick Dastardly!" Dusty exclaimed, in case no one had figured out who this was.

"Yes, and you're who? Brandon, son of the Creator?"

Brandon briefly wondered how Dick could know but then realized he wasn't as haphazardly drawn as most of the people around him. Brandon looked normal next to Dusty, but Dusty was a main character. "Yeah. And you're the dick."

"Just Dick, if you'd please. Tell me, is your father dead?"

There were more gasps from the crowd, as it was apparently their favorite activity. But Brandon felt slightly ill at the question. “How in the hell do you know that?”

Dusty gasped. “I knew it! You poisoned him, didn’t you?”

Dick sneered, but it may have been an attempt at a smile. “Of course I did. I wanted to see if something in this world could still affect him in the real world. He’d said nothing could pass from this world to the next, but I knew that was a lie!”

Brandon couldn’t believe this. This... how did any of this make any sense? “Did you put him in the bear costume too? What was the point of that?”

Dick looked genuinely confused, his brow scrunching in puzzlement. “Bear costume? What are you talking about?”

Okay, so, that was sadly his dad’s thing. If he was feeling sick, why did his father don the crotchless bear suit? Then again, maybe he hadn’t felt sick. Since it was a cartoon—hence fictional—poison, maybe he never felt it until it killed him. Or most likely, the poison didn’t work on him at all, and his heart attack was simply coincidental. But Brandon was offended this one-dimensional comic strip dipshit even tried to murder his dad. Oh sure, he’d sometimes thought of it, especially during his teen years, but that didn’t matter. It was a shitty thing to even attempt. Only family could treat other members that poorly, damn it. It was the Sedlak family way. “You asshole. I’m glad your strip got cancelled.”

“You’re gonna take me with you to your world, Creator-boy.”

“Fuck you. I am not.” Brandon then leaned over and whispered, “He can’t just walk through the door?”

Dusty shook his head before whispering back, “He can’t see it. No one can, except me and my mom and dad.”

Of course. Only the main protagonists could see the doorway/entrance, whatever the hell it was. Although how Deanna Dart, the mostly ignored spouse, got included Brandon had no idea. But it had a sort of cartoon logic to it. “You’re gonna take me, boy,” Dick insisted, pulling a gun out of pretty

much nowhere. More cartoon logic—or action-movie logic. Funny how those things were related. “Or I shoot you, and we’ll see if you really can die here.”

Again, the poorly-drawn peanut gallery gasped. Brandon almost laughed, because it was so sad. Was that all they could do? React to things in various states of shock? But before he could say or do anything, Dusty suddenly stood in front of him, protecting him with his big, beefy body, and holding out his arms for... well, no idea. Brandon had no idea why he did that. Did bullets curve in this strip? Could Dusty swat them out of the air like flies? “No you won’t, Dick. I won’t let you harm him.”

Dick scoffed. “What can a lunkhead like you do? Move aside, or I’ll shoot you first.”

“No, you won’t,” a man dressed in khaki action-wear proclaimed, striding manfully up to Dick and punching him in the jaw. Dick’s head snapped around like his spine was made of pipe cleaners, and he collapsed to the aisle, his gun skittering amongst the row of benches. Brandon knew the puncher could only be Dex, as that’s what he was famous for: punching everyone. Other action men used guns or weapons, but Dex never seemed to come across a problem he couldn’t solve by punching it in the face. It was as refreshing as it was utterly ridiculous.

“Dad!” Dusty exclaimed. “Great timing!”

Dex smoothed a hand over his slicked-back hair—hair that looked a lot like Dick’s, come to think of it—and straightened his khaki safari jacket, which looked absurd in the comic and looked even more absurd in person. What was he, the walking ad for the cartoon version of Banana Republic? Also absurd? He looked about ten years older than his son, tops. Only in a cartoon universe, or a really, really sad trailer park. “You must be Brandon. Where’s Paul?”

Dusty dropped his arms, and his shoulders sagged in what seemed like honest sadness. “He’s dead, Dad. Dick killed him.”

“What? How could he kill the Creator?” Dex then looked down at Dick, and kicked him in the shins. It was a weird choice, since if you’ve got the guy down, why not kick him in the gut? But hey, maybe that was too low down for Dex. “You’ll pay for that, Dick.”

“I... I think I need to go home,” Brandon said, patting Dusty on the back so he’d move aside. He obeyed, and Brandon was glad, as he was starting to feel overwhelmed. Why, he wasn’t sure. Well, his dad *had* just died. Maybe that was reason enough.

He walked out of City Hall, plodding down the wide steps, and briefly wondered where he was supposed to go when he realized everything in this “town” was clearly marked. It was a town with maybe thirty-two people in it, tops, and that was being generous.

Dusty followed him like an eager puppy. “Are you okay, Brandon? You seem upset.”

“Of course I’m upset. My dad just died, and I have no idea what’s going on. I mean, in real life, maybe I’m wandering down the middle of a street with my pants around my ankles, yelling ‘Kitties, kitties!’ at passing cars. It’ll make as much sense as what’s going on now.”

“But you’re here now. You’re not on a street somewhere.” Dusty paused briefly. “Why would your pants be around your ankles?”

“I don’t know. It just seems like that would happen.”

Dusty grabbed his shoulder, stopping him, and before Brandon could ask him why, Dusty pulled him into a big bear hug. He smelled vaguely of ink. Brandon was surprised, but it was kind of nice being in these big, warm arms. “What’s this for?” Brandon asked, his voice muffled by Dusty’s shoulder. If he kept hugging him much longer, breathing was going to be an issue.

“For your dad. I’m sorry. I know he really loved you.”

“No he didn’t.”

Dusty held him back at arm’s length, which was good, as now he could breathe. “How can you say that? He talked about you all the time.”

“He did?” This was news to Brandon. He thought his dad only thought about him when he absolutely had to. Brandon looked around, and saw that the doorway back to his dad’s drawing room wasn’t far. He tried to wipe the tears out of his eyes before Dusty saw them. “Hey, do you think you could come back with me and tell me about him? We could have coffee.”

Dusty grinned. He was really cute when his face lit up like a light bulb. “Water’s good enough for me. And I’d love to.”

“So why did you protect me back there? You didn’t have to.”

“Of course I did. I wasn’t going to let anyone hurt you. You’re the son of the Creator.” He paused briefly. “Besides, you’re cute.”

Brandon studied him warily. He couldn’t be... Well hell, why was he even thinking that? Comic strip characters had no sexuality, or only what their Creators allowed them to have. But as they walked back to the door, Brandon tried to remember if Dusty had ever seen any women in the strip since he’d gotten older. Then again, Dex Dart wasn’t really a relationship-centered strip. Still... Dusty had never had a female love interest of any kind, had he? He was just Dex’s adventure-loving son.

Brandon wondered how adventurous he actually was.

One Year Later

It had taken a lot of work, but finally his dad’s house looked like something new.

Brandon hadn’t been sure about the new grass-green color at first. It seemed too bright, but Dusty loved it, and Dusty’s unchecked enthusiasm basically made Brandon cave into him. Once they started painting the walls with it, Brandon realized that yeah, it was too bright, but it was also a pretty attractive color, one he preferred over bland white walls. The blue carpet was a nice improvement over brown as well.

His father’s drawing room had been transformed into Brandon’s “writing room”, where he theoretically worked on stuff, although in practice, he actually worked on stuff half the time while the other half was split between reading his email, Twitter, and playing Plants Vs. Zombies. But the drawing of the door was still there, and while the syndicate might have shut down Dex Dart the strip, Brandon and Dusty did go back from time to time. Shadow Valley was somehow still there, still going on with its oddly timeless existence. Dick still schemed to get through to the real world, but Dex was making sure he’d never succeed. He was the hero of the strip, after all, and he

never failed. Brandon still had no idea how this existed, and Dusty couldn't help him there as he didn't know either.

Dusty wasn't the brightest guy in the world. But he was optimistic and brave and sweet, and so incredibly fucking hot that the first time Brandon saw him naked he almost died of a heart attack. No matter that he wasn't drawn with genitalia, he still had 'em. And Dick had been right—things from the Shadow Valley world could exist in this world. Or at least one guy could.

But every time his friends asked how he met Dusty, Brandon never knew what to say. There was no way in hell they'd ever believe him anyway.

THE END

Author Bio

Andrea Speed writes way too much. She is the writer of the Infected series for Dreamspinner Press, and the Josh of the Damned series for Riptide Publishing, amongst other things. She won a Rainbow Award for... say, this sounds familiar. Is anyone else experiencing déjà vu?

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THE PILOT AND THE MAJOR

By D.H. Starr

Photo Description

Muscular, shirtless man staring up at an angle. His face is smeared with dirt and blood, as is his chest. He's wearing dog tags.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I don't know how long I've been here. Or even where here is. It seems like forever but I haven't forgotten how it felt to be free—to breathe, to live, to wonder. Hope dims—it does not falter.

I know only pain... what once brought pleasure now brings ruin. Still—it is only flesh—and they cannot touch the inside, the core. They will not break me. In my eyes I have a fire that will not be extinguished.

Through it all I sense him. Quiet. Biding. Determined. Always out of sight but never absent. A shadow. A slight catch in his breath, a word, a movement. His smell—like the night. He beckons me silently. Through my pain, through my screams. He sees no weakness—only resolve. He finds this... difficult.

*I don't know how I know. I just do. Now. **He** is coming.*

Background and other info:

Where is this man and how did he come to be there? Is he a prisoner in some dark underground cell in an unknown country? A freedom fighter in a post apocalyptic world? A slave in a different place or time?

He's dirty, his clothes are in tatters and injuries mar his body—but he will not yield.

You can feel free to go as dark as you want. A HFN at minimum or HEA is fine. No main character death—but non-con, harsh punishment, BDSM—it's all good. I want to experience what he does. Shock me. Make me admire him but not feel pity. Don't make me cry or grieve for that is not the emotion I see in him. Give him strength, resolve, determination, and courage.

The man who conquers him must earn the right to be called Master as this man—this man does not give his submission easily. The journey—he will hate it but find love. He will resist it but find peace. And the man—the man who is capable of capturing his heart—he will be as few are. Noble. Unapologetic. Fierce. Sheltering. Commanding. Just. A true warrior.

Sincerely,

Jo Smut-Dicked

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, erotica

Tags: alpha males, BDSM, military, public activity

Content warnings: No HEA, HFN

Word count: 2,740

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THE PILOT AND THE MAJOR

By D.H. Starr

Despite the aerobatics of his flying, Lieutenant Jenson Proctor's landings were always easy and level. The moment when rubber touched down on pavement was nothing more than a jostle. He was the best. He'd risen through the ranks faster than his peers. If it weren't for the fact he took such great joy in breaking every standard procedure when in the air, he'd become a Captain in no time at all. But it was a fact, and he'd gotten his ass chewed out enough times to know he was running out of chances. But dammit, how could he excel if he just did what everyone else did? Greatness came from pushing boundaries, in his book.

He taxied the aircraft to the hangar and climbed out of the cockpit. Jenson unsnapped his helmet, then swung it off his head. An immediate cool rush prickled along his neck as the wind made contact with his sweaty skin. He had time to take in one cleansing breath before his heart stopped beating.

"PROCTOR! Get your insubordinate ass down here. Pronto!" Major Anthony Draker loomed in the wide entrance, his stiff posture and commanding presence taking up far more space than his physical body actually occupied.

While fear was always present when he was around Tony, the two had thrown back enough beers over the past few months for him to know it was unlikely he'd get into any real trouble. But along with fear, Jenson couldn't deny his body's other reactions to the man. The one reaction he could always count on was a raging hard-on. He simply needed to see the major and all of a sudden his wang was pushing at the front of his trousers.

Jenson marched on steady legs, pushing his shoulders back enough to present a courageous front despite the icy stare on the face of his major. Once five feet away, he struck a formal pose, raising one hand to his forehead. "Major Draker, , sir. Lieutenant Proctor reporting, sir."

Draker took one step forward, his massive frame blocking the light from the setting sun and casting Jenson in shadow. "Shut it, Lieutenant. You did a fucking ground loop, didn't you?"

Jenson's chest constricted and, for a moment, the same drop in his stomach overtook him. The one he got when nose-diving from fifty thousand to twenty thousand feet in ten seconds flat. "Sir, yes sir."

"Damn it Proctor! How many times do I have to tell you, no unauthorized maneuvers? You're under my command. What does that say about me?"

Without lifting his gaze to meet his major's eyes, Jenson uttered a simple. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Well sorry's not gonna cut it today. Front and center, Lieutenant. I'm about to teach you a lesson you won't forget."

The words registered, but Jenson couldn't make sense of them. How did Draker intend on teaching him a lesson? It was a simple matter of reporting an infraction and invoking the discipline code. He'd fucked up one too many times and now he'd probably receive a reprimand. It certainly wasn't something to promote his rising career, let alone his already overstuffed ego.

"You're lucky I like your spirit, kid, otherwise I would have court-martialed your ass a long time ago. But I'll be damned if I'm letting you off the hook with a verbal warning this time."

A million possibilities rushed through Jenson's mind about what Major Draker had in mind, but all thoughts fled when the man unzipped his uniform fly and hauled out one of the thickest dicks Jenson had ever seen.

"On your knees, fly-boy. It's time for you to make up for all the grief you've put me through."

At first he was sure he'd misunderstood. One look into Tony's eyes and Jenson knew there was no amusement residing within. Heart thudding at an impossible pace, he lowered himself to his knees, only three feet separating his mouth from the dangling member now at face level.

He was about to crawl forward when Draker took a few steps to close the gap. Gripping the back of Jenson's head, the major pulled him forward so his face pressed against the hot flesh of hardening cock. He thrust his hips a few times, each movement helping to bring the monster to full rigidity. "Mmmm, your scruff feels good on my shaft."

Jenson tilted his head up and peered at Tony. Strong fingers at the back of his neck loosened slightly to allow him greater movement, then fistled his hair

and guided his mouth to the bulbous head of the major's cock. "I've been searchin' for an excuse to shove my dick in your mouth, Lieutenant."

With hands planted on Draker's thighs, Jenson opened his mouth, preparing for the invading member to stretch him wide. No sooner had the head touched his lips and slid partway into his mouth than the tautness shifted to a sting as his lips stretched past their limits of elasticity.

Tony progressed with steady determination, moving slowly enough to allow Jenson room to adjust and breathe, but never faltering in his forward movement. By the time a patch of pubic hair tickled his chin, he thought his jaw might actually unhinge.

As Jenson pulled back, allowing the veiny mast to slide out of his mouth, his insides seemed to slip back into place. When only the head remained encased in his lips, he began the slow and arduous trek back, each journey a bit easier as he learned to relax the right muscles at the correct time.

The grunts of his major affirmed for Jenson his ability at sucking cock was still as sharp as his flying ability. With renewed vigor, he gulped down, taking his superior all the way in. The dick in his mouth had grown to a size difficult to believe, and the way his body had to yield more than it ever had before was proof that this man could deliver intense pain and pleasure.

"You're a good cocksucker, Lieutenant." The major's voice was strained, a gravelly edge belying his controlled appearance. "I wonder if your ass is just as tight as that mouth."

Jenson barely had enough time to process what Tony had said before the delicious organ was withdrawn and he felt himself hoisted to his feet. Without needing orders to do so, he unzipped his flight suit, shrugged it off his shoulders, slipped his white T-shirt up and over his head, and pushed the rest of the suit down his legs. He then turned his back on the major and walked over to the aircraft he'd just flown, and stood by one of the wings. Sliding his hands into the waistline of his underwear, Jenson pushed the clothing to the floor.

Tony drew in a breath on a sharp inhale, signaling to Jenson the man liked what he saw. Not that he could blame the guy. An officer standing with his

backside exposed and pants bunched around his ankles would push any man over the edge.

The solid click of boots on cement indicated Draker's approach, and the closer he got, the more Jenson's body quivered. The thought of accommodating Tony's cock in his rarely-used ass caused his hole to quiver. Whether in fear or anticipation, he had no idea, but baser needs and reactions were quickly winning the battle against his rapidly depleting control over himself.

Tony stepped up, nestling his cock in Jenson's crack. The heat of his skin sent a shock of pleasure through the lieutenant, who gripped the wing both for stability and to give him some leverage to press back and increase the friction of skin on skin. Draker slid his cock up and down, each pass moving with greater ease due to the natural lubrication of precome Jenson suspected. "You've been very bad, Lieutenant Proctor."

Jenson bit back on his reply, not wanting to apologize or beg forgiveness. If this was the punishment he could come to expect, he'd perform ground loops and more each time he took to the air.

His silence seemed to please the major since the cock pressed against him throbbed, becoming just a bit harder. When Tony pulled away, Jenson nearly cried out, wanting the contact between himself and the massive man behind him to continue. When the head of Tony's cock pressed at his most sensitive opening, yearning shifted to anticipation of what was about to happen. Draker was going to take him right here in the hangar while he stood, pants down by his ankles, and it appeared he was going to use nothing but the lubricant nature granted him.

There was only a small flash of hesitation as Tony pressed his cock more firmly against Jenson's willing hole. The mandatory testing in the military let him know he was free from any sexually transmitted diseases, but results were private and he could only assume the major was also clean. But his desire overrode common sense and he pressed back, forcing Tony's head to pop through the tight ring of muscle.

He'd been fucked enough to know what to expect, but even his skill at loosening his ass muscles couldn't have prepared him for the instant burn.

Draker's cock had appeared thick, but as it penetrated him, Jenson was sure the shaft was tearing him in two.

Surprisingly, Draker was gentle in his progress, entering Jenson a bit at a time. "That's it, Lieutenant, relax and take it." He gripped Jenson's waist, pulling steadily, his shaft sliding deeper, his other hand rubbing soothing circles at the base of Jenson's spine.

A fine sheen of sweat broke out on his forehead as Jenson sank further down on Tony's shaft. It wasn't until he was fully seated that he was able to take in a full breath. With bristly pubic hair brushing against the sensitive skin of his ass, Jenson closed his eyes, savoring the warring sensations of discomfort and fulfillment.

The sting of a hard slap to his ass cheek snapped Jenson from the haze of ecstasy. Despite the sizable girth of the major's cock, the slide of his shaft as he withdrew until only the head remained lodged inside felt like silk brushing against Jenson's skin. On the slow inward thrust, Jenson's body accommodated the missile with greater ease. "That's it, Jenson. Take all of it."

The use of his name sent a thrill of excitement through Jenson and he had to grip his cock to keep from coming on the spot. Slowly Tony built up speed, then intensity, until he was pulling out and slamming back in, seemingly indifferent to any discomfort he might be inflicting.

Far from eliciting any kind of distress, the harder the major pounded, the more Jenson wanted, and before long he found himself bucking back, using the major's shaft to fill his channel even deeper. Whereas other men who'd fucked him found a normal rhythm and stuck with it until they climaxed, predictable and boring, Tony seemed to have an endless arsenal of maneuvers. It was as if he was as skilled at fucking as Jenson was at flying.

When another slap came stinging down on his ass, Jenson had to grip the base of his cock tighter, staving off yet another threatened release. If he could extend this moment for an eternity, it wouldn't be long enough. Never before had he been so completely filled and stretched, and never before had he wanted someone more.

The pace of Draker's onslaught increased, as did his panting, and Jenson found himself held steady by both of Tony's hands, one on each hip. Thrust

after powerful thrust, shocks of electricity coursed through Jenson. With each stroke, the head of Tony's cock brushed against Jenson's prostate and then slid deeper into him.

Their combined movements were smooth and perfect, like flying, yet along with the rush of being fucked by his muscular major came a surprising rush from submitting so completely. He'd lived his life making his own rules, yet in this moment, he handed all control over to Tony.

A few short pumps and Jenson thought he might burst open. He arched his back as Tony lodged himself to the hilt. The cock buried inside swelled even more, pulsing in time with Draker's ragged breaths.

Knowing Draker's seed washed his most sacred walls was more than Jenson could take. His own orgasm erupted with the power of a volcano. Blinding lights robbed Jenson of sight as his body shook uncontrollably. His come jetted from him, stream after stream spilling from him and scenting the air.

When the last waves subsided and Jenson was able to regain the use of his senses, he righted himself and turned to face his major. Hot come leaked from his ass and trailed down his legs as he faced the man.

"That was for breaking the rules, Lieutenant. I trust you learned your lesson."

Once again, Jenson remained silent. He'd certainly learned a lesson, but not the one he suspected Tony had intended to deliver.

Jenson stood at attention, ass slick with come and dick swaying heavily, saluting the major and then watching as the man tucked his cock back into his pants, turned on a tight rotation, and marched from the hangar.

Jenson pulled his pants up wobbly legs, already planning his next infraction and wondering what form of discipline Tony might dole out.

THE END

Author Bio

D.H. Starr is an educator by day and a dirty-minded romantic at night. He loves writing stories where the main characters experience both physical and emotional highs and lows. Known for angsty stories, he's begun to explore the more playful side of writing, creating stories where hearts aren't wrenched as much as bodies are thrown to heaven and back.

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THREE PART HARMONY

By Tielle St. Clare

Photo Description

On the left, an upright piano stands against the wall of a brightly lit room with large windows. A well-built naked man sprawls on the piano bench, facing away from the instrument, his arms spread out along the keyboard. Another naked young man stands over him, one hand braced on the top of the piano, the other behind his back. On the floor, a third naked man sits watching them, sheet music open on his lap.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The band has been together for a few years, but even their unique sound hasn't launched their career as fast as they'd hoped. So they rented a big house to live together for a summer and write their epic, star-vehicle album (author's choice of rock/blues/folk/jazz/classical or any combination). The weather has been unseasonably warm, and working in close quarters in relative isolation has pushed their friendship in new directions.

From here on out, it's author's choice within these parameters: no BDSM, D/s or hipsters; no HEA required, but an HFN would be nice—it can be for only two or all three (surprise me!) but if it's only for two, they're all still friends and band mates at the end; an unexpected time period or setting would make me very happy!

I'm also a fan of angst, highly emotional and/or offbeat stories/characters, and intimacy, but the inclusion/intensity of these are completely author's choice. Would rather no GFY, but bi would be cool.

Sincerely,

Charley

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: musicians/rock stars, friends to lovers, M/M/M, three-way

Word count: 8,945

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THREE PART HARMONY

By Tielle St. Clare

Mick stood in the open doorway, watching Crimson skim his fingers across the yellowing piano keys. The kid wasn't playing anything in particular, but the sounds somehow blended into a haunting melody that tugged on Mick's heart.

"You okay?" Mick asked. Crimson nodded, but didn't stop playing. Poor kid. Music was his only outlet. He was young, barely in his twenties, stuttered when he got nervous, and blushed when anyone looked at him too closely. How the hell he'd ended up in a rock band baffled Mick.

Except he knew.

Devon.

Crimson would have followed Devon across burning coals covered in cockroaches.

And Devon was either oblivious or just a bastard, and it really depended on the day which option Mick chose. When they were on tour or in the studio, it was easier. Devon might go out, catting around, acting like the slut he was, but Crimson had other things to do. He could avoid watching.

Here—there was no escaping it.

Not that Devon had been acting like a slut here. There wasn't an opportunity. It was just the three of them in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere. With massive, fire-breathing mosquitoes to keep them company. Technically it was interior Alaska, about a three-hour drive north of Fairbanks, except there weren't any roads. They'd had to catch a small plane, then ride ATVs for an hour to get here.

With just the three of them, it didn't give Devon a chance to fuck anything that moved. But he wasn't fucking Crimson, either.

And that left Mick—hell, he didn't know where it left him. He knew where he wasn't—fucking Crimson.

The three of them made a miserable triangle. Mick wanted Crimson. Crimson wanted Devon. And Devon just wanted to be a star.

“Where’s D?” Mick asked.

“He’s taking a shower.”

Mick nodded. They’d both needed a chance to cool off. Mick had opted for going outside but the mosquitoes had chased him back in after a few minutes.

Crimson sighed and his hands dropped away from the keyboard. “I hate it when you two fight. It’s like listening to my parents.”

Mick peeled his arm off the doorframe and strolled into the room. Even knowing it wouldn’t help his mental state, Mick couldn’t resist placing his hands on Crimson’s shoulders, bending down and kissing the top of his head. Thankfully, he found the strength not to lean a little farther over and place a kiss on Crimson’s neck, his jawline, his—fuck. This was a bad idea, but he couldn’t quite make his fingers let go. The cotton T-shirt was all that separated Mick from Crimson’s bare skin.

Mick wasn’t sure when this obsession with their keyboardist had started—sometime during the last tour, probably when he’d seen Crimson’s heart break every time Devon disappeared with another groupie. Male, female. It didn’t matter. Devon would fuck them all.

Somehow it fell to Mick to cheer up Crimson. That sense of obligation had turned to lust and then into something more.

Damn, he’d be willing to let Devon have Crimson if it would keep the sad look out of the younger man’s eyes.

“That’s a good way of looking at it.” He rubbed his palms against the tight muscles beneath his hands, imagining what it would be like to touch bare skin—a little slick from the sweat, rubbing his palms across that sleek, hot flesh. “D and I are like an old married couple. Stuck with each other and determined to fight it out to the end.”

“And there’s no sex.”

The new voice entered the room like a shot. Mick jumped back as if he’d been doing something wrong by touching Crimson. He mentally slapped himself. Devon clearly didn’t want Crimson. Mick did. Too bad the kid’s eyes were always on the band’s front man.

Devon walked to the edge of the piano and grimaced at Mick. It was a familiar version of his I'm-still-pissed-but-we-need-to-let-it-go smile. He'd put on the same pair of shorts he'd been wearing earlier and a dark T-shirt. They weren't dressing to impress anyone out here.

“Damn, we *are* like an old married couple.”

Mick chuckled, more because he wanted to accept Devon's olive branch than he thought it was that funny.

Crimson's head came up. “Then you g-guys, n-never...?”

Devon reared back. His lips crinkled in disgust as if the idea appalled him. Crimson's cheeks turned the color that gave him his name. His real name was Arthur, and while he looked like an Arthur or even an Artie, Devon didn't think anyone in a rock band should have such a stuffy name. He'd nicknamed him Crimson because he blushed so easily. After a few token protests, Crimson accepted it.

Mick reached out and smacked Devon on the arm. “We tried once.”

“T-tried?” Crimson's eyes got wide and he spun halfway around on the piano bench to look at both men at once.

Devon sighed and rolled his eyes. Mick fought the urge to do the same thing. The memory clearly affected them both the same way—embarrassing and a little bit of frustration.

“What happened?” Crimson asked.

“It was an epic battle to see who got to be on top.” Mick shook his head. “When it went from sexy to us actually trying to kill each other, we decided to get drunk instead.”

“And I found a beautiful little twink who bent over for me so nicely,” Devon drawled. “I pounded his ass for two solid days before I decided I'd had enough.”

Crimson's shoulders drooped and he spun back around, facing the keys.

Mick pressed his lips together and glared at Devon. The guy had no idea how he was crushing Crimson. Or if he did, he was just being an asshole. Despite the fact that Mick had known Devon since high school, sometimes he

didn't understand his friend. Usually he explained it away with Devon being drunk or high.

Mick peered at his friend. They'd agreed when they came out here that there would be no booze, no drugs. Mick had said it was because they needed to be clearheaded to write this next album. The secondary motive was to see if Devon could handle it. He'd been drinking a lot during the last tour, partying with the drummer from the headlining band.

Devon sighed and sank down onto one hip, his head tipping to the side. "I'm not high. Hell, if I was, I'd be in a better mood."

"That's true," Crimson muttered. Devon laughed and cuffed him on the shoulder before grabbing the sheet of music off the piano.

Mick hesitated for a moment before agreeing—Devon was fun when he was high, but it was a false personality. And the drugs tended to remove the filter and let the asshole come out.

Not that Devon hadn't been a bit of an asshole on this trip, though Mick attributed that to the heat. Seriously—they were in fucking Alaska. It was supposed to be cold—polar bears, igloos. But no, they'd arrived during one of the hottest summers ever. Ninety degrees in the shade and no fucking air conditioning. They could only open one window because the rest didn't have screens, and the man-eating mosquitoes were always looking for an opening.

They'd each only brought one pair of shorts. Mick had sacrificed his sweats on day two, cutting them off at mid-thigh. They clung to his ass and made him look like an overeager rent boy but Mick didn't care. Bare skin was their only relief.

"Okay, let's get back to it." Devon dropped down beside the piano, resting his back against the piano leg. His hair was still wet from his shower and his T-shirt clung to his chest. The light-brown shorts he wore stopped just above his knees. "Crimson, man, play us what we've got."

Crimson paused for a moment before placing his hands on the old piano keys. Damn, the piano had been a lucky break. When Mick's uncle had offered the remote cabin for their retreat, he'd said it was primitive. He hadn't specified there was only enough electricity to run the refrigerator and the

stove. They'd brought their equipment but had no way to run it. Thank God for the piano. Mick had his acoustic guitar, so they had the basics. They just had to imagine how it would sound amplified and electrified.

Crimson dutifully played the melody, the sounds moving through Mick's head. He could hear his bass line pulsing beneath it. Devon started to hum a line above the music. It was good. Just on the verge of a new sound but something wasn't right.

Crimson's fingers stumbled. "Sorry."

"No." Devon patted Crimson's leg. "It wasn't you. There's something not right."

Sweat dripped down Mick's nose and dropped to the ground.

"Fuck, it's hot," he muttered, pulling his T-shirt away from his skin. The tiny breeze created by the movement sent a brief rush of air and he sighed.

"Yeah, we know." Devon grabbed a pencil and started scribbling notes on the lined paper. "What if you tried this?"

He handed the page to Crimson. Crimson peered at the new notes then he shook his head. "No. That's going to bring the whole thing down. See?" He played what Devon had written, and the energy went flat. Crimson was by far the best musician in their little group. He could practically see the notes in his head.

Crimson started playing, his fingers tripping across the keys. He played the first section, the part they all agreed was good. When it was done, he started again. The sound swirled through the room as Mick dropped down on the couch. The rough material rubbed against his legs, like a wool blanket being wrapped around him. Heat drained his energy and he couldn't make himself get up.

The music filled the room and oozed into Mick's skin. This was it. This was the song that was going to take them to the top. He could feel it. They'd been moderately successful in the past ten years but they'd all agreed this was it. Either they made it, or they called it quits. Mick's father was holding a job for him at the used car sales lot he owned. The thought made his stomach burn, but damn, he was coming up on thirty. So was Devon. If they didn't have a sound the world wanted, maybe they needed to throw in the towel.

Mick hated the idea of giving up but damn it, he wanted enough money to pay his own rent, not have a roommate who took care of the bills when the band didn't get paid. They'd been on tour for the past eight months, the opening act for a big-name band. It hadn't paid much, but had gotten them some exposure. That's why they all agreed... now was the time.

They'd dumped their drummer and lead guitarist and decided the three of them would put together their new sound. The enforced solitude of Mick's uncle's place in the middle of Alaska had given them the time and space. Now they just needed—

Mick sighed. He couldn't think any more. The heat had melted his brain cells. He picked up a music sheet and began to fan himself.

Devon chuckled. "You look like one of those ladies at the Gospel Mission Church."

Crimson smiled and switched gears, taking up the pounding dramatic tones of a gospel song.

"Play it, brother!" Devon shouted, clapping along.

The sound was too much for Mick. It had too much intensity for his hot body.

"I can't take it anymore." He threw himself off the couch and stood up. He grabbed the bottom of his shirt and dragged it up over his head. Crimson's fingers slowed as he looked over his shoulder at Mick's bare chest.

The weak breeze teased Mick's nipples making them hard. A delicious shiver raced across his skin and he wanted more. He undid the button of his shorts and dragged the zipper down.

"What the fuck?" Devon sat up, his lips tight in the corners. "Are you just going to sit around bare-ass naked?"

"No, I—" As Mick yanked open his fly, he remembered he'd been hot while getting dressed, and underwear had been one too many layers. He'd gone commando. He briefly considered dragging his shorts back up but pride wouldn't let him. That, and the heat. "Guess I am." He shoved the baggy shorts down. They fell to the floor and Mick kicked them away.

“Fuck, that’s better.” He tipped his head back and spread his arms wide. A little air moved through the one open window and Mick took advantage.

Crimson looked at Mick, then snapped his eyes away as if he wasn’t supposed to see. Seconds later, he once again glanced over his shoulder, this time, his gaze lingering. Mick’s cock started to swell beneath the other man’s perusal. Crimson’s cheeks turned bright red, but he continued to stare.

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” Mick teased.

Crimson’s lips pulled up in a slight smile. “You do look cool.”

Devon plopped the sheet music on his lap. “You’re wasting time.” The words came out grouchy and irritable but Mick knew Devon, and he was pretty damn sure those pages of music hid a growing hard-on. The spark in his friend’s eye showed an interest. The concept stopped Mick’s heart for one moment.

He and Devon were friends, and with the exception of that one ill-fated attempt at fucking, they’d never been anything more. It worked well that way. Crimson suited Devon much better. He’d be the sweet little bottom to Devon’s big, bad top. Mick just had to get the two of them together.

The idea slammed into his brain and he instantly knew what to do.

“Come on.” He held out his hand to Crimson. The younger man shook his head, but Mick could see the hunger, the desire to be brave, behind those pretty blue eyes. He stepped forward and grabbed the bottom of Crimson’s shirt. In one quick motion, he dragged it up and off. Then he pulled Crimson off the piano bench to stand in the middle of the room.

Crimson squealed and covered his nipples with his hands, laughter in his gaze.

“Nice.” Not that Mick hadn’t seen Crimson at least mostly naked when they were changing in the one tiny dressing room they were usually given for their whole band.

“Check him out, D. Crimson’s been putting on some muscle.” It was true. There was definition in his chest and abs Mick hadn’t seen before. Devon continued to stare at the music sheet in front of him, then slowly dragged his gaze upward. The slight widening of his eyes made Mick smile.

“Been working out?”

Crimson shrugged. “Not much else to do here.”

That was true. They could fish and Mick’s uncle said they could hunt ptarmigan, but none of them were inclined to kill anything.

“Come on.” Mick lifted his chin toward Crimson’s groin. “Let’s have the rest of it.”

Crimson shook his head and sort of backed away. “Oh, I don’t know.”

Mick grabbed him by the hand and yanked him up hard against his body—and his growing erection.

“Come on, baby,” he whispered in Crimson’s ear. “Let’s show D what he’s been missing.”

Crimson gulped but he didn’t move, not even when Mick reached between their bodies and undid the top button of Crimson’s denim shorts. They fell easily to the ground, leaving a pair of black boxer briefs that clung like a second skin. It was impossible not to notice Crimson’s dick was hard as well. Mick stepped back. He wasn’t going to force Crimson to get naked.

“The rest of it.” The soft command came from Devon. Crimson hesitated for a heartbeat, then hooked his fingers into the top of his underwear and pushed them down. When he straightened up, his fingers twitched at his sides as if he wanted to shield his cock.

“Day-um.” Mick crossed his arms and stared at Crimson’s prick. The blatant observation seemed to make him harder, his cock swelling. The kid’s shaft wasn’t above average in thickness but he had to be eight, maybe nine inches long. Mick licked his lips, imagining Crimson’s moans as Mick deep throated him. “You need to walk around naked more often.”

Crimson blushed and a soft smile curved his lips. “What a-about...” Crimson’s question trailed away as his eyes moved to Devon.

Mick spun around, putting his shoulder next to Crimson’s. “Yeah D, what about you? You tell Crimson to bare it all but you’re not willing to get nekkid? That’s not very fair.”

“If you two want to expose yourselves, go for it. I’m fine.” He shifted the

music on his lap but there was no disguising his hard-on. Another nudge and Mick was pretty sure he'd have him.

"I'm guessing it's because he has a really little dick," Mick whispered loudly to Crimson.

Crimson bumped Mick's shoulder with his own. "That's not nice." He paused and looked at Devon. "That's not it, is it?"

"What? No. I just—" He stood up, still holding the sheet music in front of his groin. "I'll just let you two play." He turned and started toward the door.

"You d-don't have to leave." The soft call from Crimson stopped Devon in his tracks.

Devon sighed and shook his head. "I think Mick wants you to himself." He didn't turn around. He didn't keep walking, either.

Crimson blinked and looked up at Mick, his eyes wide as if he'd never seen him before. "R-really? You want me?"

"No."

Crimson crumpled just a little.

"I mean, yes, I do." He took a deep breath and told himself he was doing the right thing. It had to be the right thing because it hurt like a son of a bitch. "But I know how much you love D, so I'll step out and you and D can, well, you know."

Devon whipped around. "Wait. You think Crimson's in love with me?"

"He is."

"No. Crimson's in love with *you*."

"Uh, no."

"Uh, yes. I've seen the way he looks at you," Devon snapped.

"I've seen the way he looks at you. There is no mistaking that kind of look."

"Exactly—but that's how he looks at you."

"No—" Mick stopped and took a step away, turning to face Crimson. Devon returned to the center of the room. "Crimson, what's going on? Do you want one of us?"

“Or do you look at any man longingly when you know he’s not looking.”

Crimson shook his head. “N-not any man. J-just you t-two.” His cheeks flared so red Mick thought he might just burst into flame. “But I f-figured you two were t-together or would, you know, get t-together and I didn’t want to interfere.”

Mick looked at Devon. Devon met his open stare. They both shrugged. How were they supposed to figure this out?

Devon shrugged. “I’ll bow out. You two are already naked.”

“That’s a stupid reason. It would take you five seconds to get naked as well.”

“Well, what do you suggest? A game of rock-paper-scissors-lizard-Spock? The winner gets to fuck Crimson.”

“Don’t be stupid. He’s not the last piece of pizza in the box.”

“You could share me.”

The words came out strong, with no sign of a stutter or hint of hesitation. For one long second, they all froze. When time started up again and Mick reanimated, he blinked—and noticed that Crimson’s dick had gone from half-hard to a full-blown, curving-up-to-the-sky erection with a drop of pre-come decorating the tip.

“You mean one of us fucks you now and the other gets you later?” Devon asked, his question laced with pure challenge.

Crimson practically flinched under the weight of Devon’s stare. Finally he nodded. “Sure. That would work.” Except Crimson didn’t seem happy about the solution.

“No, D, I think he wants us to *share* him.” Mick’s own cock perked up at the idea. “One of us fucking his ass, the other in his mouth.” A whimper escaped Crimson’s throat. “Oh yeah. That’s what he wants.” Mick never claimed to be the brightest bulb on the porch, but once he caught on to an idea, he ran with it. “Damn, you’re a kinky little devil, aren’t you?”

Devon’s lips curled up into the wicked half smile that drew men and women, girls and boys, to Devon’s side.

“Anyone have condoms and lube?”

“I do!” Crimson practically bounced when he said it.

“You *are* a little slut.” Mick kept his words light so Crimson would know he didn’t mean it in a bad way. “I like it.”

“Where?” Devon demanded.

“Uh, my b-bedside drawer. I c-could—”

“I’ll get them.” Devon once again turned toward the door, and this time, he didn’t stop. In fact, he moved so quickly, Mick wasn’t sure he would be coming back.

“Is he coming back?” Crimson asked, voicing Mick’s concern.

“I don’t know. Hopefully.” With Devon’s feet pounding up the stairs, Mick grabbed Crimson’s arm and pulled him around to face him. “Are you sure this is what you want?” Crimson nodded, those bright blue eyes wide and almost innocent—except for the shot of pure lust that blazed inside. “I could slip out. You could be with D,” Mick offered for what he was pretty sure was the final time—because if Crimson didn’t kick him out now, he wasn’t leaving.

Crimson shook his head and dropped to his knees.

“Holy fuck.” Mick barely got the curse out before Crimson had wrapped his lips around the head of Mick’s cock and started to suck. The almost delicate suction quickly took him to full hardness. Crimson moaned and curled his hand around the base of Mick’s shaft, stroking slowly up to meet his lips.

“Holy fuck.”

Mick raised his head and stared at a shocked Devon, standing in the doorway.

“I know.” Mick couldn’t stop a shallow thrust, nudging his cock to the back of Crimson’s throat. Instead of flinching, Crimson moaned again, and the suction grew stronger. “Damn, D, if you’re going to get in on this, you’d better hurry. I’m not going to last long.”

“Don’t you dare come until I get in his ass,” Devon commanded. Mick rolled his eyes. Devon thought that as the lead singer, he was in charge of the band. Seemed he thought he’d be in charge of this as well.

“Then you better hurry because damn, this is one sweet mouth.” He scraped his hand through Crimson’s hair, tugging a little, holding the other man in place as he slowly rocked his hips forward, fucking those sexy lips. Crimson closed his eyes and took it, sucking every time Mick retreated, seemingly lost in the sensation of having a prick in his mouth. Mick hoped Devon was watching and getting just a bit jealous. It was a pretty sight to see. Nothing was going to make Mick look away.

Except maybe...

The soft sound of material sliding against skin grabbed the corner of Mick’s attention. He looked up from the intense vision of his cock sliding in and out of Crimson’s mouth and saw Devon dragging his shirt up and over his chest.

Mick tapped Crimson’s shoulder and eased back, easing his cock out of Crimson’s mouth. Crimson’s eyes blinked open and he stared up. The shocked, almost offended look on his face made Mick laugh.

“Don’t worry, baby. I’m not done with that mouth yet, but I didn’t want you to miss the show.”

Crimson spun around on his knees and watched. Devon must have been delaying until he had both men’s attention. As Crimson stilled, Devon undid the fly of his shorts and shoved them down. Mick knew, vaguely remembered, what Devon looked like when he was hard, but damn...

“Wow.” The soft sigh of admiration from Crimson was followed by him sinking down and resting against Mick’s legs. “His dick isn’t tiny.”

Mick couldn’t stop his laughter. Devon grimaced. “I told you it wasn’t.”

“But guys always say that,” Mick said when he caught his breath. “You can’t ever believe them.”

“Bite me.”

Mick felt a little bad. Devon didn’t like to be teased. He liked to be in charge, be the one the world admired. Still, he needed to lighten up a little. This was supposed to be fun.

Devon strolled forward and Crimson went back onto his knees, his eager eyes locked on Devon’s prick. The thick shaft continued to fill under his

steady gaze. Devon wasn't overly long but his shaft was thick, and Crimson was going to feel every inch of that in his ass.

From the eager look on Crimson's face, he wasn't worried. He reminded Mick of a puppy, eager for his master's hand to pet him, rub his belly. Crimson's butt even twitched as if he were wagging his tail.

Part of Mick felt left out, and then Crimson tipped his head back, then leaning forward, he lapped a drop of pre-come off the tip of Mick's cock.

Mick watched in amazement as Crimson smiled as if quietly pleased with himself, then turned to Devon. He slid his hand across Devon's thigh. Devon stopped and let the other man caress him, spreading his legs a little to give him access. The shy smile once again formed on Crimson's lips, but Mick didn't believe the innocence in those eyes any longer. The damn kid was seducing both of them.

Crimson wrapped his fingers around Devon's cock, sliding his hand up and down in smooth strokes.

Fuck, they were hot. Crimson's pale-blond hair against Devon's tan skin. That nagging part of Mick's mind told him to bow out. This time it was Devon who drew him back. He dragged his gaze away from Crimson and met Mick's stare. A spark he hadn't seen in Devon's eyes since the two of them had tried to fuck flared.

Crimson leaned in closer and buried his nose at the base of Devon's cock, drawing in a deep breath.

Mick swallowed the lump in his throat and couldn't resist another meeting with Devon's stare. His wide eyes mirrored Mick's shock. Where the hell had their mild-mannered keyboardist gone? Instead, this sexy, confident creature seemed to be seducing them both. He must have licked or kissed Devon's cock because Devon grunted. He slapped his hand on Mick's shoulder as if his knees were wobbling and he needed the extra support.

Crimson drew back, sitting once again on his heels. The pose should have been submissive, but the wicked smile curving those soft lips made it clear who was in charge of this little scenario.

"What's next, baby?" Mick asked.

The smile on Crimson's face got wider, and a hint of wickedness appeared in that eager grin.

"In my dream, you're in my mouth and Devon's fucking me."

"You've been dreaming about this?"

Crimson's cheeks turned red but he didn't look away from Mick's stare.

"Well, we shouldn't disappoint the kid," Devon drawled. He raised his chin, directing Mick to the piano bench. "Get comfortable."

Used to Devon being in charge, Mick shrugged and followed the command, draping himself casually across the piano bench and spreading his legs wide. Crimson crawled across the small space, hips swaying, drawing Mick's attention to Crimson's ass. When Mick glanced up, he noticed Devon staring at the exact same place.

The distraction of Crimson's butt didn't last long for Mick. The smaller man eased his way between Mick's thighs. In one smooth, practiced move, he kissed the head of Mick's cock, slurping just the tip into his mouth before he drew back. As if he knew Mick watched, Crimson ran his tongue along his lips as if wanting to capture the taste of pre-come.

"Yum."

Breath caught in Mick's throat as Crimson opened his mouth and gulped the first few inches of Mick's cock into his mouth. Mick tipped his head back even as he curled his fingers around the edge of the piano bench, holding himself in place as Crimson pushed a little deeper, until the head of Mick's cock tapped the back of his throat.

Crimson drew back, sucking as he retreated. Fuck, it was too soon to come but it had been a long time since anyone had given his dick this much attention. Holding himself still so he didn't startle his lover, Mick forced his lungs to expand in slow, rhythmic breaths.

Lost in his own sensations, he almost missed when Devon moved close to the piano. Devon tipped his head to the left as he watched, his gaze locked on Crimson's mouth sliding up and down Mick's prick.

Mick dug his fingernails into the soft wood and held on, fighting the urge to thrust his dick deeper into Crimson's mouth. The kid definitely wasn't a

virgin, even so, Mick didn't know how much experience he had and didn't want to break the mood by choking his brand-new lover.

A low moan rumbled from the side. Mick's head dropped to the right and he stared at Devon... staring at them, hand wrapped around his cock, eyes locked on Crimson's mouth and Mick's prick.

Slowly, Devon jacked his shaft up and down.

"Stop." Mick couldn't believe the word had shot from his mouth, not when it might pull Crimson off his cock. Crimson lifted his head, his lips red and glistening with saliva. He met Mick's stare with a look that screamed if Mick said one wrong word, the kid would retreat forever. "Not you, baby," Mick reassured him. He stroked his hand across Crimson's short blond hair. "I just didn't want D to come before he'd had a chance to fuck your sweet ass."

Crimson blinked and looked over at Devon, his stare almost accusing. "You weren't going to do that, were you?"

Mick squished his lips together to stop from laughing. Damn, somehow shy little Crimson had taken control. Devon shook his head and took the three steps he needed to get back to Crimson's ass.

The *snick* of the lube bottle opening seemed to echo around the room and Mick waited.

Surely Crimson would start sucking again now that Devon was clearly getting him ready. But no...

Devon reached behind Crimson, just out of Mick's sight line, although he could imagine what was happening by the way Crimson arched his body, and the bliss on his face.

The unseen action tempted him—Devon's hand pumping in and out of Crimson. Devon paused, and Mick knew he was adding another finger. Tension zipped through Crimson's body and he closed his eyes.

"Too much, baby?" Mick tightened his grip on Crimson's hair.

Crimson shook his head within the constraints of Mick's hold.

"I like the burn." He turned and kissed the inside of Mick's wrist. That sexy little ass rocked back and Mick groaned, imagining how that hole would feel wrapped around his cock.

“Damn it, D, finish him up already,” Mick grouched. “I’m going to come just watching you two.”

Crimson’s head snapped up and a pout curled his lower lip, making Mick ache to be sliding back into this mouth. “Don’t you dare,” Crimson commanded.

Devon looked up and he stared at Mick. The words were silent, but Mick understood each one. Somehow, they’d become Crimson’s bitches.

Mick shrugged. What the hell. At least he was going to get to come in the mouth he’d been fantasizing about for months—and get to watch Devon fuck Crimson’s ass. All in all, it was going to be one hell of an afternoon... if Devon would just get a move on.

“Come on, man.” Mick reached over, grabbed one of the condoms and tossed it at Devon. “Fuck him so we can all get off.” Because he was pretty damn sure he wasn’t going any farther until Crimson got his ass fucked.

Devon tore open the condom and rolled it down his shaft.

Mick couldn’t look away. He’d always kind of dreamed of Devon’s cock, and seeing it, hard and slicked up, ready to fuck—damn. Still, this was for Crimson.

A laugh tickled the back of Mick’s throat. Right. He might explain it away later by saying they were doing it for Crimson but Mick knew—he wanted this.

So did Devon by the hungry look in his eyes, as he lined up his dick with Crimson’s hole. Crimson swung around, his lips an inch from Mick’s cock while Devon pushed in.

Crimson’s eyes fluttered in fast little blinks, and his grip on Mick’s thighs tightened almost to the point of pain. A heartbeat later, the tiny pinpricks from his nails eased. And Crimson took a breath.

“You okay?” Mick asked. Damn, he felt like all he was doing was watching out for Crimson, who clearly didn’t need to be protected. Except... he did. The soft light in his eyes reached into Mick’s chest and squeezed his heart.

The right side of Crimson's mouth pulled up into a smile. He leaned forward, taking Mick's cock deep, almost to the back of his throat before he retreated, pulling completely off Mick's shaft. The loss of the sexy suction made Mick's head spin, but within seconds it was back—slow, steady sucks, teasing and tempting—just not enough to make him come.

He relaxed and told himself to enjoy it. He had a feast of sexy male flesh before him. Mick couldn't decide which he wanted to watch more—Crimson's mouth on his cock, or Devon pounding into Crimson's ass. In the end, he had the best of both. Devon pumped his hips forward, driving Crimson onto Mick's cock. The deep penetration was perfect.

Devon thrust again—and clearly hit Crimson's sweet spot because the man groaned. The sound sent wicked vibrations through Mick's cock. Unable to remain passive any longer, he gripped Crimson's hair and rocked his dick in and out of that sweet mouth. And Crimson took him.

He glanced up and noticed Devon wasn't moving. He was watching. And touching, his hands sliding down Crimson's slim back. "That's it, pretty boy. Suck that cock. Show us how much you can take."

The sexual commands seemed to be just what Crimson wanted—or needed. He sucked harder, trying to please them both.

Mick pulsed up, the sweet suction on his cock taking him to the edge quickly. Part of him wanted this to last but then he remembered they had two weeks before the plane came to pick them up. If he had anything to say about it, this wouldn't be the last time Crimson sucked him off.

Mick concentrated on the sight of that mouth stretched around his dick. His balls drew up.

"Harder, Crimson. He's almost there." Devon nudged his hips forward. The movement sent the tip of Mick's cock into Crimson's throat, and damn... the kid swallowed, taking him even deeper.

Mick couldn't contain his shout. "Once more like that."

Devon did his part, fucking Crimson's ass with enough force to urge Mick's cock into another deep thrust. The subtle pressure on the head of his shaft was too much for Mick. He cried out and came, pouring his come down

Crimson's throat. The kid took it all, sucking as he eased back, as if he wanted to drain Mick of all his come.

Devon moaned. Mick didn't know if it was the sight of him coming or if Crimson's ass had clenched when he'd filled the younger man's mouth. Didn't matter. Devon was clearly done waiting. He drew back and started to fuck Crimson in earnest.

Mick eased the younger man away, letting his cock slip from Crimson's mouth. Not that he didn't love the attention—even after coming, when his cock was a bit too sensitive—but he was a little worried about Crimson's teeth as Devon got going.

Devon gripped Crimson's hips, holding him in place as he fucked him, hard. Mick's own ass ached in sympathy. Crimson seemed to love it. The strokes were long and deep, and every time Devon hit Crimson's gland, the younger man would moan and shiver.

He might have felt left out if it hadn't been for the way Crimson clung to him, fingers digging into Mick's thighs, hot breath panting against his skin. Mick did everything he could to support the young man, touching him, telling him how sexy he looked with Devon's dick in his ass.

"Fuck!" Devon slammed into Crimson with enough force to make Mick wince. The other man didn't even flinch, just moaned and opened his mouth to gasp in a harsh breath.

"Can you come like this?" Mick asked, rubbing Crimson on his shoulder. Crimson shook his head but he didn't stop moving his hips.

"Close but—" The breathless words fell across Mick's thighs. "I need—"

"D, give him a hand," Mick commanded. True, he could have released Crimson and knelt beside him to wrap his hand around the man's cock, but he decided he didn't want to let go of the sweet body leaning heavily on his.

Devon looked up and glared at Mick as if pissed off by the interruption. Or maybe it was because Mick had given him an order and he hated to take orders from anyone, especially Mick.

But Devon released his hand on Crimson's hip and reached around. Almost immediately, he lost the rhythm, twisting to the side and almost tipping over. "Fuck!"

Mick bit his lips to stop from laughing. “Sorry. You keep doing what you’re doing.” He tapped Devon’s arm. “I got it.” He bent over, draping his torso over Crimson’s back and reaching beneath his body. He wrapped his fingers around Crimson’s shaft, squeezing just enough that he heard the change in Crimson’s breath. “Fuck him,” Mick commanded and this time, Devon obeyed. He thrust forward, sending Crimson’s dick through Mick’s fist. Oh yeah. That was perfect. Devon might be fucking him—Mick would make him come.

It didn’t take much. A few strokes and Crimson cried out, his nails digging into Mick’s flesh as he spilled across the old carpet. Seconds later, Devon moaned and drove into Crimson’s ass one final time, holding himself deep as he rode out his orgasm.

Mick dropped his head down, his cheek against the base of Crimson’s spine, exhaustion overwhelming him. A soft kiss brushed his shoulder and Devon skimmed his hands along Mick’s sides, as if he just needed to touch.

He didn’t know how long they rested there, a strange pillar of bodies supporting one another, until the heat—of the room, of their skin pressed against each other—became too much and Mick had to straighten up.

Devon eased his hips back, slipping his cock from Crimson’s hole. They both groaned and sagged to the side as if the connection between them had been the only thing keeping them upright. Crimson leaned his head against Mick’s thigh and closed his eyes, his lips open and chest billowing in short, fast breaths. Devon leaned in and pressed a kiss on Crimson’s shoulder.

The younger man smiled. He looked practically angelic—except for the red, slightly puffy lips and the scent of sex in the air. He opened his eyes and slipped his hand behind Devon’s neck, drawing him forward. Mick watched from his perch on the piano bench. Devon seemed to hesitate for just a moment, then leaned in, meeting Crimson’s waiting mouth.

Mick couldn’t look away. The sexual sight before him made his prick struggle to get hard again. It wouldn’t take much.

Devon eased back and ran his tongue along the inside of his lips.

“He tastes good, doesn’t he?” Crimson asked and Mick realized they were talking about him—the taste of Mick’s come lingering in Crimson’s mouth.

Devon nodded and placed another quick kiss on Crimson's lips before pushing himself up to stand and walked out of the room. "Did I say something wrong?" Crimson asked.

"No." Mick slid his fingers through Crimson's blond hair. "He's fine." At least Mick hoped so. Crimson would be crushed if Devon rejected him now. And Mick realized he didn't want to go back to the way things were. No, he and Devon hadn't—technically—fucked, but they'd gotten closer than they had in years. Who knows? Mick thought. *Maybe I'm mature enough now to let D top me.* The idea didn't seem as frightening as it had almost a decade ago, when they'd both been trying to prove who was more manly.

Devon strolled back into the living room, still naked, condom gone, a damp washcloth in his hand. He crouched down and ran the cloth between Crimson's ass cheeks, wiping away the traces of their fucking. Crimson blushed and pressed his cheek against Mick's thigh. Devon tossed the rag toward the doorway and dropped to the floor. He picked up the music and draped it across his lap.

Mick dragged his head up. "You seriously expect to work? Now?" He couldn't keep the laughter out of his voice.

The edge of Devon's mouth kicked up. "What can I say? I'm feeling inspired."

Crimson pushed his body upright as if energy suddenly shot through him. "You know, so am I." He stood up, his sculpted chest right in front of Mick's face. Crimson bent down and covered Mick's mouth in a kiss. Startled, it took him a moment to respond. Then Mick wrapped his hand around Crimson's neck, holding him in place as he drove his tongue into the other man's mouth. He could still taste the faintest hint of his own come combined with the unique flavor of Crimson.

Crimson jerked back, his breath coming fast and hard once again. "Don't forget where we left off," he whispered. Then he straightened up and fluttered his hands toward Mick. "Get out of my spot," he said when Mick didn't move fast enough.

Chuckling, Mick pushed himself off the piano bench and let Crimson sit down. The guy's hands immediately hit the keys and ran through the melody

they'd been working on, this time with a new tone beneath it. Mick was a self-taught musician, so he couldn't tell if it was a minor or major tone change, but it added ominous power to the notes.

"Fuck, that's it." Mick grabbed his guitar and sat down on the couch, trying to match the sounds. Devon hummed and sung along. It didn't quite blend even if the base was there.

After about twenty minutes, Crimson hit a final note and they let silence settle for a moment.

Slowly he spun in his seat and draped his arms backward across the keyboard. Mick leaned over him, palm against the piano, peering at the music as if it would reveal the mystery. They were so close. Mick could almost taste it. Something, some little fucking thing was still missing.

"Maybe getting fucked unblocked you, babe," Devon said.

Crimson's lips curled into a smile and he looked down at Devon, still sitting on the floor. "It's almost there. Maybe I need to be fucked again and again until we get it right."

Mick's cock twitched. It had been enough time and he hadn't had a chance at Crimson's ass.

"Maybe we should work naked from now on," Devon said.

"We'd never get anything done." Crimson stroked the back of his fingers across Mick's cut abs. "Too distracting." His voice sounded sleepy and sexual—and no stuttering.

Mick kept that observation to himself. No need to make the kid self-conscious.

"I definitely feel cooler, though." Mick straightened up, and damn if he didn't feel a bit of a breeze. He looked out the window. It had been bright sunshine when they'd started. Now, it looked like the sun was setting. They hadn't worked that long.

He walked to the couch and put his knee on it, leaning over and peeking out the window. The long shadows he was expecting were gone. Before he could call the other two over so they'd have some warning that the world appeared to be ending, the skies opened up.

It came on quick. A few drops then a downpour. Water pooled on the dry ground but didn't sit for long before it sank into the soil. Raindrops pounded the metal roof, sounding like the entire cast from *Stomp!* doing a routine.

“What the hell?” Devon pushed up from the ground.

Crimson jumped out of his seat and ran to the window. “Wow, look at that.”

The three of them stood there, watching.

“I bet that would feel so good,” Crimson murmured.

“Let's go.” Mick grabbed his hand and started toward the door. Crimson held back. “No one's going to see us. We're in the middle of nowhere.”

As if he didn't want to leave anyone behind, Crimson took Devon's hand and pulled him along too. They stepped onto the porch. Mick hesitated for one heartbeat and then ran into the yard. The cold rain fell in sheets, so good against his hot skin.

Moments later his friends were with him. The dirt yard immediately turned to mud and they danced around. It wasn't graceful or rhythmic, they just leapt about, savoring the sensation of movement without sweating. The rain seemed to have scared the mosquitoes away for a brief period. He didn't know how long it would last, and he wanted to enjoy every moment of it.

Mick spun around, his foot getting caught on his other heel and he fell. Instinct took over and he grabbed whatever happened to be near to stop his earthly plummet. His hands latched onto Devon's shoulders and they both hit the ground. Mud splattered around their backs.

“What the—” Devon's shout was drowned out by Crimson's laughter.

“Woohoo! Naked mud wrestling! I love it!”

Mick raised his head and met Devon's eyes. The laughter pouring through that sexy green stare reminded him of when they first started—the energy, the electricity in Devon.

A dangerous glint filled those green eyes and he grabbed Mick by the shoulders, pulling him close. Every dominant thought that Mick possessed told him to resist, but instincts he hadn't expected—ones that might have developed as he'd gotten just a little bit older—wouldn't let him move away.

“Let the kid have what he wants,” Devon whispered, though Mick knew from the look in his friend’s eyes that it was so much more than that. Mick nodded. That seemed to be enough. Devon wrapped his leg around Mick’s hip, pulling them close, their groins rubbing hard against each other. Every pulse was like a new jolt to Mick’s cock.

The world shifted and Mick found himself on his back, Devon above him. In their late teens/early twenties they’d tried this and almost killed each other.

Mick didn’t know if it was maturity or love or just the desire to give his best friend what he wanted... but Mick had no fight left in him. He took a breath and let his muscles relax. The mud squished around his bare skin. He didn’t care.

Devon pushed up, sliding his cock between Mick’s legs. They were both hard again. Mick licked his lips and swallowed, bracing himself, knowing he would take whatever Devon wanted to give.

Bright green eyes stared down at him as Devon’s body covered his. The rain was relentless, pounding down, creating a protective bubble around their break from reality.

For one brief moment, the world seemed to stand still.

Devon hesitated... then he moved, diving down, his lips meeting Mick’s in a hot, opened-mouthed kiss.

They still struggled for dominance. It wasn’t in Mick’s nature to completely give up control, but damn...

Devon slipped his knees between Mick’s and pushed up, spreading him wide. The hard thick cock that had so recently fucked Crimson’s ass slid cross Mick’s groin.

“Damn, you’re amazing,” Devon whispered against Mick’s lips.

Mick drew back. “What about Crimson?”

“He’s amazing too.” Devon kissed him, hard cock sliding against hard cock. “I just...” The words trailed off but the steady pulse of Devon’s cock didn’t stop.

Mick couldn’t resist sliding his hands down Devon’s ass, cupping those firm hard mounds, pulling him tight against him. They moved in unison,

Devon's hand curling around their cocks, providing enough pressure as they rocked against each other. Every stroke sent a new delicious jolt through Mick's cock—the rain and Devon's hot kisses blending in as background noise—until he cried out, spilling his come across Devon's stomach. The burst of seed seemed to trigger Devon's orgasm and he groaned, the sound making Mick smile.

For a moment, they hung there—semen coating their skin, rain pelting down on them, breath pumping violently between them.

Mick looked down. His cock was getting soft, but so was Devon's.

“You okay?” Devon asked.

“Yeah but what about...” He nudged Devon aside and looked to where Crimson had been standing. “Where'd he go?”

“I'm sure he's fine,” Devon said as rolled off Mick.

“You don't think seeing us together freaked him out?”

Devon looked down at Mick. “The kid just seduced the both of us. I seriously doubt a kiss and some rub and tug is going to freak him out.”

“Yeah but—” Mick worried about Crimson and...

Music floated out the open window. Devon froze for one single heartbeat.

“That's it.” He pushed himself up, grabbing Mick's hand as he moved, pulling him along as they stumbled back into the house. They stood in the doorway and listened until Crimson finally stopped playing.

He turned and looked at them, his smile lighting up the room. “I fixed it,” he declared.

“How—?”

The sweet blond shook his head. “I don't know. I saw the two of you kiss and you looked so pretty, fucking and covered in mud. It—” He shrugged. “It was just there.” His hands hit the keyboard again, in a curious mix of rock and... damn, countrified soul. Powerful but sexy, making Mick think of tight asses in blue jeans. The pulse made Mick ache for his bass. He grabbed his T-shirt and wiped the come and some of the mud off his stomach before picking up his guitar and joining Crimson's sound.

As if the rain had washed away the strain, Devon tipped his head back and started to hum, then sing—a strange mixture of words that somehow fit together, strong and clear, weaving between the notes Crimson played.

The bass line floated through Mick's head and he started to tap out a beat. Beneath it all was a sensual throb that hadn't been there before... as if fucking had truly unblocked them all. When it finally blended, when it melded into a sound they couldn't forget, they ended it.

Silence swirled through the room but it wasn't uncomfortable or eerie. More like a breath—drawing in fresh air, pushing out the bad.

Mick looked at Devon then down to Crimson. The kid's cheeks were once again pink turning to red. It wasn't embarrassment that caused the brightening—it was pleasure and sheer joy.

Mick tipped his head back and laughed. All they'd needed was a little sex and a little rain to create the perfect sound.

THE END

Author Bio

Tielle St. Clare is the author of some 35+ erotic romances, ranging from sexy fairy tales to dragons and werewolves to a cursed wedding dress. Her books cross the spectrum but recent works focus on m/m/f and m/m love stories (with a lot of sex thrown in!). In her most recent story Fire Engine, a game of Truth or Dare puts Linc in a cursed wedding gown that might just lead him to the men of his dreams.

Contact & Media Info

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OIL AND WATER

By Goesta Struve-Dencher

Photo Description

A possibly naked young man, brown hair, close-cropped beard, sensual lips, handsome but presents as a geek. Intently staring, though with unfocussed, slightly crossed eyes. Adjusting his thick glasses. He is dripping wet with drops of water surrounding him as if floating in space—a frozen moment.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Why the heck is this geek all wet? And why is he looking at me like that. Someone, please, tell him to stop or else...

Sincerely,

Andra

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Sub-genre: erotic romance with elements of paranormal fantasy

Tags: paranormal, masseur, surfers, disabilities, illusionism, geeks/nerds, humorous, psychic ability

Content warnings: rampant gay sexuality, apparent non-consensual queer arousal of a straight person, profanity, blasphemy, pornographic use of electricity and concrete poetry, violating the laws of physics and human anatomy.

Word count: 20,442

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Dedication

For Jimmy, who inspires my life
and
For Andra, who inspired this story.

OIL AND WATER

-A humouresque massage fantasy-

By Goesta Struve-Dencher

An “Originary Sonata” (Humoresque)

Composed by Goesta Struve-Dencher

Performed by Yehoshua Ben Khaddouri (Tenore di forza) and Enzo Leone
Ferrara (Spinto tenor)

Introduction

Einleitung

First Movement

Rondo

Second Movement

Largo

Third Movement

Scherzo

Trio

Scherzo

Fourth Movement

Presto

Ablösung

Kadenz

Schluss

*To be performed as hot droplets of scented, multi-coloured oils being poured into crystalline turquoise, tropical ocean, infinite horizons below blazing twin chocolate suns gazing down from a heavy pink sky, and of course in the spirit of **Merz**.*

Einleitung

Towering bare-chested and glorious before the naked, dripping young man, the Surfin' Messiah shook his long, trailing dreadlocks and heaved a way-too-sexy sigh. He gave the impression of a huge and sleek, barely containable stallion that, having been spooked by some passing spectre, couldn't decide whether to bite, mount or bolt. The young thing in its path probably should have fled any which way. An ungainly, wet, scruffy foal, it didn't stand a chance. But, from instinct or sloppy breeding, it passively stood scant feet from the thoroughbred beast and just wobbled a bit. Having perchance gleaned the formidable nature of the opponent, the lumpy, soft boy blinked several times through his densely dewed, tragically thick lenses, while steeling himself for the encounter. He bravely emphasized the one impressive part of his physique. He got generously—massively—hard.

This is going to be a teeny weenie bit complicated, thought the one who answered to Jericho. He gave the vague man-boy a once-over. **Ok, not teeny**, he revised. **He's not even seeing me, but he obviously knows I'm in the room, given away by the tall darkish handsome cloud taking up most of the space.**

The sculpted giant sighed. **There's nothing for it but to get to work.** Jericho was a peripatetic billboard of masculine virility, but he carried it with an easy, self-mocking arrogance that paradoxically reflected, to anyone who knew him, a deep humility among his many gifts. He was more at home lightly skimming across water than amongst his disciples on land. Rarely sighted in his sandals, and just having shed his (genuine, hand-made) Hawaiian shirt to protect it from grease stains, he was wearing only crisp orange cut-offs. But humble or not, he was obviously, once again, having his expected effect on people of various genders.

And so the very hour, three times a week, and now out of the blue, four, that the one man secretly dreaded and the other fantasized about incessantly, was at hand. Enzo's wellness hour.

Rondo

As soon as he clued into his state of arousal, Enzo blushed like a young Puggle—in the way only a carpet-wetting puppy manages to blush. This one was still blithely watering the expensive mauve pile, having just stepped over the threshold of the tiny built-in shower closet. With exceeding care, Enzo edged his currently useless glasses toward the narrow teak sideboard. His rare degenerative ocular defect had only recently and by chance been diagnosed, during the first rigorous medical examination of his life. Shortly before the appointment, Enzo had found himself, to his surprise, the newest and youngest member of this peculiar company and thus of its excellent health plan. It was far too late to effect any reversal of his eventual total loss of sight; all they could do for him was to delay the inevitable by a matter of months. Otherwise, he'd been found, apart from slight malnutrition and dormant asthma, to be in decent health if not shape.

This had been a relief to everyone, not just his employer. They had all been worrying themselves sleepless, knowing the profound dangers of the careless, desultory existence he'd been leading in the streets and cruising bars of Rome, from which their master had rescued him. The mysterious head of this operation had taken one look at the homeless-looking boy across a busy street and had emphatically stated he'd be the perfect candidate for the vacancy. Later that evening, without realizing it, Enzo had been put to a test and had passed with flying colours. The next morning, the team had left town, stronger by one most unusual young man.

As a happy by-effect of his vastly improved diet, newfound sense of purpose and concomitant heavy workload, Enzo's girth and wan, pimply complexion were in retreat and he was even glowing a little. Both Enzo's body and soul were finally being nourished as carefully and kindly as every person here knew how, because they had absolute faith in their boss. About someone like Enzo, he was unfailingly correct in his judgment. And because, truth be told, most of the team members working away on the current project while getting the new guy up to speed had been in a similar spot once. Usually around the time that a strange, dark large man had suddenly shown up from

nowhere and offered to take them away to a better place. So they all knew that Enzo was very, very special, though few quite knew why.

Jericho began preparing the items that were required for the upcoming exercise in futility, to wit, ministering to what really ailed Enzo apart from his headache—and from his damn eyes that, to Jericho’s dismay, had conclusively failed to respond to anything he had tried.

Enzo was towelling himself down. His backside was modestly exposed to his stunning ministrant, due to Enzo’s effort to hide, belatedly, his considerable excitement up front. In a couple of moments, Jericho would see all of him anyway, whether he wanted to or not. Meanwhile, the healer rubbed warm lubricating oil into his massive paws and idly perused the two large velutinous ovoids thus innocently presented for his consideration.

Enzo Leone, Jericho was convinced, was one of those rarest of creatures, a genuine, oblivious sweetheart. As well as an unlikely but potential gay heartthrob. Sure, he was ungainly and unkempt right now, with a nest-like, vaguely brownish mop and a struggling, unkempt beard. But to claim that Jericho was exceedingly good at making out what lay beneath people’s surfaces would have been an effrontery. It was his bred-in-the-bone *modus vivendi*, let alone his bread and butter. Jericho felt quite certain that, from deep within the stubborn neglect of Enzo’s own person, a handsome, brilliant and profoundly loving fledgling was aching to launch himself into the great blue sky. To achieve it, Enzo just needed to want to live a little. This was yet another subject in which Jericho prided himself on his expertise; he was nothing if not a born bon vivant. To his numerous disciples, he was *the* sex god. Sadly, much as he adored the new boy, Enzo was not the morsel for stimulating Jericho’s own prodigious, though blandly one-sided, appetites.

“*Prego*,” Enzo mumbled disconsolately in a corner of the miniature spa. This lovely setting really ought to have been much more conducive to his wellness, since he himself had helped redesign it not long ago. Through the softly lit space floated soothing, distant echoes of sea birds, a suggestion of warm breezes, and the slow rhythms of waves lapping against the foot of a

cliff far below. An extravagant dual ventilation system had been installed in the entire facility—mainly for the benefit of Enzo’s delicate lungs—and everyone was breathing easier and more pleasurably these days. It explained why one could actually smell the mixture of warm fields and cool brine being conjured by the soundscape. Not just the air but also the idyllic natural tones were being piped in from above the ground, the latter via sensitive all-weather microphones.

Subtle indirect lighting, dialled to a ludicrous erotic pink specifically requested by Enzo, was recessed above the cornice under the pillowed ceiling, and the cleansing, musky scents of various oils warming up in tiny cauldrons suspended above flickering tea candles permeated the fresh, warm air.

All this clever effort made the tiny space feel much airier, and at the same time even cosier, than it used to. Incongruously, its two almost cramped inhabitants were hidden far from the world’s eyes, locked away a hundred feet or so underground.

Under that bumbling puppy-dog guise, Enzo was rather *sly*. He’d meticulously conjured a pink, simmering love nest,

Wellness Chamber. *Jerk.*

just for the two of them, under the guise of “improving” on the previous stark functionality of the room. It was one among a series of such reinforced concrete-framed cubes along the narrow corridor; the others were replete with stacked bunk beds and survival gear. Perfect for, say, a handful of paranoiacs to outlast world war three, sooner or later, as efficiently as possible. The facility occupied a system of ancient natural caves in the limestone bowels of the island. The rocky outcrop that housed the whole complex fell off sharply towards the Mediterranean, little more than a stone’s throw away. They were thus in effect ensconced in a secret little paradise, a clever collaboration between human and natural genius.

In fairness to the boss, who was merely perpetually cautious (as if something even bigger and hungrier was going to step on his tail any second), they were during non-working hours being coddled in huge, lovely accommodations on the surface. The spartan quarters next door were merely indicative of plan C.

Or F, as in fubar. Just in case.

Enzo had immediately descended upon the opportunity to exponentially upgrade the wellness area, using the latest ambient electronics. It was the first thing he'd worked on, secretly—only the boss had been in on it (**sneaky bastard, saving his own hide**), since he'd naturally been footing the bill—after Enzo's initiation into the inner circle. **Not quite all the way in**, as Jericho himself was hoping to stay today; only two men were that deeply *in* at the moment and two other individuals, complicit in their awareness thereof. But both Jericho and his employer suspected that, eventually, Enzo would have to be completely filled in. He was simply too talented not to figure out how to *perform*. He would soon trip, headlong, while sporting an innocent, delighted grin, into a huge, steaming vat of *truth*.

And paradise

Will crumble

To ashes

Jericho shook himself. **Fluff off, Messiah. Working here.**

The new-age healer had no real problem with Enzo's habitual, rampant hard-ons during these sessions. It wasn't as if he'd never seen one before.

Ol' Jay Kat's not so relaxed about it right now.

The kid couldn't help himself. His colleague was plainly the epitome and prime mould of a beach-bum demigod, from whom others were wretchedly imitated and badly cast. Jericho's skin was sublime bronze to others' plaster of Paris. The working drawings had been executed by a virtuoso hand in languidly rippling, seductively firm but pliant curves. In the dimensions of the finished masterpiece, these lines defined deeply carved, elegant speedways hugging a smooth undulating landscape, in contrast to lesser men's rutted, errant donkey tracks.

Given the chance to admire him at length, one desired to take one's almost—*almost*, if one were forced to consider a trade-in—equally sexy Jag E-Type OTS—incidentally, according to another Enzo F, “the most beautiful car ever made”—and just *drive*, for *days on end*, over those regal hills and along

those abundant valleys. The ground would slide by like velvet under one's expensive custom rubber. Sooner or later one might encounter on one's journey one of four great forests planted upon this otherwise pristine land, or one or another long stretch of delightful underbrush: the first thrived among the undulant plains of his lusty abdomen, while the second was hidden deep within a narrow, fecund canyon.

Pervy classic-car nut.

Follow either generously marked path and it should guide you towards one of two thickly-rimmed, near-circular oases that emerge like tempting wells to refresh the travel-weary. One of these, sheer, bottomless, shall seem to desire to suck you down into its murky depths. The other shallower pool many will have played in already before you, and it will frequently be warmed by ardent, moist breezes. But that other, more mysterious funnel, alas, no man has ever spelunked, or ever will.

About time we got to that *pretty important* plot point. Jay doesn't cave. Claustrophobic. Well. Okay, I'm *in a cave now*, but, like, I'm not a cave for none. Wising up to the lay of the land here. Poor choice of words. You're the *wordy* guy. Meanwhile oil's getting hot and my client, hotter. I mean, he's *sweating* and *uncomfortable*. Hurry it along, would ya' for the Messiah's sake.

This is the story, in brief, of another lone wanderer, though this one was rarely alone. When he had been a child, Yehoshua Ben Khaddouri's dark skin and afroesque mane had caused many, among them his own father, secretly to wonder where he'd really breezed in from, into the large, *Haredi* family that had been settled for generations, proudly but precariously, deep inside the West Bank. Familial relations had become further strained when Yehoshua's ebulliently sensual nature, like his hair, could no longer be restricted to horsing around in the *yeshiva*, and had detonated onto the larger community. Thereafter he'd rapidly matured into an irrepressible young man who seemed to be either blithely testing his considerable strength or else declaring himself utterly contrarian to his native environment.

Abruptly one day, Jay Kat (*nom de plume*) had found himself officially without a family and in irrevocable exile. He therefore, endowed only with natural enthusiasm, set out to find another one in the beckoning *out there*, far from the constrictions that prohibited further tolerance of “that *niddah* spawn.” Perhaps he had dimly sensed a need for his own separate peace, and was searching for *his* personal *kehuna*: some priesthood of like-minded souls who could show him that he belonged anywhere at all. But while gifted with boundless energy, spelling never was his forte, and neither was focus. So quite soon he became intensely distracted from his noble quest.

Wherever he alit for a short while, Yehoshua tended to seek out the company of beaches, always the ones with the largest swells. Nothing seemed to scare him; instead, he laughed all the time, as if born to celebrate life itself. Always the sun shone out from his comely person, which warmed not just the hearts of those around him. He should have realized, seeing the effect he had on men and women alike, lighting them up from within with his touch, that he was meant for more, though what he gave and received was much more already than most ever dared to desire for themselves. Slowly he discovered that he, himself, was *feeling* those who enjoyed hanging out with him, feeling *him* feeling them... It was uncanny, complicated and surely wondrous, but Jericho (as he'd started to call himself then), was not yet given to self-reflection. Except to rather modestly—but not very firmly—brush off all the attention, with a quip that he must be a “Surfin’ Messiah or somethin’.”

Indeed, he had soon learned to handle his boards most excellently. However, his cultural roots, itinerant existence and limited academic interests might excuse his somewhat eccentric take on the mysterious, complex lingo of his peers. Freely he gave of his other great talent as well, spreading affection (**Ahem.**); but making love, he only found rewarding in the company of women. (**Much appreciated.**) Clusters clung to him at a time, as grapes to the healthy vine. (**You’re a bit of all right dude; sorry I snarked at you earlier...**) So gathering myriads of maenads required very little effort. Jericho was not given to exerting himself, except in his dual areas of expertise, surfing and fu—(**Point made. Moving on.**)... Without a cent to his name, he existed simply but comfortably on his beach. A need for constant company, one suspects, was the main reason for his athletic excesses. Left to himself, he’d

have had to think; thinking, wonder; wondering, inquire; inquiring, elicit an answer. And he had no clue who to ask, or what, or even why bother.

One day, somewhere along the long crescent of his aurum, azure-fitted summer, a mysterious, lone man did come along.

(Peculiar, how this occurs so frequently in old tales about the quests of young, comely men, and how rarely it turns out to be instead a garrulous, diaphanous, leggy—)

I don't like your tone. I have long legs too, you know. The better to up and vamoose with. Man of the open air. Getting sticky in here.

It took one unique *man* to show Jericho where he belonged and what he really was. They encountered each other at Laniakea.

The glistening boy was roused from dozing on the hot sand by a sudden drop in temperature. A huge, squarish, raven silhouette had eclipsed all the sky, yet in descending upon him it glided with delicate grace. The figure seemed to hover while it examined Jericho. Then the bulky, elegant man of indeterminate age shed his bespoke, feather-light jacket of deep charcoal silk and...

How do you notice all those little details? My peepers were glued to four pairs of bodalicious...

...

Yeah, yeah back to work. You know I'm stalling, don't you. Of course you do.

...arranged himself among them. He nudged the leggy, pouting girls politely but adamantly and forever out of the story, ruined his beautiful suit, and *told* Jericho.

Thus it came to pass that a hedonistic, reckless, lazy young roamer, then on the cusp of twenty-one, learned that something in his beautiful sunshiny life had been missing all along. He hadn't been able to put his finger on it until that instant he was drawn into the man's eyes, who had surely flown, in a blink, from impossibly far, so clearly arctic were the bright moons of his irises that had displaced Jericho's sun. Not even the heat on Oahu that day had

melted them yet, or possibly ever would. The boy shivered. *Broken*. Jericho saw in those eyes that the golden clockwork toy without a watch, the perpetual Hermes, the laughing Don Juan, was damaged inside.

He discovered later that evening that he was meant to be a *kahuna haha*. One who can diagnose and heal much that ailed humanity, through the simple magic of his touch. One who would not be complete in his purpose until he learned to love well, not just plentifully. Much later he realized, by inference: It had taken one broken lover to know another. And it would take yet another to heal the first.

I misspelled one lousy letter. And I am, nominally, Jewish. Hena-huna, big deal.

In the decade that followed, Jericho started paying more attention to what was truly important in life.

Nowadays, of course, Jericho worked—nominally—for the (**Cussed boss-**) man, who was his closest friend and confidant. And because of those two profoundly binding commitments, it was part of his job to help fix up his colleagues, who came to him with their little, and larger, aches and pains. Working for the man was stressful and often dangerous, since it involved sharp objects, cramped spaces, split-second escapes and tricky power-tools. Pocketbooks bulging with frequent-flyer, red-eye member cards and back-crimping schedules. Months on end of spicy foods and exasperating hosts. The usual, as well as other, less usual perils that, at the time of this telling, were still to come.

Due to the peculiar brand of individual that the man seemed to adopt like strays, there were deeper pains as well. Not so recent, subcutaneous scars that you couldn't just smooth out with a gentle stroke of the tip of your thumb. Most of the time there was precious little that Jericho could do about those old injuries, because they were, in their tricky way, a vital part of the organism they had invaded. He couldn't, knew he shouldn't, eradicate them, even if sometimes, such as in Enzo's case, he dearly wanted to. But he still had to touch the patient while he ministered to more superficial complaints. All the while the deep ones hurt both doctor and patient like hell.

We are up to speed on Jericho. How does one get to know Enzo Leone Ferrara? In the six or so months after he'd left home and before his current employment, nearly all who ran into him would first inquire whether it did in fact have eyes in its head. The vague greyish-brown blot on the landscape would immediately return copious rapid-fire, non-lethal apologies, using custom Sicilianu rounds. The precise answer to one's polite query, based on one's own functioning perception of enthusiastic nodding and verbal denial, seemed to be yes and no. One might abstractedly note that the neglected-looking individual had not fashion sense enough to save his life. If one threw caution to the wind and became more curious still, out of the kindness of one's heart or from burgeoning self-interest, one might extract from him: a workable name; that he was under twenty but over eighteen; and that, as a matter of fact, he liked men just fine. If one required verbal intercourse, felt however unsatisfied by impromptu sounds and signals and preferred mumbled English over jumbled Italian, the strange boy would impress upon one that a thriving fish was ruined upon the hearth by a silly sibling.

Excuse me... that he hailed from a six-house village, including barns, such as could be found all over Sicily. Thereafter one was caught in a more or less lengthy loop of scepticism and reiteration. One eventually unearthed, provided one had lasted this far, a final morsel of available information, about his envisioned future: one day he would be a fine electrician.

In this oft-practiced manner, people found their way permanently into the heart of a shy, dorky kid from nowhere, whether they chose to remain in his company or not. Physically, he'd apparently been assembled from various leftovers. Such as baby-fat, furuncles, thumbs and felt. Or, if one had penetrated that thick layer of other crud: sugar and strawberries, chocolate sprinkles and cream.

That Enzo Leone Ferrara was the incomprehensible, astonishingly brilliant, nineteen-and-a-half year-old new chief electrical engineer of a quirky operation that specialized in entertaining people by fooling them blind.

There were *two* souls, whom Fate had done her utmost to null and void, that haunted the subterranean compound this day, and one of them was shyly

but impatiently waiting for an adventitious fourth run of the week on Jericho. The other? Well, almost since the second he'd clapped his feeble eyes on the Beast, his new master, Enzo had loved that other lone wolf with all of his vast palpitating heart. But, fully aware that they'd never, ever dance together, he'd since projected at least the physiological aspects of his veneration—in perfectly sharp focus—onto, of all people, the incorrigibly straight Jericho.

Somewhere beyond the idyll of two men gazing at each other across a massage bed, a real-life Big Bad Wolf, in an exceedingly rare but conclusive sighting, was dangerously on the prowl. This extraordinary animal behaviour was—barely—audible to Jericho. Which curdled his blood, in that he was able to make the faint noises out at all, let alone distinctly. He and Enzo were shut up tight in a chamber that had been expertly soundproofed for privacy and built to defy Armageddon. Still Jericho cringed. All a-growl and a-sowl the chimera was, out there somewhere, scouring inside the rock for a scent of the doomed goat to let scape for the quenching of its incredible wrath. The Wolf's quaking minions thanked their Fates, one by one, for being rumblingly deemed irreplaceable, though they knew they remained up to their nostrils in *merde*.

The team had been ramping up for the imminent Asian debut of “Morpheus Dawning”, but preparations had stalled while deadlines loomed. The chief engineer was tearing at her fiery red hair; the taciturn computer genius was volubly cursing in choice Unicode; the avuncular caterer scowled, safely barricaded behind his fortress of Mephistophelian baklava that everyone, normally, would bleed out for and inhale, fingerless, rather than fetch a Band-Aid from Jericho first. The boss Himself—who was as kind, queer and collected as Jericho was hot, empathic and straight...

...who was queerer, actually, than Jay was not, *were* one to compare the (**I can hear you just fine from in here.**)... a kind ruler whose habitual mien lay somewhere between that of a *Buddha* perched on his *zafu* and a scalpel immersed in liquid CO₂—*that* individual had spontaneously morphed into one enormous, black bristle intent on huffing and puffing the whole solid-bedrock place down.

Because *no* one, after all that time and money spent—burned to fuel the development of three minutes of mesmerizing fluff rather than, as the Wolf was volubly regretting, to feed a small starving country (*which nobody put it*

past him to be, albeit more quietly, doing anyway)—not one of the card-carrying geniuses had been able to make this Cowering Ass Tension actually *work*. The voracious monstrosity would gather, from now till next season *if* they were lucky, additional bags of golden dust. When complete it would be, they knew in their bones, absolutely spectacular, but not this year, and not within the greater vicinity of Shanghai, Osaka and Seoul. So they would have to figure out a *rousing finale for the show* to replace The Tower of Ascension number and preferably by yesterday. As was his wont, the Wolf was not about to recycle any of the other spectacular offerings with which Storage was stuffed to its reinforced concrete rafters, because *that* wouldn't be fair to the paying public. And they all knew too well it would be easier to design something from scratch by Thursday than to point out to the Wolf that, since they'd never actually *been* to any of these places, his arguments didn't hold a drop.

Rhomboid of baklava, they'd too quickly agreed. However, in *this* single, shocking, unheard-of instance, everyone seemed to have run fresh out of ideas. Which is why two of the unfortunates responsible for the fucking fuck-up were roasting like *luau* piglets at the foot of a ruptured volcano, while piglet number three, having fortuitously developed a migraine immediately after the umpteenth and definitively last failed rehearsal, was about to be butter-balled by Jericho. Two of their principal performers were next on Jericho's suddenly full schedule, with sprains and bruises, a bloody nose and a twisted ankle. But they were still arguing with the boss for another shot at the act. In fairness to the Beast, who was at heart the fairest of them all, it was primarily ranting about the potential fatality. The young, expert acrobat had, by a hair's actual breadth, avoided plummeting from three stories up. In the sweetest of ironies, he had been spared solely due to the eagle-eye vigilance of... Enzo, for which, Jericho had to warmly admit, he was most justly being rewarded with this unexpected treat. If only it didn't have to be at the hands of good ol' Surfer Claus.

Big picture, Jericho assessed, I'm not out *there*. I'd rather be snuggled up in a pinkly simmering little hole, with a sweet kid who has a mile-long hard-on for me that I can't really help him with. Anatomically, hell, sure,

why not. I'm open. Well, most of me. Front door. Fire exit isn't unlocked for anybody. But guys aren't any ickier than gals. Proven fact. Just a lot less exciting.

Even emotionally, up to a point, he could engage with Enzo. He genuinely liked the boy. But Jericho had grown up since Oahu.

Not the way he needs me. Deserves. After the afterglow, he'd only hurt even more.

So it would be, as usual, just the works, no perks. But even a simple work-over meant **skinny-diving in his thick, horny funk** for a good forty minutes.

Totally cool. Piece of ass. Cassy. Cherry Pie. Cake. Piece of cake.

Jericho glanced around, making sure the scented oils, large singing bowls and little glass cups were at the ready. He did give good wellness. But Jericho wasn't done dithering, so he changed the order of the routine. Which, in hindsight, may not have been the best strategy, since it would mean that, a few minutes earlier than usual, Enzo would turn over to have his front done. Not a planner, our Jericho.

He spaced the three largest bell metal bronze bowls atop Enzo's prone form: upper back, lower back and thighs, and set them vibrating with a leather-muffled mallet. They sounded like the gongs of an Asian monastery, pitched to some mystical, harmonious chord. He let the vibrations fade out completely, in what felt like several minutes of blissful eternity, and paused for another minute to allow Enzo's body to experience the resonant echoes within. One more time. Beautiful.

The final round was a bit trickier. He rebalanced the bowls to make as little skin contact as possible, while remaining centred above the relevant chakras. Then he glided a plain wooden mallet around the inside rims, making them vibrate more gently and musically. The softer touch produced a more piercing, eerie effect. (**Alien monks chanting. Trippy.**) Complex vibrations—layers within layers of overtones—now engaged, it felt like, every molecule in the room, and every cell of both their bodies deep into the bone. Enzo of course was the most profoundly affected. The three genuine, ancient Himalayan treasures were another reason for the near-perfect sound barrier. With the door

open, their pregnant song could topple some precariously balanced object in the nearby workshop right off its high, dangerous perch.

Enzo didn't topple. Enzo simply melted as his pent-up tension drained out of him. That experience was something else. It took you far into and yet totally out of yourself.

Pure. Free. Elemental. Surfin' the cosmic wave. Peace. You'd think, that much vibration shooting through your *Atala*, you'd be spurting buckets, but it all just evaporates. Perfect.

Which had been the plan. Unfortunately, it was now time for the folks down under to participate in the cosmic daisy chain. Jericho tapped Enzo on the shoulder, who languidly mewed and shuffled himself around, stretching and yawning.

No flags fluttering. No pole for hoisting. Still good.

Largo

Enzo unfurled his heavy lids and demonstrated his second-best trick, a synchronized twin chocolate moonrise. Whatever wretched apprentice had slapped him together and then botched the paint job in a vague theme of muddy whites and dirty browns, he had mercifully left the eyes to his master, who had evidently been a more competent artisan. Same theme, but applied with a clean, fine brush and a trained and steady, generous hand. Enzo looked, as always, surprised and befuddled at what life had plunked right in front, or in this case, above, his nose. His teddy-bear arms, unbidden, reached into the sky and wrapped themselves tightly around Jericho's neck, before the blurry demigod from Enzo's vague dream could float back up and away into the deep pink heavens.

Enzo, barely there yet, instinctively grabbed and pulled, as *anyone* would have. More precisely, his *body* pulled at the heavenly hunk on top of him. His *brain*, at that exact moment configured to one-tenth consciousness and nine-tenths hormones, *pushed* with all it had.

In poor, innocent Enzo's sleep-addled vision, which was obviously fibbing, Jericho started to sparkle all over, inside and out, in myriad subtle hues of tropical sunset skies. There *was* no flesh and blood man topping him, there was only a huge, sexy apparition made up of zillions of tiny, flickering sparks, rushing and dancing back and forth with abandon until they hit some invisible barrier, that happened to be formed into an idealized love god. This hot glittery *figment* out of some Arabian tale was what Enzo held onto with all his puny might, and sloppily kissed. In his ongoing dream, their moist tongues crackled with an unexpected, massive static charge that however didn't stay static for long.

How was Enzo to know? He'd never *seen* anything like it. Okay, it not so vaguely resembled his electric machines, which he would *perceive* when they operated, in exactly this manner. But in them the currents were exponentially higher than within the body, and so, well above the threshold of Enzo's inner electric eye. The natural, slightly negative human charge was minuscule by comparison. Which is why this *had* to be a dream, his perfect dream of a

Jericho machine. And he knew intimately how to make any electrical device work exactly to his own specifications. So he might as well enjoy the fantasy while it lasted. *Anyone* would have kept dreaming for as long as possible, and Enzo intended to do just that.

A thoroughly rattled Jericho *sensed* everything Enzo was feeling, rushing into himself, and a good deal more besides. Pulled off-balance by Enzo's move, he'd slapped his big hands onto the ardent young man's skin, the left on his soft, scratchy chest—on *Anahata*—and the right on his lower belly—smack-dab in *Atala*.

It would turn this terse tale into ruminating rigmarole to explain the significance of Jericho's accidental closing, with Enzo, of a circuit that passed precisely through these two of Enzo's chakras, while Jericho's 'terminals' happened to be the very parts of him that *felt* empathically. It would complicate matters further and bore the reader, who we are confident would rather find out what happened next, to tears of despairing frustration if we further tried to theorize as to what exactly *performing* or *pushing* or, heavens, *truth*, may have been intended, most inadequately, to designate within those voluminous and hard to decipher, crazed esoteric scribblings (provided we could even find them) that had been secreted from prying eyes in yet another, *hidden* section of the hidden complex. Some essential pages from these ever-growing, haphazardly-bundled stacks, our Jericho, not a bibliophile at best, had, out of necessity, forced himself to become familiar with, since they applied to him as well. So in the interest of brevity, we shall leave these tedious and convoluted, blatant speculations for another time.

Something invisible stabbed right through the back of Jericho's left palm and deep into Enzo, who didn't seem to notice at all. Something hard, blunt and on fire, a rail spike used for a branding iron. Meanwhile a flash-fire took most of Jericho's right arm all the way into his shoulder, where it mercifully petered out, lapping greedily towards the space behind his eyes. The very tip of the dragon tongue proceeded to feel and taste its way around in there. To

put it mildly, and more literally, Jericho was, for a split-second, frozen by a profound electric shock, that had been precisely *aimed* into his brain matter; then he collapsed in a heap, his torso sprawled across Enzo's, his hands flattened between them—continuing to feel and *feel* and FEEL everything. As soon as he regained some muscular control he shifted position, but by then it was far too late to change anything; by then his face had been locked somehow to Enzo's greedy mouth.

Next thing Jericho knew, he was Enzo. All he saw in the world—and enthusiastically proceeded to do something about—was Jericho, up top, passionately kissing him. Except in this fantasy world, Jericho, no, *Enzo*, who had spent his entire life being chubby, peculiar, ineffectual and invisible... Little Enzo was Jericho's equal in irresistible strength and gorgeousness. Which caused Jericho, during the next half hour or so, whenever he would intermittently manage to re-inhabit his own space, a not inconsiderable series of further shocks.

This has become really confusing, dude.

Jericho was long used to the overwhelming muddle of frozen loneliness and scorching desire whenever his palms touched Enzo. Having to share this painful, perpetual state with him was the prime reason he dreaded these sessions, as well as why they were so necessary. After a few seconds of disorientation, he'd always get it under control, and while it remained an unpleasant sensation it was more or less bearable. Less so, whenever he could *sense* other, even greater but duller pain rising up from Enzo's past than the ache that defined his present. Still, it was a small price to pay for making his client feel a little better for a day or two. But *this*?

Jericho definitively wasn't, in *this* manner, clairvoyant. He couldn't *see* into people's heads. (**Thank Morpheus... curse that fucking show**).

What he was, what he did for others—his role in life—as well as the strange notions that would sometimes, out of the blue, haunt him—of course he had a joke about all that. He imagined he must be the lost love child of a

lesbian space-opera *ménage-à-trois*, among the unerring female doctor, the mushy empath and the... Whoopi. Spaced Dude, the next generation.

For the next few minutes, while he couldn't see, feel, hear, touch, or taste anything that made any sense (**nose, present and normal: wellness pad, candles and oils, Enzo aroused, Jericho sweating**), Jericho had to assume that his decade-long training had taken over, and that in reality he was busy giving Enzo his back rub (**Belly rub? Toe massage? Tongue bath? Where were we, what's next, get with the program**). Since *this*, obviously, he wasn't doing.

Because Jericho wasn't. *Enzo* was. Obviously. (**Hello-o? I'm Enzo, always have been, duh.**) And (**most dudacious!**), did it ever feel amazing to finally be allowed to suck Jericho's luscious cock.

The smoothly toned, attractive young man who was Enzo...

I've obviously started to work out a while back, finally sick I guess of always huffing along after the others; and been waxing and shaving, not such a mangy mutt anymore. Cool. 'Bout time I wised up to my potential.

...who was Enzo's fantasy Enzo, was by all accounts a gentle, retiring creature. Nevertheless, he now used his recently acquired upper body strength to his advantage, and, while the object of his unbridled affection was still startled out of his wits, he easily flipped them both over like stacked pancakes and slammed himself on top, flattening Jericho's backside against the warm, greasy frying pan of the massage pad. Now Enzo was *finally* on top, and the dread-locked, smokin' hot dude lay helplessly spread out beneath him. Enzo's lithe steely thighs had his victim's massive trunks locked in their vice grip, and Enzo's granite cock was poking into sweaty bronze flesh above the arched shelf of Jericho's abdomen. The underside of Enzo's sensitive bulb was being deliriously tickled by Jericho's treasure trail. His, that is, Jericho's, warm, gentle hands—so very soothing, strangely pulsing, firm and loving hands—cupped his temples as he

He-ey! Earth calling! Enzo's! Me, remember? Born in the vineyard, fuckwad dad, pious ineffectual mom, cool sister, wacky gran, cocksucker

soccer coach... Dude, ya gotta keep track! Or I'm gonna end up doing something weird to myself, Sheesh!

Jericho eagerly took another bottomless draught of the sweet, sexy boy...

No, wait! That's not what's happening here at all. Th-*that's* me. This is *him*. Meaning me of course. One of them us.

All his senses now desperately struggling to perceive more clearly, Jericho somehow managed partly to dispel the handsome, luminous apparition. Waves of force seemed to ripple through the dense, pretty-youth-shaped nebula, as if Jericho's sandwiched palms had been dropped into it like two pebbles. During the embrace he had managed to rearrange them somewhat more comfortably, which had turned out to be on Enzo's scraggly chest, right on his rock-hard nipples. Now, during the three or five second transformation back to Enzo, or at least to a glowing Enzocloudnebula, these were burning like two deployed Zippos into Jericho's palms.

Feeling was second nature even to this spaced-out surfer living their shared psychedelic wet dream. So he *sensed* the originating energy within Enzo that was desperately resisting Jericho's instinctive defensive move. It was not, as he might have expected, some potent blend of unconscious fear and need and aroused desire, designed to extract something from Jericho. Rather, it was a deep wanting to *give*. Enzo was not, at least not consciously, trying to seduce Jericho with this fiery vision, which to Enzo (if not necessarily Jericho) would have represented, surely, his incarnation as a male siren upon whose crag most gay men would wantonly shipwreck themselves.

Slowly the false image, and with it the resisting force, was collapsing back into a black pool of dejection before it would dispel; possibly the aware part of Enzo felt none of this happening to him, while the other acceded to Jericho's unspoken demand that it should vanish. Meanwhile, Jericho rapidly interpreted: Deep Enzo desired more than anything else to appear to him like this, because it was the only way it knew in which it might be able to make Jericho happy. It was trying to present Jericho with a gift of Enziness, and though it retreated, because that was what its Jericho wanted, it felt confused and disappointed that he had rejected it.

Even more confounding to Jericho at the moment, however, was that, though he knew the false image was gone and he had the old Enzo back, he continued to *perceive* Enzo that way, and knew deep within that from now on he always would. Because his empathic talent, wordlessly as usual but impossibly visually in this instance as well, had left no doubt in Jericho's otherwise addled mind that *this* was Enzo as he *truly* was. The real prince trapped in the accursed frog.

Jericho was flummoxed, breathing hard and hot against Enzo's throat. (**Damn, is the dude cute. Fuck me, I'm hard.**) Whatever insights he might have had in the preceding seconds, they evaporated as his suddenly awoken carnal instincts got busy and wiped his drives to install their own operating system for the time being.

And ribbit.

Reboot. There we are. Systems back up and running. Dangerously over-cooked. I mean, give a medal to Petal here: Gotta get my too-fucking-tight pants off right this second.

"Loverboy, would you loosen those thunder thighs, there's a dear?"

Enzo mumbled something that to Jericho had marinated in the blazing Mediterranean sun and complied. "Thanks hotness. *So* much better. Hey, no *fair*, yours biggern mine. *Uff!*"

Big effing deal. I'm obviously unconscious, so I didn't actually just say that to a guy. Help me with these, big boy, and I do mean

Someone wolf-whistled. Someone else peeled him out of his pants, hampered by both men's massive erections. They gazed into each other, lust-engorged, with their greenish-chocolate-blue eyes. They both sounded in their own minds, as they assessed unexpected developments, oddly like someone someone else knew him as Jericho. Then, thankfully, things came into lovely focus again for Enzo.

So *that's* Jericho's hyperactive cock. Not disappointing, big guy. No wonder the chicks dig it. Today, I'll be doing the digging, like no chick can dig ya', dig me, chick digga?

Dig me? Feeling punny are we? Whoa. Need to talk about that, dude. Ungh. I'm dripping. Huh. Wanna take a lick? Go ahead, I'd taste me too if I could. Weird dream, 'cause that scorchin' dude's not really... Enzo's sweet sexy face, flushed now like the rest of him while he was hard at work on Jericho, was all huge, limpid eyes, Sicilian brows and bulbous nose in a nest of scruffy underbrush.

Must be out cold, dude. I give you sweet and maybe limpid, but sexy? Dream on. Why not. See what develops. Probably I've turned the heat up too far.

Or worse, the air off by mistake. *Shit!*

Worry not. Enzo's scooted off to fetch help. Sure. Wouldn't just leave his buddy lying around, suffocating. We'll be just fine, sexy. Any second now Jericho's gonna come through that... Oh. *Enzo!* Slow down, dude, I'm serious!

Huh. It's been a while. No apparent change in the situation, at least I'm me for now: A hot and steamy thanksgiving spread for my secret wet, nutbutter (buttnutter?) fantasy lad... I'm gonna be spread, *fuck!* By a pretty wee monk-ee... hehe... who's fallen off his call-eye-oh-pee-pee. Wang-gone-ee.

Peachy-keen, keen poochy-boy. Doing good. Ooh! Wow man. Why? Whim? I like *women!*

Not on these tides, stranger, you don't, sorry 'bout that. Can't help y'out. Not a one around. Can't say I miss 'em much at the instance.

Gone off his *rocker*, you mean! *Both* of us!

Whatever. Peachy dream.

But he's really been gone quite a while now. Where are they? Last two brain cells dying here. Need oxygen, fool's locked the door behind him. Even in my *fucking coma* I'm hyperventilating. I mean, there's the evidence, right? Guy who assphyh... prick who assfucks, moron who *suffocates* himself, who is really, really *hung* like little big Enzo here fuck

who straps himself up by his belt for some fun: portrait of Jay Kat, desist or deceased. They'll find him later, with a massive hard-on lying in his own splooge. Right? Fuck, I'm almost *there*!!

Slow down, I'm *so* there already! Yeah, gimme big puppy kiss, relax sweetie, we've got all day no one can hear us we're locked in tight, two smug buggers on drugs. Oooo babeeee, yeah! Fuuuuck meeee!... Yes right *now*!

FuckyoufuckingginormousteaseEnzosweetieeeeeeeee. Pleeeeeese? Pretty pretty please my pretty dudarling?

Calfskin, you mooncalf. It's calfskin you guys are ruining in my headpad. Bossman's gonna be furious.

Hellooooo? Anybody? Passed out in here. Creamy dream, funky situation!

Pretty Dude-what's-Enzo-no-me-but-not-recently's been working his way inwards, meticulously spiralling like a Spidey—*Ow!* Hitting all the right spots, baby, but they're called lovebites not love *bites*. Almost, at last, can't hardly hold it anymore *fuck* is he good, arriving at the main course. Have to admit, he's got some self-control, look at the hunger in those Easter-egg eyes, kiddo surprise, is it Easter now? Holy cock. Cow. Christmas has wrapped, Joshie's unwrapped, right after he got zapped, by the pretty little lights in the peach tree, Tweedledee.

FUCK am I tweedleDUMB!

The lad's gone bonkers with unspent spunk and has somehow programmed me as his wildest fantasy, showing me exactly how to have his way with him. With me. To... (*Fuck me!*) he's *performing* like U2 on acid and probably doesn't even know it. Gotta let the top-dude know, this could be serious. Wait. *I'm* the top dude. Sucking off Jericho. Who's gonna be bottoming today, inn't dat kee-ute?

YES. You're my bottom now, boy.

Huh? He could be blowing our shields right now. Big time. Everybody will find out what we are.

So what? Lovin' is God's gift to clay. Toys are for boys to play. I'm your bottom boy now your pleasure toy yessiree, *oy!* Watch it. I mean *us* not us.

Do dudes really talk like that when they're fucking? Why am I thinking it's kinda hot? Cause I'm about to fuck the hottest fucking bronze God on the fucking planet, that's why, boy oh boy!

Oh Boy-o-boy. *Focus!* Getting fucked over here by a moon-faced twink who's repossessed my... *Enzo's!* That's what you said: *my* brain. And he's got his too-firm grip on Jericho's dripping prock. *Too* weird, maybe we better not tell the boss... Cummere you hunk-a hunk-a-door is shut *too tight* baby! Gonna open soon, I promise! Open real wide. Let your big ol' teddy bear boss right on in real deep and all's gonna be peachy-skies from now on in.

The following were the last more or less sensible thoughts Jericho was to have that fine hour.

ashes to ashes

rust to rust

running over water

tears up oceans

frozen salt pillar

gush into rush

***Dust*, not, rust, moron. Go. Away. Incoming signal *no comprende*, as per usual. No time right now, we're rusting here. *Rutting*. Blazes to hell. Do I have to spell it out? I'm b-u-s-y riding my... his... *Dude's* big fat juicy fruit shiny red corvette, so *fuck off*.**

***Ooh yah...* Running his tongue all over my balls, the fucking tease, slurping sucking soft wet lips popping them out over and over my cock throbbing hurts too hard fuck it actually *hurts* look it's all wet again no room for all that spunky water balloon gonna burst slow *down* dammit *ungh* that was close...**

Take that monster all the way down my throat, yeah, how does he *do* that, all the way in and out in and out *fuck* till my lips get all scratched by Jericho's musky bush and my greedy gullet is sore from the pounding it's getting from my yummy dick...

So close so fucking close fuck but then I tease *him* (ha!) and pull it out and flip over on my belly and slather my ass with the oil (*take that!*) all shiny and tempting his ginormous prick whodaknown (*I picked those lights for us you know so I can see you like this all tempting and shiny*) and the candles flicker over his perfect skin like it's on fire. Then we just watch dripping hard don't even touch but hard not to, while he fingers himself and moans for me. I have to stop too far too fast never done it silently I plead with him to *stop* but I look at his pleading, faraway eyes and it just turns me on even more can't help it I'm sorry too late now am drowning in those crystal pools tropical waters Kauai no more surfing am under too deep drowning where is up where out in space feeling my spaced toy, blissed-out boy, limpid eyes heavy, pooling water *dangerous* deuterium oxide reactor miss physics going on about *danger* didn't pay attention never took physics not paying attention now on my own time *no time!* like the present it's a fine time baby relax we have *all* the time in the world no one will hear us way out in space.

Hesitantly at first then faster (*needy I need you so bad inside*) me he probes him testing the virgin isn't that funny! The Kat's a *virgin* for you anything even my ass territory no too scared too virge-end hot unfamiliar helpless *virgency!* First one tip, then two long thick fingers then three, stretching it wide I can feel it relax now sucking at my fingers tasting my skin, feeling the hardness of his boner underneath what a rush... wanting nothing else in the world than to have him have me fill my ass with his sweaty hole. Other end up now of the universe coming in here like this not expecting me to come in you please isn't it different yes from your purple pussy palace at home but I'm home and... he's home! The bat's connected. Wow! What a crack! There he flies, into sky, eye on the prize, everyone sighs. Rousing cheers! Home run! Gotta run! Faster! Please,

faster! The others! They're cheering us on don't you hear it. Relax you're at home plate main dish. No more running. But will they be happy for us do you think? Parents hate me mine too but we have each other now they can't hurt us any more we'll be so happy together will they be happy though? I'm sure they will, big boy, I'm sure they're laughing and shouting and screaming more... more encore no that's the audience fooled by a trick of the light they're clapping and screaming please harder... *harder baby* no that's me screaming for *help!*

Fuck I need *more* inside me, *all* of it! what's the boy *waiting* for, *hello?* A little assistance, RIGHT NOW screaming my lungs out here no I can't barely a whispered breath pounded out of me no air lungs empty don't bother screaming no one can hear you probably all dead by now. Doesn't matter. Too late if you don't hurry I'm gonna fuck me

HARDER! Can you take it take all of me sure you can? Course I can take it, I mean yes sir please NO! like you mean it bitch you sweet crazy boy watch your *oh!* langwich.

Jericho's balls snuggle his thighs big soft pink sack drooping below his crack onto slicked leather. They're guarding his rampaging cock like the Wolf in the cave didn't know the boss could be such a cock what a fuck-up all around wish I could see it ache every time I push into me oh! now I can feel it underneath my, fuck, foot-long tonguwich wedged tight muscle and calf-hide sticky with my—Shit we forgot the *lube?* didn't need it I guess *wow*—no not lube wish I had cuffs and a cock strap (*where did that come from fuck*) me Enzo you Jay *cap!* yeah gotta wear a *helmet* while I ride ya' shit clean forgot

“Dio mio, gli goldoni!”

what *he* said... what'd he say? Never mind checkup clear to launch *phew* both of us and a matching studded collar how cute diamonds he deserves you're such a *good* boy and on the leash too to make them sparkle like Jericho so pretty and I can feel my balls slapping against his bulge all sweaty and fat in the fuck strap cock is a *fuck?* train crossing

fuck! bra for boy balls fuck! they're enormous fuck!! eyes gleaming from the grass fuck!!! is it Easter I told fucking! Hell's bells! Like, already.

Hop, funny bunny. Hup! Crossing tracks. Hep! Like this. Hut! You. I. Your. Hut! My! Agogo saviour. Snap my balls! At last. On two. You're just lovin' it, aren't you. Crossing the line. Now! My. Surfin' Sunshine?

I'm fucking me, not fucking you! But my ass is amazing gotta say never seen why some chicks get into—my ass! Cannonballs!—pump hot molten steel, into my juicy flesh—Fucker!

Aren't I just, great hunks of meat, getting pulverized here?

—quivering beefcake, switched, on as fuck! he's barrelling into—over, the barrel, me—victim! of desire, for the kid, so lonely, so long!

All those old geezers giving nothing in return for fucks sake!! my devotion fucking cunts. I've got Jericho, now Jericho forever Geronimo! The walls come down, towering walls of ass tension all melted away glistening bejewelled portcullis my jewel unlocked for me just for me Ow! Enzo! Poor little can't see for fuck what's he doing? Painful! I'm in pain! FEEL IT, yeah, ride it! Like that! No, please DON'T!! like that!!! Yeah, that's much better thanks I can FEEL you so DEEP I'm so deep inside cause you're so fucking beautiful all-the-way-in-fuck—

"I'm so beautiful inside you!"

"You're so beautiful inside me!"

Pure unending pleasure horizon blue peaceful eternal golden limits none only us now. Like surfing, no? No. Like truth in his papers truth he says should be love but it isn't not yet have to keep searching not fair don't wanna you're here now it's perfect fully me us full release full stop I'm gonna burst my ass no my cock fuck oh fuck me... uh oh!

"Hoh-shit."

Coming copiously, while having someone absurdly massive inside you, was about to be an entirely new anatomical feat for Jericho. Though essentially a familiar biochemical procedure, only, well, to use that horrible neologism correctly for once, more *impactful*—Jericho, during the second or so that he could still briefly cogitate, accurately suspected it was going to be very high

up indeed on the list of “*the* most intense, dude, ever” experiences, snuggled right up against that *other* great one-eyed monster.

He’d been way too young to know better, back in ’00, impetuously intent on celebrating the new millennium *his* way. It had done its considerable best to end him that day, “Cyclops” had, off the remote southern coastline of Australia. Jericho found himself—very briefly—transported back in time, reminiscing.

How apropos. Except that time I *avoided* getting pounded into hamburger by submerged rocks. Barely.

Be that as it may, the intro of J. B. Khaddouri’s unintentional tribute to concrete poetry—its imminence signalled by several terse jabs of the Maestro’s baton—went something like this:

[*Staccato*]

„Ou-w // wf-ff-ouff...

„ffu-ngh! // Uh! / -h- / uh / -Hh- / hUgh-q.

„Qhuqk! / Ggh-g-ckK! // Qw-ww-W- / wOW!!!

„... !?...

„W-whoa-h / hH / h / **Hh** / h // u-**huh!** / u-HUH!!“

At which point someone mercifully engaged a vacuum pump, or else got helplessly stuck all the way in, between the jammed portals of Jericho’s clenched sphincter. Enzo, either way, had felt the unmistakable shudder besetting Jericho’s drenched frame, and so he tightly wrapped himself around his lover and mercifully held still. His hot, close breath carried an abstract murmur of incredibly sexy solace into Jericho’s ear. Together as one, they hovered in the still eye of the storm

—? :... ! :—!—!!—??? !!!!!

[*Cres. Fortissimo*]

„HHOUwaA!Aah**HAaha**Aaah—

„Hh. **HAAA**aaaaaa. ...“

[*Dim.*]

„... *aohwGH haoh ouhO*w-w-w...

„*W - w. ... w! ...*

„*w.*“

„—“

[*Coda*]

„... *o fuNGh-gh-k*“

What the...

...fuck, I'm gonna come AGAIN, must have been *years* no yesterday? The brunette what's her name... I'm swimming in my own cum but hoh lordy I'm not done yet ENZO's! close I'm so fucking close I'm *here* you're right here, my NO! I'm not yours! Please trust me, you'll find him, don't you love me? I love you kid that's why I can't let you I'll just break your big ol' *cock* my cock *fuck* I'm gonna gonna deep into *you you* you have to get out of my fucking *fuck* have to get out of his *head* this is wrong so *wrong* please I'm sorry! *trust* me I love you my darling my.

Jesus!!!

Enzo's cock was still crazy-glued into Jericho, who thought he felt something upon his person rip as the fucking beast swelled up some more and started to twitch, then pulse, against the most sensitive lining of his anatomy. No doubt, had he had breath left, he might have reiterated his recent solo to get his point across. As it turned out, he didn't have to, because he'd just crossed over again into

Enzo screaming,

[*Cantabile, sfz*]

„*GESÜ-oo-oo! Io godo! Michia!*

„*Io god-ohoh-Oh-oh-oh-oh -*

„oh... oh—oh—o—

„—o... o... .“

[*Reprise, var.*]

„... Oh!—ho haw!?

„Haw-ww-ww fu-uUu-Ung!!

„HAAa-ow! W-WAWAAA!?!?

„—WaHaHAHww-f-UHU? - HUH!

„—HUH!—HUH!—HUH!—Huh.“

[*Dim.*]

„—Uhownghngnhhnnhhnnnhhhhhhh!“

[*Coda*]

„*Mannagia*, siamo nella merda!“

Huh.

Shit! NononoNO SHIT! What have I done you're not *done* must keep looking trust me you'll know when you find *love* is the *truth* is I DO love Enzo! Truly. I promise. I really! *really*... really?... Really *do*. Shit.

...

Yes. Me. Jay Kat Ben Khaddouri. Don't speak a word of Italian. Never did. Love him. Yes. Wow. No, *now*. Now *he's* Enzo Leone Ferrara. Again. For good. Sicilian. Yes. All sorted now? Seems so. Shit I'm gonna pass—

...

...

...

Through it now. Over. Huh. All out now. Out of what? Wet wipes? No, silly, clear... For my specs? Don't use 'em. I'm all... *clear*. Of what? Shit happen? Something drop on top of me? Clod knock me out? Don't remember. Out cold. Not a thi... No *wait*. Dreamt. Long one. Something, some... I was... *oh*.

Oh, yeah.

I was dreaming sweet little Enzo fucked the living daylight out of, with Big Ben here, and we just loved it. Second time I came in Italian. Weird, huh. Trippy. Waddyaknow lil' Enzo's a screamer. Creamboat. Total dream. in my.

Non più di erba per questo ragazzo, um, dude. Um... 'Sheesh?'

Got that right, Jay ole boy. Gotta lay off the spinelli for a while.

...

What's a spinelli?

...

Some kinda cross, crusty shag shay shone... *shrimps*, dude. Duh. Spicy too, shouldn't wonder. Make me *noxious*. Nightmares. Runs. Feel the burning in my ass already, *fuck*. So stupid. Stoned outta my tree again, why I didn't remember not to partake, sure. Blazing munchies!

What happened here? Just look at this junk! Wow, look at that dude's... Fuck, I'm *naked*. FUCK I'm at the *office*!

This dodo's in deepish doo-doo.

Naw, couldn'a gone down *here*.

Could it?

[*Lento, pianissimo*]

While Enzo underwent his second ablutions for the day, flopping about like a chubby felt Gumby doll stripped of its supporting wires, an equally zoned-out Jericho cleaned up the spa bed pretending as usual nothing had happened. Sure, there were a bit more oil and a lot more cum than normal

smear all over the expensive leather, post Enzo. His rising, tearful whimper always announced the imminence of the habitual event.

I did hear him earlier, sure. Except it had sounded weirdly... like *me*, when I was just, like, waaaay back. When I'd just figured out you can actually... do *that* with that. Right after biology class, in the boy's room. People came running, worried I'd cut the damn thing off or something. Learned to be more quiet about it after.

Enzo usually ejaculated at the exact moment Jericho was expertly making mincemeat of his glutes. The poorly hidden event concluded with a brief exclamation point, scribbled in quivering flesh by pitched, swallowed moaning. Afterwards, both would pretend they hadn't noticed, both tacitly relieved that Enzo had got his kinks out, for now.

Although. Surely Enzo would have tried to rouse him if Jericho had fallen asleep on the job, or worse, had suddenly passed out.

And he *is* all spaceballs and rubber duckies, even more than usual. So I did do my job, must have given him a real workout. Except, I feel like someone minced *my* ass real good instead.

King Prawn, dude. It's the hot buttered prawn. Any minute now. Oh, right. Hope he gets outta there soon, in case I need to... *uh oh*, breathing shallow. Think he remembered to give me my injection?

Enzo knew Jericho was badly allergic.

How could I have given him that level of service? I wasn't even *present*. I was out cold, gasping for air. Fuck, the AirCon!

Also, that he was hypoglycemic, with a bad habit of skipping his first meal due to a bad habit of partying late before workdays.

Air's working fine. Ok, that was part of the dream. I just passed out because... of low sugar. That's it. Stop skipping breakfast from now on. Yeah. Grab a bagel and chow on the run. That'll do the trick.

Spreading wellness in my fucking sleep? What am I, the Prophet of Dozing? I'm not *that* lazy, people.

...

Unless.

Gotta be shitting me.

I'm *empathic* and he's... *electric*. But he's just a *receiver*. Isn't he? All the tests we've snuck by him. Conclusive. He couldn't have fucked... *faked*, fuck he wouldn't have, he's, he's *Enzo*, for Dude's sake. Walking bloody proof for the, you know, Law, *Guile can't Procreate in a Vacuum*.

Unless. It. Happened.

Fuck. Me. blind.

The jinxed mix of, of, of *both* of us—touching each other, hyper-activated, intensely focused. Spiced up with a... a potent eruption of his bottled-up need. Holy Cow. Enzo really did just *perform*. On me. Pulled his great big white rabbit out of the hat. Welded himself onto me, I don't know... his horny little electrons beaming on up and having a party in my neurotic... neuronal penthouse. Then he, true to form, he rabbits himself off to safety again. Or?

Up my enchanted bubble butt! I was *baked*, hot out the oven, just right for to gobble up hole. Whole. *Hole!* Hook, line and sink 'im. Enzo oh *Enzo sweet Enzo* on my brain. Didn't the kid even wonder what had suddenly hit me?

Damn. Remember now. After he kissed me. That bit. I seduced *him* into... me! Wheedled him over the fucking edge, lathering up all nice and ready to be fried. *There* you go, sweetheart, isn't this what you've always wanted? Well, get it on and come, come on in, 'cause,

“I'm so fucking hot for you right now, baby!”

Didn't say that out loud, did I? Dreamboat, you're gunning for me, have been all along, so come on then, take your best shot, Cap'n E. Valentino.

...

Fuuuuck me. The kid's *amazing*. Dangerous, but fucking amazing. I'd give him a great big hug right now, but. In context, might be... misrepresented.

She-ee-it. I... think... actually... I... don't wanna talk about this right now. To no one. Kat's feeling a might... diss-comb-ovulated. Not... not freaked out, or anything. *Nah*.

Over-elated? You think?

For Pete's sake, please don't think about myself in... in a person... other than number one. *That* is freaking me out right now.

Asses to ass

funk to funky

ASHES! Ground to action control: Let it *slide*. All the way up my big ripped open kazoo, plenty'a room in here for all of us... And I'm not a major ju—just toke up once in a blue... oh. You mean—getting addicted to...

You know what, don't talk to me anymore *period*. No more, "Oooh, have a look-see, the Spooky Messiah, he's shrieking big nothing again," okay? No more pre-mo-me-ni-notions, no more funny funk-ed-up headfunk.

the stars look

very different

today

Asshead! Is there nothing I can do to vaporize you?

...

Not taking no head-fucking ass fucking from nobody. Had it up to *here*.

...

"I *quit*! Do you *hear* me, people? Final warning!! On my way out, bye-bye Hellness pod, stepping through the door *right now*...

"Right *after* I throw something on!"

A lesser man than Jericho might have fled into prolonged therapy right then and there. He, however, had experienced some truly weird shit in his time, so he tried to be philosophical about the whole thing, as well as practical. He'd just have to make Enzo not do *that*, whatever it had been, *ever* again. Because this clearly wasn't Jericho's problem he was wrestling with, it was Enzo's.

Right?

That boy had some rather pressing privacy issues to overcome.

Just the Laws of Nature, dude, too bad really. Don't you think I'd rather be bilaterally endowed? Double the gum, man. *Sheesh.*

I mean. Get real. He can't just... just go around playing space invaders. Head commando. Right? This ain't no... no innocent little porno flick he's pirated, we're talking real people here. Granted, people have fucked him up and over all his life, but...

Still, gotta hand it to him. Way to get back at someone. Just glad he practiced on me first.

Are you grinning?

I mean so I can go knock some sense into him before he tears up some other bugger's buggery butt!... Oh hell. You tell me, Mister Know-it-all. All fuzzed-up at the present end. My ass is still smokin', I'll have you know.

Mhm! I can see that.

Scherzo

They were milling about, bleary and exhausted, not really sure *what* to do next. At least, that's how Jericho felt, who was employing his proven strategy of procrastinating for as long as possible when confronted with an awkward decision. Enzo was apparently off somewhere in his own head, ruminating. He'd been intently focused on *something*, because suddenly he started to jump up and down, buck-naked and flopping, and shouted,

“Find the LADY!”

Jericho glared at him. “Next time I will,” he grouched. “You can bet your... excessive endowment on it.”

I think I'm bleeding. He carefully wiggled his butt. **Attached, barely. Thank the Big Kahuna for Enzo's reformed monastic lifestyle. That boy, unlike this one, is all work and no play. Till oy vey today.**

“No, really, Shericcoh! Find. The. Lady!”

Jericho was so done playing stupid games. “What. Enzobaby. Saying.”

Enzo rolled his eyes and carefully enunciated, “With people, *ovviamente*.” Jericho was obviously just being stubbornly idiotic, as usual.

The latter pretended he finally got it that time, “Of course. *Ow*. Of course what?”

“We can play, *come si chiama? Sì!* The Full Monty!” Enzo was waving his arms around like a madman, everything else forgotten.

“Newsflash for ya. You. Me. Sans togs? Remember? I sure do.” He visually demonstrated, by way of his several tender spheres. He remembered it all now, down to the last detail. Which didn't do much to dispel his lingering confusion. If anything, he was beginning to feel weak in the knees again.

“No, silly, with *two* men, with big heart and big... *sì*, big *clubs*...”

Oh fuck I should have just said yes, sure, great, find the lady. Now he's going nuts again because I provoked him.

“Yeah, sure, ok, waddayasay we both go right now and find you a lady!”

“*Bello*, I know you understand! No need go outside. I show you, yes, right now, in here, *you* are the lady, big nice queen, please, it is okay! *Are you okay, Caro mio?*”

Jericho was about to faint, it appeared, for real.

Oh fuck. Not again. Is he trying to tell me it's ok to be gay? Gay. Before we skip hand in hand into the pink sunset? Hello world, guess what? We're getting hitched, like candy-cane superheroes, in bright spandex tuxes, on a hundred-story whipped white wedding cream pie, surrounded by five thousand Roman candles, only the best for these two supee sweethearts, Electronboy and his Jay-jelly-rainbow-beanie-baby.

Goodbye world. Or? Just bi! Not so bad. Did claim I would if I could, didn't I. Me and my mouth. Still do it with chicks. Right? If I want to? If he'll let me! I'm sure he'll let me. Out. Once a while. Sweetest guy in the world. *Haw-w-w*, and a real nice big white wedding, too!

Not the real issue right now, but sweet of him to reassure me, all the same.

“This *can't* be happening...” Jericho whispered, tears of frustration threatening to well.

“*Sì... sì, roba da non credere, ma...* Just dream of it with me for seconds, yes! After you try, *prendere o lasciare, va bene*. Yes or no, say. But please, first. Try it. So. I am the one, the first of them, yes? But the other man, he must be here... at you, next. *After* me. I come first.”

Sure babe, promise, I'll wait for ya' next time. I'm happy. Hope you're happy too.

“Here, I show you!” Enzo grabbed the large, heavy sack of wet putty that had once been Jericho and started heaving it around the limited, unusually slippery floor space.

Where does he get the energy? Is he hard again? Forget it! I don't even want to look. Frightening. Some point even he's gonna be knackered. Praying to Penis here. *Venus*.

“*Sì, va bene così...* I know it is a little small, in your... *questo spazio*, but we say they go in. With the head, you must... believe, yes? It will be good...”

Così... ma no, così!... And now the first again, bend, *ma no*, lower, so nobody see, and the second, and he bend and move like so and then they go *together*, and out again, so easy! You see, then you, in, out, back, and on..."

Jericho's vision was blurring and he had turned quite pale as he flopped around, swaying crazily, doing Enzo's bidding. **Maybe I'm turning into Enzo again, but this time with my whole body. Next stop, sexy fantasy twins.** Jericho's future prime mould meanwhile went on erupting, oblivious and relentless.

"And now our *beautiful* new *queen*, of the, *come si dice*, the *diggings*, making bigger the *hole!*... *Tu. Cielo! Dai!* Big queen... *Ecco! Presente!*... *between* them. And the *poof* comes out, now the other *poof* goes there and... and... *Ma no, cavoli!*" Enzo shook his head in frustration as his friend abandoned his efforts, limply climbed onto the mattress and curled up into a possum.

The past minute, Jericho had felt like the final defensive piece in a very fast, losing game of *eksekseks*. The great white king, about to be toppled onto the bed. Chucked by his mate.

Excessive sex chess. Queen. Board. Checked, mate! You're really losing it, aren't you. Everyone's gone insane, even the Author. Especially him. Sheesh.

He was drenched again in chess. (**Sweat.**) Thanks. As passive and helpless as Enzo had been, before his electric power had been short-circuited into action by his pooling desire; Jericho had now turned into a dripping, shy and dazed, meek little puppy.

(**Just. Not. Fair.**) Maybe Enzo *did* somehow deserve the chance to get back at all those who had cruelly rejected him in his young life. But, come on. *Jericho?* They were the best of (**Totally. Fucked. Over.**) buddies! Each in his way, *loved* the other with all his heart. (**I. Give. Up. Watch. It.**) And Jericho had always, *always* done *everything* he could to make Enzo feel special.

No. Not everything.

Hm?

Should have. See that now. Didn't then. Failed him too, in the end. This? Just my own. Come upon once. Twice. Tuppence. Comeuppance.

Fair fuck. Fuck's fair. *Fuck!* Fair's fair. I'll be his goat for him, take all the blame. Go ahead. Nail me to his cocks. It's fine. I'm the Fucking Messiah. It's all God. No. I'm just as bad, I see that now. Clearly. It's all *good*. Oh, good GOD man! Get it in me and done over with.

How can I be feeling so meek all of a sudden. Fuck. Nothing, *meek!* Weak. Inherit the Ass. Earth. Bull. Cock crotch Chinashop. Enzo. My head! Shopping for silk in Shanghai. Draped. Over his arms. Like Piety. Enzo, Christ in his lap? Dead. Can't move a muscle. All wrapped up. Just lying here.

Enzo unravels me. Nice. Christmas? So long already! No wonder I'm aching. Been waiting forever. Dreamboat coming into port now. Great. Big. Fucking. Greek. Yacht. Tiny port. Coast of Italy. Big clumsy Roman sailor's gonna wreck us both. Can't... wait wait wait *wait!*

***O Nononononooo!* Not with Jackie O you don't! *Fuck.* Jericho. Too many names. No real gender. Identity! Can't we keep one thing straight around here?**

FUCK!!! I'm a human being for fuck's sake not your pony fool, your puny wee, *piggy-on-male...* Eliza Dolightly!

Oh Jovey, why me?

Blackout.

[*Breve. n.b.: Pausa silenziosa.*]

[Cut to: Another place and time. A huge vague space, no visible walls, no up down or sideways. We remain in total darkness—and silence—for the entire Scene.]

‘You seem to be upset.’

Damn straight.

‘Can you elaborate on that?’

Sick and tired of you screwing me around.

‘You're not really talking about Me, are you.’

Him, him, screwing me loose. In my head. The screws. Are.

‘I’m not sure I understand you fully.’

Oh forget it.

...

‘There, there...’

S’okay.

‘I don’t... appear to have a Blessèd Kleenex on Me at the moment.’

So now you’re actually here, you can’t help, or won’t?

‘We shouldn’t even be talking.’

Why fucking not. Sorry, fudging. My situation is already impossible.

‘Things tend to get worse when I show up. And there is nothing wrong with Fucking if you mean it.’

Why don’t you toodle along then, we’re all kinda busy I’m sure, and leave us to fuck it up on our own, thank you very much.

‘When you ask the right Question, I shall always Answer. Those are the Rules. I’m big on Rules.’

Didn’t ask you anything. Never listen anyway. Don’t do rules.

‘Your Heart is always Asking. Listening depends on you.’

So how come I never heard you before.

‘You weren’t the excellent *listener* you have become. And your heart wasn’t asking a Question.’

No, seriously, dude, why am I hearing you now, not yesterday or, I don’t know, last week.

‘Seriously, your brain is totally fried at the moment.’

I knew it. Shit. What’s my question, then, huh? Hell if I know. Sorry. Heck.

‘As you are doing right now, two shall be Asked at once. But I can answer only one. Rules, alas...’

‘No swearing allowed isn’t one. We’re not in school here. Neither, come to think of it, is thou shalt not blaspheme. Quite meaningless concepts, in any

case—naming Me, queuing Me up in order of priority. “Hell”, very droll—though I do regret that they have caused such infernal suffering in spite. Not My doing, I assure you.’

Nice to know for future reference. So two questions? But I get just one answer?

‘Yes. I can only answer the One. The other, the better one, I cannot.’

Cannot, or will not?

‘Because I *will* not, since you *will* yourself, so I *cannot*. Obviously.’

Making up your own mind must be even more confusing for you than me.

‘So. Would you like to Ask your Question or not. Since I seem, according to you, to be here at this moment, with you. In space.’

Oh, what the heck. Hell! Lemme think... Of course. Duh, dude: “Is it really love?”

Hm? That’s the right question, right? Or, *nonono* hang on!... is it really *true*, right, *that’s* what you’re gonna clear up for me now. That’s what I’m trying to, with this, interior, homolog, so silly queer—whatever, to figure out.

“Is all this really happening, or am I just dreaming?”

That’s what I really want to know, right? Or? Is it the other... thing? What I’m *really* feeling? For... him. I mean, I’m really wondering whether I’m actually falling in... or just, you know... *lust*. Or?

‘It will work as the Question.’

But that’s two... oh.... No, *no*. These seem to me to be clearly *two* totally separate issues I’m racking my aching brain over. So now I need to pick one, huh. So we can at least, in my head, get one lonely thing sorted. Right? That’s what all this is about.

‘What do *you* think?’

I think... shit. Think, think, *think* darnit! I think... that there’s actually only *one* answer. That must be it. Yes. Or no. Both. Or neither.

Makes sense. Two birds with one stone. The birds or the boy. Or *and!* Problem solved. So what's it to be then, huh? Big guy? Hmm?

WAAAAIT! Not sure if... Do I really want to *know*?

‘There you go. I knew you would get to it. That’s the other One. The important One. The One only you can answer. Not I.’

Oh. I see.

No, that doesn't make any *sense*! Aren't the other two facts a teensy bit more important to me right now? Whether I want to or not, I need to have those answers before I can even start to get out from under this mess, this, fucking mental quicksand. Where to go from here. With anything. Life. Totally stuck in limbo, otherwise. Both me and him. Totally unfair to Enzo. And, gotta admit, to me.

‘Not true. Once you answer *your* Question, everything else shall become clear, including Mine. Or not. As you wish. So you see, clearly you don't need Me at all.’

I don't understand a word you're saying.

‘That’s always been an issue. Words do get tossed around so. Bent, twisted, broken. Generally over other people’s heads. Until you don't recognize them anymore. The heads, or the words. Mine, especially.’

So some words are yours and some aren't. Naturally. And we're supposed to be able to tell the difference. Google *Are These His Words Or Someone Else's*? What, you... you plague-arise some other Big Dude? So I'm just a freaking photocopy?

‘No. You were truly inspired. I meant Mine, singular. I only have One, Word.’

I'm murdering my remaining brain cell over my one little question, that I still don't know what it's supposed to be, for your one single lousy one-word, *incomprehensible* answer. Peachy. Born in *the* Holy Land, I end up with a... some Japanese Dude. What is it, Zen? Your big mystery word?

‘It has many names.’

I don't wanna ask it out on a date! I'm *taken*, it seems, remember? Words have names, now?

'Mine does. You do. So why not. But not quite. Many words, some of the time, are employed as... names, yes, close enough, for My One Word.'

Can't you just write it down then or something? *Tell* someone, *they* write it down, *we* study it, learn it by heart, and figure it all out, problem solved.

Again, the whole problem, *not* solved. I did try, you know. Several times. People have been spreading My Word for thousands of years, using far too many of their own. Creating more problems. I realized then that I... had screwed up regally. So I... whizzed on up. Is that how you would say it?

Close enough. Can you at least give me a hint?

'Certainly. I can give you more than one. Listen closely:

'LOVE.

'TRUTH.'

Here we go, back to square one.

Or? Maybe not. Just a bit slow on the uptake; the Kat's brain talking, innit... Hah!... So, *truth is love* after all? He's still got it wrong, then? L—

'I know who you mean. He's more right than most already, and he is still working on it. He'll get there soon, like everyone, when their Time comes. Very well, I will take that to be your Question, Yehoshua. This shall be My only Answer. Listen very carefully.

'*TRUTH CAN MEAN LOVE, BUT IT NEED NOT IF IT WISHES NOT.*

'*LOVE, ONLY IF LOVE, IS ALWAYS TRUTH, BUT ONLY IF TRUE.*'

I *knew* it! What was I thinking? Never gonna get a straight answer from... *Him*. Just words, words, and more words. Flying in circles like little yellow Tweetie Birds around my poor Kat skull.

...

'I see, most regretfully, though you are now in possession of your only possible, *true* Answer: You are still confused, and suffering even more greatly. I did warn you that this would happen. It usually does.'

Yeah yeah. Everyone's full of bloody excuses after they fuck around in Jericho. Hey, all come to Jericho: the holiday hotspot for impossible all-potent maniacs.

'That's not entirely fair. Very well, try this on:

'IF YOU KNOW WHAT THE TRUTH IS, YOU MAY FIND LOVE.

'HAVING ENCOUNTERED LOVE, YOU SHALL DISCOVER THE TRUTH.'

Just one enormous, bottomless fortune cookie, aren't we. Does anyone around here ever understand you?

'Yes. Someone new is just beginning to, very nearby.'

Who? Enzo?

'You tell Me.'

Why won't you ever just say: plain and simple, Yes! Or. No! Don't we deserve to know?

'Yes, you do. Very much so.'

Don't you love us enough, even, to *tell* us anything at all?

'I Love you too much. And I am Telling you all the Time.'

But you'll just sit back on your cloud nine and a half and do nothing about any of it, regardless.

'I thought I made Myself quite Clear. I am *always*... Doing Things. You just don't notice most of the time. You're not supposed to. Those are the Rules. They exist only so you may thrive in *Truth*, and never merely, so that I might impose My *Will* on you whenever it would Please Me, which, commonly, it would.

'Good luck finding your second Answer. The vital one. The one that shall change everything for the both of you.

'Do you remember that Question? In your current state, you really ought to take notes. Here, I shall paraphrase:

'DO I REALLY WANT TO KNOW?'

'I *would* Pray that you answer it soon. But. That really wouldn't accomplish a Hell of a lot, would it.

‘I *Know* you have it in you. You have My *Word* in that Matter of yours. And My Word is *Forever*. I shouldn’t be telling you this either, but since, after All is Said and Done, it is so very obvious. May it make you Feel a little better:

‘I LOVE YOU MY CHILD

‘INTO BEING FOREVER.

‘That is My job, and I Am, if I may say so Myself, rather Good at it.’

Instant Dimensional Tunnel Effect, we are drawn up towards the mysterious divine light...

[Rapid Dissolve through white—we’re heading across all of time and space now, from within a vast black nothing towards pure light, that might with a little imagination resemble the other end of a long tunnel—]

Trio

[—and come up right where we left off, on Scene minus two, once more:]

Even though it *felt* to Jericho, strangely and all of a sudden, like an eternity, no more than a few minutes could have passed since both of them, almost together, had come. And it was only the beginning. Enzo was dancing around him like some ecstatic voodoo priest, casting jumbled, incomprehensible incantations that appeared to involve plenty of exciting triple action in all imaginable configurations.

Will someone please finally wake up and come looking for us.

Jericho had somehow carelessly managed to climb down from his perch, and was leaning weakly against the shiny leather love slab. He was drugged to the gills with a heady concoction of post-coital exhaustion, hypoglycemia, Enzo's endless, hypnotic, crazed nattering and prodding, and the sticky, pungent male aroma of the close cell. Formerly Jericho's lovely little fruity Wellness Chamber. Now unwell Enzo's tiny chapel of perpetual freaky lovin'.

Maybe that's what he's doing, he's sending more spells into me with every poke, invoking his invisible familiars to possess me, gnaw away at my brain, snip off connections here and solder new ones there. Reconfigure me in his image to his own specifications.

Hark! Enzo's fatal mating call.

That's that then, you're done for. Living proof of it. Soon, zombie proof. Yes, probably he is moulding me right now into his willing zombie slave toy... gotta...

Gotta... make some kinda... some kinda *spell*, yeah... Spell it. L-O shit no... M-O-V-E. Make a move, Fucking Messiah. All quiet now, huh? Catgut your tongue? Caught a cockatoo? Yessireebob. In a web. The little spider is coming. Over and over.

It's all one. Who cares. No, *two!* He is definitely talking about two jacks for our new queen. Two guys at the same time. Maybe not so bad. Or three? Something about twins now? No, later. For now, just training

me. Still so new at all this. *Me!* Ha! Dunit with four, no, *five* whaddyacallem, the others, before a life covered in pricks. Not at the same time, natch, and not, you know, the other way round. Never did chicks (that's the word) with dicks. Mighta prepared me better. No, the old Jericho didn't have so much cock power. But the new improved one will. Yessir. All the time. All over and inside too. Enzo's Big Pussycat.

Could take weeks to train my, *whaddoIneedtocallitfromnow*, whenever I beg him for more, please, *more*, oh yes, *pleasesir!* Stretch my. Thingy.

Boypussy. *Ick.* Need practice. Hungry for more. Already? No. Actually. I'm *hungry*.

Months of supplies down here, thanks boss. Spades of time. Queen of Spades. What's that supposed to mean?

There had been something, hadn't there, that Jericho should be understanding, that had recently passed across Enzo's luscious lips?

Too fuzzy, Peaches. Can't put my finger in it. Too tight. Like, drunk. Pretty peaches. Like his navel. Peach fuzz. God I need a drink. Should get hisself some pecs and lose those specs. Go running. Who? Me? No, gay guys. Would come running, fall over themselves for him, yeah, that's it.

Doesn't need 'em anymore. Cause he has me now? Yes. Piss off, boys. Enzo's all mine. No, the glasses. They don't help at all. We know. Pretend. Let him hope.

He prays and hopes and prays, and then one day whoops it actually works and I get appointed Saviour. Well, maybe that's fine by me. Sick of fucking around, feeling lonely. 'Specially of late. Didn't know I could feel so lonely. Maybe that's why this is happening now. He's saving me too.

It's gonna be okay. I'll get used to it all. Our new pals? Not so much. Don't care for them. Him though. The kid's okay.

Who knows how long I'll stay mesmerized like this? Rest of our lives? He's gorgeous and doesn't even know it. I was so ugly to him. Stupid, selfish prick. Yeah, I'm getting sweet on the kid. But what's up with the

ménage kick? I mean, isn't it enough that *I* love him? Shouldn't we be everything we need, just the *two* of us? Fuck! Gotta talk some truth to his hormones! Already getting insanely jealous, and the other guy's not even here yet. Or is he already bored with me? Oh shit. Oh *no*. I'm not sure I could... Fuck. Enzo? Sweetheart? *Please* tell me you still love me! *Only* me! Too weak to open my mouth. I gotta... have to... know... going crazy... Tell me it isn't so! Honeybuns?

Enzooooooooo!

How would he sneak the other guy past the system, anyway? Locked up airtight by now. Everybody else out, erased their code. Erase my code so I can't bolt. In my head. As if I'd ever want to. No trust, that kid. Even our hackerman wouldn't be able to get back in. Put my head together again. Not now. Wouldn't let ya touch it. We'd beat you off first. With really big sticks.

Ha! Probably wrecked the keypads on both ends. Gonna have to make do with me, genius! Better learn to enjoy me, all mo-no-game-us-ly! Got plenty left over for ya, ol' Jay has. Hasn't even gotten started. Sex-crazed, after being love-starved. You and me both kid. Two crazy kiddos.

Starving, all the while, starving while fucking. Six months maybe, for three.

Fuck, he installed it, piece of cake to fix it. It's going to be *him*, isn't it. Sure. Enzo's fantasy threesome. Together at last. The three freaky amigos. Even bigger hairy bugger. Enzo's cute and fuzzy. *He's* hirsute.

Ménage chez Wolfie. Stocked up on candles. Maybe I can teach them to wax.

We'll be fine, for a bit. Magic. Interlocking rings. Ancient trick. Easy. After that? Three star-crossed rainbows in heaven?

The End?

...

Maybe the power will go off. Release locks. Find electrician. He's in Jericho. Enzo's already put in a monster backup. Go on forever. Like that movie. Awful. With Jack

Blackout.

Jack maybe Jill.

Scherzo

[Five second fade up on: A hard, naked Enzo tightly hugging a limp, dazed Jericho.]

Oh no, not again.

I'm dead, sure, that's it. Stuck in Pure buggery-gatery.

Bill, that's it, Bill Murray. Stuck in Punks-a-tawny.

Such foresight, packing my eternal intended. No getting bored, having Precious here with me. But am definitely getting... whoopsy, look at *you* all shiny and

Oh no, not—

Astoundingly, yes. And no, not at all. Jericho really had fainted and fortuitously collapsed into the arms of his closely hovering friend, who had caught him before Jericho could do some more brain damage to himself. “*Caro! Carissimo! Sorbole!... Così. Va bene così. Va bene. Sì. Okay?*”

Jericho was finally coming to. (**Not dead, ha.**) He opened his eyes. (**My saviour.**) Enzo beamed back at him. Jericho desperately tried to speak. It was incredibly important.

I love you Enzo. I tried everything else but nothing went right. Ergo, quid, quo, this must be so.

“Yeah, okay,” barely a mumble, but he did manage a sliver of a smile. Through pure force of will, he moved the inch he needed to kiss Enzo, and fervently hoped he was about to prove, to both of them, that he truly loved the boy.

Enzo clapped and bounced.

I thought that was pretty good, all things considered. But wow.

“You see now, yes,” he grinned, “nobody know how we do, where we do, but we do, we do again and again, all three of them, you are amazing, I know it, but it *will* work more better even!”

Sure Enzo. Whatever you want. I'm happy, if you're happy too.

Gonna need a new name. New Josh puts paid to old Jericho, I guess. No more surfin' hot-waxed leggy boards. Is Josh an okay gay name? Waves of hot steaming cum on my legs instead. How about Rico? Forget it, no more waxing. I could pass for Latino. Of course we shouldn't. Hell, I used to pass for straight. We're real men. Massive gay dudes. Wouldn't have to catch the waves anymore. Nothing to prove. They'd be aimed right at me. Perfect. All play and no work. Coconut milk baths. Nice. And so convenient.

Jericho managed to whisper, "Cause I won't be able to move a muscle, kiddo. *Sheesh.*"

"But *yes, of course* you will!" Enzo chortled, shaking his head in amusement. "You are our *friend*, Shericcoh, big *strong* friend, you will make the... the *effort*, for *us*, for your team, *carissimo!*" Enzo was jumping up and down with glee.

So much innocence. So beautiful. He has no idea. So happy. My perfect sunshiny love. All because he figured out how to make me love him. Woulda figgered it myself, sooner or later. How couldn't I?

Sweetest kid in the whole world. Just for me. Don't deserve. But thanks, Big Guy.

...

Way too damn happy. Not over this. Threesome. Sugar-plum visions of enchanted fairies. Not sex slaves. Not Enzo. Wouldn't ever. We're his *friends*.

You great big dumb-ass worthless piece of arrogant wannabe prick shit, *Jesus!*

E.n.z.o. F.r.i.e.n.d. N.o.t. M.o.n.s.t.e.r.

Things were becoming much clearer. (**Can spell too. Loads of hidden talents.**) And horribly disconcerting for poor Jericho.

He's not really after me. I'm *not* the love of his life. Shit. What am I supposed to do now? All by my lonesome again? Fuck around like before? Fuck, no way man! Slit my wrists first.

Hold it. Wrong train of thought. Not helping. *Focus.* On Enzo. What's he really saying?

“A *lot* of *work*, I know, but together *we* can... *handle*... the three big, *coso*, the... tubes maybe, three *giant* tubes, yes. We finish by... three days, four most, and *after* you can... *relax* yourself again.”

Presto

[Scene: Exterior, vast ocean, bright day, POV Jericho, still underwater, struggling to reach the undulating surface from below—]

Dives up, up towards the bright light, desperately striving for Enzo, his blazing sun, warm loving energy drawing him up, towards Life. Far beneath Jericho, the deep, dark, cold Past. Fear. His heart's oblivion. But above him in the sky, Enzo is beckoning, guiding the prodigal soul back into their beautiful world. One final great thrust of his powerful legs, and Jericho breaks the surface. All becomes as clear as the crystal blue elements surrounding them. They are flying now, it looks like, as...

[Camera pulls up and circles them, going wide, centred on the two together, in each other's arms, splashing and paddling far below like happily grinning young boys on their endless summer vacation.]

The proof of their true love at hand—each other, united—*such* joy and relief, beneath hot pink skies and blazing chocolate sunshine.

[Cut to CU, head shot, Enzo POV.]

The delirious, drenched Surfin' Messiah, once capsized by the Big One, back in his element again, his sparkling turquoise eyes and effervescent grin responding to everything Enzo's been trying so hard to tell him, needing no words at all (except maybe One, that cannot be spoken):

I understand what you're saying now, all of it! Thank you! I love you, kiddo!

[End

Of Scene. Cut to:]

Ablösung

All at once it hit him, and Jericho puckered right back up. It wasn't as bad as he'd feared. Not at all. Of course Enzo loved him, and only him; he'd have known it, if he'd really listened to their hearts all along.

No, it was fucking worse.

He was going to have to *work really hard for three or four days*.

Enzo happily confirmed Jericho's ultimate nightmare vision of defenceless zombie slavery: "It is very hard, yes, for me too, so *new* here. No... nobody *trust* Enzo... but I *teach* and it will be *easy*... *come si dice?*... the smooth sailors, *sì? Chiaro*... You want the smooth sailors, so you can do the surfing with them after." He pouted. Devastatingly.

Jericho burst out laughing. Smooth sailors. Full Monty. The Queen of Spades not playing with a full deck. Enzo was just too much. They were both, in their mutual misapprehension, hysterical.

"THREE-CARD MONTE!" Jericho finally managed to wheeze, between fits, "With *people*, not *playing cards*," desperately gasping for air.

Enzo glared at him. "But that is what I *say* all the along, you big *dado*! We will make *everybody* so happy! We finish on time, the big finale, and they all cheer and clapping." Enzo bounded around, deliciously jiggling his butt at Jericho as he geared up to run out the door.

"I *must* tell everyone *now*, we have *no* time to... to *loosen ourself now!*"

Jericho *had* to control himself, signal somehow, try to shout, *anything*. It was *important*. *Really* important. He managed to stop giggling (**Giggling, for Pete's sake! Chortling maybe.**) like a schoolgirl listening to a potentially dirty joke; his huge, manly frame was quaking with the effort. He looked and sounded like a mountain of brass racked by an earthquake.

Screw it. Focus!

He swallowed, snorted, then threw an explosive coughing fit, that froze Enzo in his tracks in the nick of time, half-way into the short open passage towards the work area. "WAIT! *Caro mio!*"

Enzo slunk back inside and sheepishly shut the door behind him.

“Aren’t we forgetting something?”

“Um...”

“Yeah, *Um*. Woulda been my words exactly. Followed by: You’re like totally *nekk, kid*.”

Enzo blushed and frantically tried to find his clothes under the mess they’d left on the floor. “I understand. Yes. *Chiaro*. You must tell... tell *him* now, *sì, chiaramente*... what has happen,” he babbled, “with me. It was not the dreaming. *Dimostrato, è così*. To you, like—like what—what I do.” He threw on his pants and shirt, angrily forced his belt into the wrong, painfully tight hole, but he couldn’t fumble more than the top two buttons closed, and gave up. “So *so* sorry. *Invece mi dispiace*...”

Jericho just stared at the boy, whose gentle, open features were awash with the plain, all-consuming guilt over what he’d forced Jericho to do. His eyes searched for Jericho imploringly, but his former friend and ally for once completely ignored his terrible pain.

Jericho was fascinated by the spectacle of the pale furry, pumping spheroid that kept pushing past Enzo’s flapping shirttails. The little belly-balloon appeared absurdly exaggerated as a result of Enzo’s clumsy conquest of his pants. With its cute little tie-off right at the centre, pointed at Jericho like a dark, fuzzy eyeball, it seemed to be slyly winking every time it jutted forward at him, and then retreated back playfully, as soon as it had his attention, to hide behind the curtain again. *Catch me if you can*, it seemed to be winking. A one-eyed, bearded belly-head, it was bobbing on the sill of its window to another world, between grey curtains fluttering in the breeze. That strange wonderland from whence Jericho had so recently climbed back to return to this one, the normal one, his reality.

Whatever that means, now.

He’d been over there. Felt what it felt like. Profoundly inhaled its strange, breathable, musky air.

Dude, I’ve always enjoyed wiggly butts and soft, round bellies. More to fondle, more lovin’ to handle.

Bit of furriness? Hey, that's what makes it special, this new guy thing. Exciting, to be honest. Teensy bit kinky. Kinda exotic. Deliriously ticklish. Totally unique. That's not my brain talking, try a bit lower down right about... now. *Ooof*. Could someone bolt the door again. We're a bit busy ogling our boyfriend.

Dude down there not really coming out swinging, but just has an Enzo thingy? That would be, let's face it, even weirder. Like, guess what dude, I'm going gay all over for ya, one-time special, me and you, right here, right now? Come off it. Totally McAbba. Stalky-creepy. No way, it's always in you or it isn't, just gotta find the right switch. No man, lemme try to explain: It's like, over there, droves of babes, like you said, cool, tons of fun; but now over here, we have on offer just the one Enzobabe. With special accessory.

Don't get me wrong, love the ample birthday suit, helps whet the appetite, sure, but once my Enzobaby gets going, believe you me, he's all-dude to the core. Creamy Sicilian delight with a bone-crunchy centre. Total fucking massive dude hotness. Fuck I'm moist again, just splaining the matter. Don't ever ask me to give a class in Enzology. Lesson's over. Can I go now? Pretty please? Urgently need to unwrap my present, look, it's getting impatient too.

Indeed, as he'd perceived through the magical combination of their shared gifts, inside this soft, delectable wrapping had been hidden just for him, all this time, *his* special treat, all Enzo, all powerful, all man, all love, all the time. An addictive confection indeed. A most heady drug.

To be handled with extra-special care. All this incredible treasure. You never knew who might get hurt in the end. When it would be time for the last withdrawal. Because it was clear, despite their amazing discoveries of the past hour, that neither of them was done looking for their own *truth* for a while yet. Which didn't mean they couldn't share the magnificent, difficult journey together, teach, adore and protect each other along the way.

Enzo was breathing hard, a pathetic bundle of puppy nerves. His returning arousal remained, at this moment, anatomical, its own urgent signals blocked by his brainstem's rising hysteria.

“*Prego.*” Enzo managed to put on his glasses with two shaky hands. “Please, I am... I am to be okay. Ready... I hope *you* are... *please? Are you? Okay? No. How can you... Oo-oo-oo!* My beautiful most friend in the world.” His soft, wide lips started to quiver.

“Tell you what.” Jericho considered, growing serious, as the last of the tickly champagne evaporated.

The poor kid is absolutely shattered by what he thinks he did to me. Did. Did he? All by himself? Of course not. Dammit. It was just as much my doing. Randy Messiah. Surfin’ Sex Fiend. Oh Enzo. Sweetheart. Can we pick up the pieces together? Please? I need you. To be okay. With me, us. I need us to be okay. Together. Couldn’t live with my fucked-up self otherwise. Not by myself, darling Enzo all gone, over, destroyed. By me. Fuck.

Beyond the haze of the room, Jericho focused on his friend. He instinctively tried to reassure him with a devoted gaze that Enzo of course couldn’t see.

Totally blind right now. Too much steam. Pink hot-pant steam. Fucking mood lights. Carefully, gently, talk him down. Or he’ll bust a brain vein soon.

Hesitantly he offered, “I... think it’s best, for now anyway... to... if we don’t spill... Oh *hell, Enzo. You* know what just happened. It’s all your fucking—”

“*My... yes... My fault. All. I know.*” Enzo was a portrait of wretched misery. “*I know you do not feel... for me. This love. I know. You are my friend, I know I know I know,*” he started to keel hysterically, “*colpa mia ma mio malgrado faro una colossale minchiata!!!*”

Enzo’s pretty lips—

He does have pretty lips, too pretty for a manly man like him, really.

—were twitching all over the place. His eyes, lost and enormous behind his crazy specs, were starting to brim over.

Time to take some decisive action here, Jay Kat old chum. Won’t have dudes crying in my wellness area. *Wellness* being the name on the plate.

People get whole here, not shattered. Assholes, maybe, but not their owners.

He took the two steps that separated their current universes and carefully wrapped all of fragile Enzo deeply into his enormous arms. He murmured, “*Hell* no sweetheart! It’s *not* all your fault because we’re *both* fucking freaks, lovable freaks, and *yes*, I’m your *only* fucking *boyfriend* in this joint and by the way I love you so don’t you *fucking dare*... Oh, just *fuck* me all the time why don’t ya.”

My operation. My terms.

“Nonononono I *promise* I won’t... *mai più gli stessi cazzo!*”

Jericho sighed. “*Power*, I meant. Taking over. It’s all your power taking over, controlling... well, *confusing* me. Plus mine, all muddled together in there. We both needed it so bad. I get it, kid, at last I do. Me too, turns out, all that time, wanting to be, really *be* with... someone special. *Really* special. And there *you* are. Even though you’re, you know, for, me, before, I mean, a, you know, just a *guy*. Now I *know*...”

“I adore you! But you... we... we need to learn to control this. Okay? Take it *slow*. Easy. On *each other*. Do it only if... when... *if* it turns out... shit I hope so... *both* of us are, um, *into* it without, um, *assistance*. I’ll help us both, promise. I know *a few* things about no *self-control*, when it comes to... splashing around in the *love pond*.”

Blazes to Becky, that sounded lame. How do you *flirt* with a guy? Without saying too much? Letting him take the reins. Decide for himself. I should be great at this. Lots of practice. With the ladies. Lotta good that’s doing me now. Waste of time.

Shit. Is he feeling better yet? Somewhere in there, yeah. Can feel it rising. Getting lovely and warm. Little rays of sunshiny lovin’ peering out through those bleak stormy clouds. That’s my Enzo. Good boy. Not quite off the hook yet, is our Josh Rico. Shit that’s lame too. Crunch time.

Enzo was totally still, unresisting, melted into Jericho.

Tatty Teddy with his sniffly nose gone all pink, not blue. No fight left. One huge puddle of vulnerability. Watch where you tread, Angel. Hey, that kinda works. Bit pretentious, but, dude, so was Jericho.

Whatever Jericho said next, he'd just take it, the Old Enzo. Who still thought he knew full well, deep down, that he *always* lost everything in the end, no matter how fervently he loved.

Jericho heaved a profound sigh, to gather his heart and soul. "I was gonna say it's... for now... Shit. *From now... it's all on the house.*" Slowly he exhaled. Would it work?

Please God make it work. I'm such shit at this still.

...

Enzo didn't react at all for a moment. Not one muscle twitched. His eyes were shut, a single huge tear creeping out from under his lashes. Then he seemed to get it. His weather rapidly turned from imminent flash flood to radiant skies.

"Grazie di cuore. Jericho! Ti voglio un mondo die bene!"

"Shhh! Um." **Kiddo. Italian, fuck.** *"Ragazzo."* **Ouch.** "It's no problem. Forget it. I... I sort of... *shit*... I sorta enjoyed it too okay happy now," Jericho mumbled at the incredibly interesting bare wall past Enzo's tousled mop, grateful the concrete didn't have its own set of Puggle eyes to gleam up at him adoringly.

Enzo sighed blissfully, *"Really?"* and tilted his head up and opened his eyes straight at Jericho.

Yup. There they are. Everything back to normal. Warm and wet like puppy dog tongues slobbering over your... did he spy a *different*, new sparkle therein, and potentially a sly curl to a... just the *one*... corner of Enzo's lips?

Sparkle? Sly? Enzo? Uh oh. Who was in control here, after all? Just helping out, just a little?

Who cared?

Jericho let himself linger, revelling in the sensation of drowning in Enzo's huge, dark, glittering pools of loving mischief, while sabraging whole caseloads of fresh champagne.

Brimfire and Hellstones. The kid's got balls. Lovely, bursting, endless supplies of 'em.

Kadenz

Hi puppy. What big, beautiful chocolaty eyes you have. Can you see mine? They're brimming over with lovin' for you.

Enzo could indeed, and smiled an even bigger smile, just before they kissed deeply and for a long while. Just kissed. Lovingly. Ignoring, for a special moment, the clamouring below. It turned out Jericho had, after all, helped Enzo to see people again, though he wouldn't be told for a while.

Enzo wanted to enjoy his new secret. Since right after the singing bowls, he had been *seeing* Jericho, clearly and in radiant light. All of him, and right through him, too. But he wouldn't be seeing anyone else, other than his lover, for a while after. Then, very slowly, others would start appearing to him again, even while his eyesight was gasping its last. It would be a difficult experience to handle, nightmarish at first, because they would not appear like Jericho. At first they would hardly seem human at all. And the eyes would, in the long run, turn out to be the hardest to *see* again. To *perceive* his next pair of eyes, he still had a long, hard road to travel. But Jericho would be beside him now. So Enzo had a much, much better chance of making it through.

Enzo eventually broke their lip-lock and stirred, a little impatiently, in the huge, warm nest of Jericho's embrace. Rapidly he recited, like a naughty schoolboy pretending to have learned his lesson so he can skip detention, "Okay okay *okay*. My Big *Dado*. Can I go now? I *really* must go talk about the... doing the *Monty* with everyone now..."

Jericho grinned and released him. He ran his huge paw through the mad mochaccino tousle that was hovering anxiously around the tip of his nose.

Not vague at all. Nothing muddy about it. Precisely how I like my hot-cocoa-coffee-foamed-milk thingy, how Enzo always prepares it on that monstrosity. Just didn't bother to mention it, before, is all. Makes me happy, my very own first, secret... Enzoism. 'kay??

He gently did up the rest of the young man's buttons, and fixed his belt while tucking his shirt in. Then he twirled his boyfriend around for a final assessment.

(A few wrinkles here and there, but you're looking most excellent, if I do say so myself.)

Jericho patted Enzo affectionately on his swell glutes and commanded, “*Off* you scoot, puppy, our practice’s over for the day, well, couple of hours at least; show’ em how the trick’s done. Gonna be fabulous. Earn you a medal. Bring us some peace from the Beast.

“Hurry back though, okay, or do I need to let you touch-read the state I’m in?”

“A *dopo*, you big *dope*!”

“Love you too, baby, bye-bye!”

Curious. Really curious. The bubbles had risen much higher than last time, right up somewhere deep inside his chest.

Enzo in turn demonstrated his glittery, sly new Enzogrin and flounced off to spread the news of everyone’s problems instantly solved. Well, not everyone’s, not instantly. Jericho had a shitload of actual *labour* to cope with for the next few, backbreaking days. Though really a minor sacrifice, for all he had already been rewarded with today, when all is said and done.

Read you loud and clear, dude. Not so stupid as you enjoy making me out to. Being.

Schluss

Jericho was left behind in the Wellness Chamber, feeling unexpectedly well himself. The starkly muscular and gloriously naked buck perched his magnificent peaches onto his shiny calf-skin altar. He'd have to do the whole floor, alas, later. Or the next client was liable to slide the three feet across the greasy tarmac and tumble head over heels into the love slab. The candles had died, in apparent agony, long ago. There were sad, misshapen white clumps sticking everywhere: to the table, to the built-in shelving, atop the work hutch and across the floor; as if to unequivocally, emblematically commemorate the recent inauguration of the Wellness Chamber as an extended dual-use facility. Jericho paid no heed to the artfully arranged disaster area; he was lost in thought.

Some critical stuff has to be dealt with, and fast, or I'll go bonkers. Better make a list right now.

One. Decent togs. Morpheus knows he'll be able to afford them soon, working for the man.

Two. A trim above the neck. Swans could be having whole families in there, unnoticed.

Three. Thorough weeding and maintenance below said neck. No wax though. *Egads*. Not on his delicate, pale skin. Over my dead body. I mean, ouch, dude! No close shaves either, I've been told off for that before. Itches and scratches both affected parties on contact. Double ouch.

But Jericho would insist on an elegant trim. Take them to some real artist in the field, so to speak. Regularly. There were limits. Not as many as he'd imagined once, but.

Four, no more one-way mind-fuck. Right? At least, not until after I start my engines, I can do that just fine by myself, thank you. After we make contact? Just a little bit? For the... rush? Eensy-beensy fistful of Electronboy? For that... total connection? Already tingling, just thinking. Addictive as fuck. Unlike... anything. Not even...

...barrelling right off the lip at Teahupoo? Hmmmm? 'Member, dude? Whoa.

Whoa. Switched-on Leone's even better than that. Gonna be some lucky dude snags the kid for himself one of these days. Not too soon, I hope. Give us some time, okay? Coupla years, or five? Hope that guy's gonna know it when he nicks the prize out from under, or off of top o' me.

Or I'll *break his fucking prick off.*

Would it hurt us in the end? Playing with that peculiar fire, willingly? It will me, a bit, I'm sure. Major junk funk, on top of, shit, my heartbreak. Get used to it, Angel though you may look to him now, you're just the rebound, if that. *Felt* it. Not a possible hope in hell. Easy lovin', best before, that's me. True too, whodathunk it. Lovin' hard and true now. With you, not so gentle. Not so easy to let go either, in the end. We'll figure it out. Together.

It's about loving each other every minute, innit, and ever after, no matter where the path leads or when it forks. Become part of each other's *truth*, celebrate that, now and always. And when, one day, far away future, we head for the next, unknowable adventure. Then we'll leave behind a few more sparkles than before. Do it any damn way you got talent. This vast shitty hole needs lovers real bad, of any stripe and current. Especially someone incredible, someone so utterly unique as Enzo Leone Ferrara, blind electrician to the brightest stars of magic and mystery, from Nowheresville, southern Italy.

And, may I add, the sweetest, most heady fruit ever ripened under that hot Sicilian sun, on that ancient, impoverished, soon to be most talked-about little vineyard on the planet.

There was a polite, melodious and almost synchronized, clearing of throats at the open door.

Uh oh. Forgot all about them. Better get 'em back in shape for what Enzo's got planned with those two.

"Sorry, guys! Gimme a, *erm*, sec to get dressed here. Then I'll do whomever's got the most pain first... 'kay, c'mon in, whichever you are. Right, you had the wings, so you're the ankle."

The present tale is all *true*. As will the future be, I promise. We're almost there already.

The End

Of Oil & Water
just silly fun and games.

The Beginning

of
Rainfire.

Acknowledgments

To the large handful of lovely individuals who prodded me into writing, I thank you from the bottom of my soul. The whole sadistic lot of you: **Dev, Liz, Macky, Katharina, Lori** and **Danni**. If I forgot you, forgive me, the freely flowing drinks at our little garden party of unearthly delights have gone to my head and messed with my memory. If I mentioned anyone who did not tell me to write, or begged me not to, I apologize as well, but at least you know you are blameless.

To my gentle, incisive beta readers: **Lucas Lyons, Dev, Macky, Plainbrownwrapper,** and **Averin Noble**. If I managed not to embarrass myself completely, it is due only to you.

The world in which this rather odd-man-out story and its brethren take place is directly inspired by **Jordan Castillo Price**'s brilliant *Magic Mansion*, which made me hunger for more adventures in a place where real and pretend-magic overlap. I hope that I managed to treat her own ideas, transform them and expand upon them, in a manner that honours the age-old spirit of inspiration, adaptation and variation without which art in any form would be impossible, rather than the equally age-old but somewhat less honourable tradition of literary larceny. In all seriousness, I had no idea she had herself developed a series called *Channeling Morpheus*, until after I'd come up with the name of the show. Spooky.

I have gratefully and with permission been able to draw on **Deirdré Straughan**'s delightful research into Italian slang at www.beginningwithi.com. Any errors in usage, spelling or grammar are completely down to me.

I've done my best to be accurate and respectful about degenerative ocular disease, given the context of a narrative celebrating a fantasy of magical healing.

Big wet kisses to the instigators of the Internet and the gazillion contributors to **Wikipedia et. al.**, to the organisers and volunteers of "**Love Has No Boundaries**" (*Don't Read in the Closet 2013*), to **Jen McJ** for putting

up with me, and especially to **Andra**, who posted the image that resulted in this labour of, mostly, hot lovin'. Also to the editors who communicated with me through **JoAnn H** and to formidable formatter **SueM**.

I dedicate this work, and implicitly all that may follow it, to my partner in life and in dreams, without whom I wouldn't be here now, and probably wouldn't be anywhere at all. **To Jimmy**.

Berlin, 6 April 2013

Referenced Works, Characters, real-life Personages

- “**Ursonate**” (1923-1932) by Kurt Schwitters, the progenitor of
- **Merz**, which isn’t really a Dadaist movement, but is about finding beauty in the jumbled leftovers of existence.
- “**Space Oddity**” (1969) and “**Ashes to Ashes**” (1980) as performed by David Bowie, father of
- **Major Tom**, a star man.
- “**The Full Monty**” (1997) dir. by Peter Cattaneo, *not* to be confused with
- **Three-Card Monte** *aka.* Bola Bola *aka.* Ménage-à-Card *aka.* Find the Lady, origin unknown.
- “**Groundhog Day**” (1993), by Harold Ramis and Danny Ruben, and starring **Bill Murray**, stuck in Punxsutawney, not Purgatory.
- “**Dances with Wolves**” (1990) directed by and starring blue-eyed, nowadays salt & pepper Kevin Costner.
- “**Star Trek, the Next Generation**,” television series created by, among others, Gene Roddenberry, featuring: Gates McFadden as **Dr. Beverly Crusher**, Marina Sirtis as the empath **Deanna Troi**, and Whoopi Goldberg as the weird, wise **Guinan**.
- “**Three Little Pigs**,” and their Wolfie, via James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps.
- “**The Frog Prince**; or, Iron Henry,” who sadly only has one golden ball, via the Brothers Grimm.
- **Sylvester** and **Tweety**, Warner Brothers characters.
- **Fritz the Cat**, by Robert Crumb; or possibly Felix the Cat by Otto Messmer, or maybe Pat Sullivan; but most probably Krazy Kat, by George Herriman.
- **Enzo Ferrari**, famous car nut, who admired the
- **Jaguar XK-E** automobile in the

- *Classic Car Review* (1964) article by Sean Curtis.
- **Spider-Man**, as envisioned by Marvel Comics and Sam Raimi.
- **Tatty Teddy & my Blue Nose friends**, who are trademarked by Carte Blanche Greetings Ltd.
- **Pygmalion** (1912) by George Bernard Shaw, wherein appears Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle.
- **ELIZA** (1964-66), a computer program written by Joseph Weizenbaum to satirically simulate a Rogerian psychotherapist.
- And another Star Being with many names, among them **YHWH**. Whose word, they say, flows through all of us, provided we want to know the answer to the most important question.

Author Bio

The author was born in Germany half a life-time ago (at least, or so he hopes), but spent more than half again of that—his growing years, coming out, education and first career—in Canada. Professionally the author has also wandered a bit; showing an early talent for drawing, he then planned to become a documentary film-maker, before stumbling into the burgeoning field of digital animation, which he dropped out of college to pursue. Years later, inspired by his now husband, another geographically and culturally errant soul, he re-entered academia to pursue a degree in scenography that turned into an MFA in directing for the stage. This he sporadically practises in of all places Berlin, which is plainly swarming with unemployed theatre artists.

By January of 2013 the devoted couple had saved up enough change for their second Mediterranean cruise. As a random side effect of buying his first eReader to avoid lugging along a stack of Francis, Pratchett, Colfer and Silva again, the then never in a million years future author discovered some writings intriguingly dubbed “m/m”. About a month later, the man who believed all his life he had absolutely no stories to tell was typing away for fourteen hours a day (still is).

This is his third and so far only completed work. The author is currently scribbling notes in the margins on part six of a series of novels while desperately trying to focus on volume one. Which is what he’d been quietly doing, minding his business, when one then still foetal, nerdy minor character piped up, “Bello, there’s that pic of me on Goodreads, so when will I finally get to be? And I want my own story, and, and a really cute, no, totally hot, smart-aleck boyfriend, like, um... scusami... I need someone, cazzo, right, fucking, NOW.”

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HANDS-ON JUSTICE

By Laurie Terson

Photo Description

Two naked men lie facedown on a flat rock, the man on top has his left arm on top of the lower man's head. The lower man has both hands under his head. The upper man may be restraining the lower man, preventing him from escaping.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He used to be a damn good agent until he threw it all away. He's been on the run for two years, but we finally pinned down his location. They sent me to bring him in. I've got him, but he's fighting me every step of the way. He won't go in willingly, and I won't go without him. Oh, and I'd really like a gun fight between them at some point...

A couple of notes: No ménage or paranormal please. A little D/s is ok (perhaps even encouraged) but no hardcore BDSM. HEA not required, but at least a HFN would be nice.

Sincerely,

Ariadne

Story Info

Genre: action, contemporary

Tags: law enforcement, bounty hunter, outdoor sex, enemies to lovers

Content warnings: some graphic violence

Word count: 20,124

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HANDS-ON JUSTICE

By Laurie Terson

CHAPTER ONE

July 2010, 0200 hours – Stateside, somewhere in a U.S./Mexico border town

No moon hung in the sky, making the night overcast, dark and sultry. Storms in the Gulf of Mexico had brought showers earlier in the evening. Without a breeze, the moisture steamed off the pavement and the humidity hung like a breathable blanket over the sleeping city. The citizens rested as easily in their beds as they could in this crime-riddled town. Tonight, they slept unaware of the movement of black-clothed figures easing their way out of the few shadows surrounding the derelict warehouse on the east end of town.

The governmental alphabet soup was cooking tonight. Ten men total, two each from the FBI, ICE, DHS, the local Sheriff's Department, and last but not least, the DEA. It had taken almost two years to get the intel they needed from the various informants, stakeouts, and wiretaps. A raid on one of Mexico's biggest drug lords took a lot of planning.

The team all wore full tactical gear, which held the heat like a mother. Drops of sweat rolled from under their helmets, down their faces, soaking into the black T-shirts they had on under their body armor. None of them gave away their positions by even a twitch. Huddled by the edge of the door with the team leader, five of them waited for a sign from him to surge through it. The other four crawled around the back of the building, waiting for the sound of the door being busted in as their signal to move.

Crouched on one knee, DEA Agent Justice Thornton—JT to his team—listened for any sound that shouldn't be there. Other than the muted murmurs of activity inside, and the far-off barking of a dog, he didn't hear a thing. The quiet scared Justice, it reminded him of how still a forest got when a predator lurked close.

His gut burned. Years spent as a sniper in the Army taught him to listen to his gut. He felt again the tingle of his spidey-senses—they had gone into

overdrive with the change of personnel on his nine-man raid team. He still had no idea why Agent Adrian Guzman had been switched to his team. The only reason a member got pulled days before an assignment was due to illness or injury. Neither applied here, since no one on his team had either problem.

But he had been ordered by the higher-ups to accept this substitution, and he always obeyed direct orders. Everything in him said this mission was FUBAR—he just hoped no one got killed. With a quick glance back at the man behind him, he realized that some of his discomfort came from the fact that he and Agent Guzman—Guz to his friends—were more than fellow agents. Just a little under two years ago they'd become lovers, and had been off and on ever since.

With his left hand raised, Justice fanned his fingers, curling them down one at a time. The team knew to rush the door when he got down to just his fist. His second in command hit the door with the battering ram, popping it open on the first try. Immediately, shouts in English and Spanish sounded, along with the pop of gunfire.

Scanning the room in front of him, JT could see all the drug cartel men were down, either dead or on their way to being dead. So far, his team was unharmed. He motioned for the two junior agents to secure the room and keep an eye on the dead. Pairing off, the rest of the men moved out toward the other doors that their intel had said they'd find.

JT needed to secure the rest of the building before assessing the merchandise that was on the tables. With silent steps, he went up the staircase to where the office was reported to be, Guzman behind him. Reaching the top, JT silently indicated that he would bust the door, going in low and to the right. Guz nodded toward the left. With the slight nod of Guzman's head, JT straightened up and kicked the door in, diving to the right. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Guz do the same in the other direction.

There was no sound in the room. What the hell? Coming up on one knee, he made a quick scan of the room. It ran across the full length of the building, and toward the far end, closer to the window, sat a table. There was no one there.

Their intelligence had said this was the money room, the place where they'd find Miguel Castaneda, known as *El Ángel de la Muerte*, the Angel of

Death. He started as an enforcer for his uncle's drug empire, then the rumors had it he killed his way to being the boss. In the room, Thornton could see that someone had been there recently. Whoever it was had left in a hurry, though.

Stacks of money, still in their ten-thousand-dollar bundles, sat in neat little rows marching across the table. As he walked to the table, a quick glance showed more than two hundred thousand dollars there. Chump change to a man like Castaneda, but it was more than he'd want to lose to the DEA. Rumor was that he disliked losing at anything or to anyone.

Lost in his thoughts for just those few seconds, the kiss of a cold steel gun barrel against the base of his skull caused him to freeze. He then heard Guzman's voice in his ear, *tsking*, telling him to not even think about trying anything, that they both had the same training. That he would be dead if he even twitched. Then Guzman's hand came around to remove his communications earbud, and with a hard yank pulled the microphone attached to his collar loose, too, tossing both to the far end of the table. The hand came back, taking his AR-15 out of his hand, and sliding it next to the earbud. Next, it reached into his thigh holster and removed his SIG Sauer. After tossing it to join the rest of his gear, next came the SOG knife from his vest. The pressure from the gun barrel disappeared as Guzman stepped back. JT had no idea where the traitor was standing, and it was obvious now that Guzman *was* a traitor.

"Why, Guz? All I want to know is why?" Although he hadn't turned around to verify it, he knew that Guz had been holding the gun to the base of his neck. "None of it was real, was it? I'm just the willing patsy in all of this? Are you even gay, or did you just take one for the team, pardon the pun, to get in good with me?" JT couldn't believe he'd been played for such a fool.

When he heard an exhale behind him, he waited for Guz to give him an explanation. Instead he heard the sound of a door opening behind him. It couldn't have been the door they came through, so there must have been a door on that wall that didn't show on the blueprints they'd been given. Damn him for not noticing. But then he'd thought Guzman had his back. How many other surprises did this building hold? JT heard Spanish spoken behind him, telling someone to close and bar the door. Steps were heard again and the

sounds of two doors being closed reached his ears. When another noise reached his ears as well, he assumed it was the outer door being barred. Footsteps—dress shoes, going by the crisp *click* of the heels—made their unhurried way across the room, coming around on his left-hand side.

Castaneda stood on the far side of the table smirking at him, and his two bodyguards stood behind him, one off of each of his shoulders. For someone who was the head of one of the most bloodthirsty and ruthless cartels in Mexico, at five foot nine inches tall, he didn't look all that intimidating. Until you looked into his eyes, and saw a cold look of pure evil. JT didn't see any humanity left.

“So, Agent Guzman, everything you said was true.” He placed his hands on the table between him and the two agents. Miguel Castaneda leaned forward, the smile on his face not reassuring in the least. A shiver ran up JT's back. The insincere smile was malevolent. Looked like it was enough to unnerve Guz, too, as he heard the sounds of nervous shifting.

With an ingratiating simper, Guz spoke up. “Señor Castaneda, *Jefe*, I delivered an agent like I promised I would. To show proof of my loyalty to you. I have done all that you've asked me to.”

“Yes, you did.” Castaneda walked to the end of the table where JT's earbud, AR-15 and SIG Sauer were. He casually started playing with JT's discarded property as he talked. “Your information wasn't as reliable as I hoped it would be. I have five dead men downstairs and I'm about to lose product. I don't like to lose.” Cocking his head, sporadic gunfire was heard coming from downstairs. “Ah, yes that would be the rest of my men, so maybe more than five men. Maybe some of your team as well, *si?*” Pausing, he picked up the earbud and flipped it a few times in his hand before setting it back down next to the handgun. Casually picking up the SIG Sauer, he said, “I don't like to lose anything or anyone.” He made a show of looking the gun over, then putting it down. Reaching into his pants pocket, Castaneda pulled what looked like a backup gun, a Glock 23. It wasn't one of JT's.

Raising the Glock to chest level, he pointed it in the direction of both Guzman and JT. “You recognize your gun yet, Guzman? It was so easy for *Agente* Thornton to remove from your house.”

JT's gut was screaming FUBAR now in an insistent voice—this was going to blow up in a major way. But was he going to be the one taking the bullet, or was it Guz—or both? That Guz had called Castaneda “*Jefe*” was a very telling clue. Now the question became, how long had he been working for them? It was unlikely that it was a coincidence that Adrian had come on to him about the same time JT had started gathering the needed information to put this operation in motion. Guess he'd been stupid thinking that it had been real. When Guz asked to stay on the down-low, he thought it was because of work. Guess he knew better now.

The sound of Thornton's team's footsteps pounding up the stairs caused a knee-jerk reaction in everyone in the room. Castaneda's bodyguards started yelling in more Spanish as they raced toward what appeared to be a blank wall. Castaneda turned toward JT as he backed away. “And you, you are of use to me, as the man who gunned down a fellow officer. As the dead rat... no, it is mole, correct? Yes, as the mole in your office, you will be a small use when dead. You, *agente*, you are killed as the brave Guzman takes his last dramatic breath. It is, how you say, loose ends tied up? *Sí*, yes, *agente*?” Castaneda pulled the trigger of Guzman's gun and fired a single shot at Guzman, nailing him right between the eyes. With a calculating smile that twisted his lips, Castaneda shook his head ruefully. “*Agente*, that is now one problem I no longer must worry about.”

The dead weight of Guzman's falling body started to pull JT down, he went with the motion since it took him out of Castaneda's line of fire. As JT hit the floor, he rolled under the table, hoping for a small measure of shielding. Fuck, he had to get out of here. Running through what he'd just heard, his brain reached the conclusion that he'd been set up too well—his team was going to believe that he killed Guz. He also didn't think Castaneda was going to stay and explain. *El Ángel* and his men were busy spraying the door with gunfire as they kept backing up to that blank wall. Out of the corner of his eye, JT caught the sliding of a panel start to open. Fuck, something else that hadn't been on the blueprints he'd gotten.

Seeing his chance, JT did a visual check of the windows. He didn't want to die in the crossfire; better a flying leap out of the middle window that should

land him in a trash Dumpster in the alley, if he remembered the layout correctly. As the door crashed open, JT took the running, flying leap out of the window. A last look back showed his team entering and no sign of Castaneda. *Fuck!* But JT decided that getting out of the window with his life and not losing it hitting the ground took precedence over seeing how the chaos in the room finished.

CHAPTER TWO

Present Day, May, 2013 – Somewhere in the Appalachian Mountains

Scratching at his face, JT wondered again why the hell men grew beards. It did nothing but itch, catch food and drink, and if he wasn't careful it got stuck in the zipper of his jacket.

He peered into the small mirror of his postage stamp-sized bathroom. He almost had to stand in the bathtub to wash his hands. He stroked his hand down the length of his beard. After the three years he'd been growing it, it now reached his chest, and his hair was even longer, well past his shoulders. It had taken a lot of getting used to, going from his military high-and-tight to what looked back at him in the mirror now. Even his own mother wouldn't have recognized him.

Both the hair and the beard helped him to blend in here in this rural part of the Appalachian Mountains, as did his overalls and flannel shirts. But damn, he was getting tired of the hair. Maybe it was time to get rid of the scruff and start over again. He thought he'd gotten to know most of the locals well enough now for it to not be a problem. Reaching for the scissors, he made the first snip of his beard.

Living here, he'd figured out this was the kind of place where if you didn't bother people, they didn't bother you. In fact, most were more than ready to shoot your happy ass if you got too close to their property. Not having anyone butt into his business worked just fine for JT. Strangers were not welcome in any manner, but if one showed up—well, then the locals all had your back. Usually with a double barrel shotgun in the stranger's face.

JT understood that there had to be bodies buried in the hills surrounding him. Lawmen didn't make calls out here, mainly because they'd end up getting a butt-load of buckshot in their britches, and that hadn't changed for at least a couple hundred years from the stories he'd heard. The folks were still heard to mutter comments about the *durn revenueurs* under their breath. JT was glad he'd been forced to come to some of the family reunions over the years. While he still wasn't considered a local, he was given more leeway than others.

He'd been living in his Great-Grandpa Thornton's little one-room cabin for about two years. Before that, he'd spent twelve months crisscrossing the country to make sure nobody could track him. Lucky for him, he'd been smart enough to always have another identity and matching bank accounts at the ready. In his previous line of work, it had been as necessary as breathing. You never knew when you'd need to disappear in undercover work, and disappearing with ready cash always worked out better. In this outback, so far away from regular civilization and all things civilized, barter or cash worked best.

He was also fortunate that Great-Grandpa Thornton had seen fit to use some of his money to put in plumbing. There was a septic tank attached to the two-seater outhouse, so he had the luxury of flushing the toilet. The story was that Great-Gramps hadn't wanted to flaunt his money around by installing the toilets inside the house, so in the dead of winter you still had to freeze your sorry ass off out in the cold. You just didn't have to hold your breath from the stench while trying to peel said ass off the frozen toilet seat. Which had always made JT wonder, did frozen shit stink? Hey, inquiring minds and all that. Still didn't keep his ass warm in the middle of a snowstorm, though.

Okay, he'd been alone too long now. He was thinking about frozen shit. Instead, he should be working on who the other mole had been—because another mole much higher up the food chain could be the only explanation for Guzman being inserted into his team.

Someone had to make the order for the switch—Guzman couldn't have done that himself, he didn't have the authority or the access. JT hadn't thought to check where the order had come from, he'd just accepted it. It would also explain why Guzman had been killed. The excuse that Guzman had caused Castaneda to lose product and men didn't fly—in *El Ángel's* world that was just the cost of doing business. If Guzman had been on *El Ángel's* payroll for almost two years or more, that was an investment of time and money wasted by killing him.

Nope, Guzman's death didn't make sense. There had to be another mole in the office, one that Guzman knew about, and he had been killed to protect that source. There was no way *El Ángel de la Muerte* could have known the raid

was happening. None of the team had known the location until JT texted them just a few hours before the operation. Only he knew what the signal was to start the raid, and yet Castaneda been waiting for them. So there were two mysteries to solve—the reason for Guzman’s death, and how Castaneda found out about the raid.

It had been three years, but damn, it still felt like yesterday.

CHAPTER THREE

Conrad Walters, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the DEA Tucson office, stared at the light blinking on his desk phone, line five. It didn't have a ring tone, it just blinked in a bright, flashing red. It was his private line, which very few had the number for, and most of them were not the kind of people that he would want to hear from. His heart rate jumped to a level that his doctor would be worried about, if he ever heard about it. This increase in beats-per-minute wasn't from fear though—he was hoping that this was the call he'd been waiting for. The call giving him the information he needed to take down Justice Thornton, the man who'd been a pain in his ass for the last three years.

Hell, he was no more than a pencil-pusher these days, and the whole office knew it. His own agents didn't even want him as backup, it had been so long since he'd been in the field. If he took down Thornton, it would be his ticket for the promotion that had been denied him, and he'd finally get what he thought he deserved. Every single one of the promotions that would have gotten him out of this stinking-ass town of Tucson had been given to someone else for one stupid reason or another.

When he finally answered the phone, the heavily accented voice of a native Spanish speaker just gave him the name of a place smack in the middle of hillbilly country, in the Appalachian Mountains. Then it told him to meet them for lunch at a bar in Rio Rico, just this side of the border checkpoint, to get the rest of the information he needed.

"I can't be seen meeting you," hissed Conrad. "Do you realize what would happen if I'm seen by anyone?" Sweat was starting to gather along his forehead as he imagined it. This wasn't how these things were supposed to go.

Laughter met his statement, followed a *click* and then a dial tone buzzing in his ear. *Shit!*

A few minutes later, he strode out of the building that housed his office. He'd told his secretary that he had a dental appointment and then he would be at lunch. Crap, yes, he'd be at lunch, but he'd be risking everything he'd been

working for with this meeting in a shit-hole cantina near the Mexican border—a meeting that no one could know about, given the person he was going to see. Hopefully, that close to the border, the place would be mostly locals only in the middle of the week.

Why the stupid, arrogant jackass needed a face-to-face was beyond him. Was Castaneda wanting to see how high he could make him jump, pulling the puppet strings? He couldn't be seen with the known top assassin for Castaneda. *Tres Dedos* was as well known as Castaneda was in these parts for this meeting to mean anything other than what it did—that Conrad worked for Castaneda. And how the hell did *Tres Dedos* keep getting across the border in the first place? How far a reach did *El Ángel de la Muerte* have? How many agents in how many different agencies were owned by him?

Smirking, then outright laughing nervously, he thought about having to meet with Castaneda's right-hand man. *Right-hand man* being kind of ironic, as the man only had three fingers left on that hand. The rumor was that after the drug raid had gone south three years ago, Castaneda had taken the failure out on *Tres Dedos*, and had calmly clipped off his pinky and ring fingers with a cigar clipper. Well, he *did* need his index finger to pull a trigger, so the boss had left it. Too bad Castaneda hadn't remembered that more than the three remaining fingers were needed to keep a gun stable enough for shooting.

Fortunately, *Tres Dedos* learned to shoot left-handed, so he could still be an effective enforcer for Castaneda. And now, everyone called him *Tres Dedos*, or Three Fingers, when they were laughing behind his back. However, anyone who he caught laughing wound up dead or disappeared.

Sliding into his government car, Walters made a quick trip to his house. No way was he taking the company car to his meeting. He needed to get into the beater car that he'd bought for a few hundred bucks in untraceable cash. He'd left it in the previous owner's name, who'd mysteriously and sadly disappeared before he could file the transfer of title. Feeling less conspicuous, Walters pulled out onto the road and headed toward his meeting.

Pulling into the parking lot of the tiny cantina bar, Walters noticed that *Tres Dedos* at least had the smarts to find an out-of-the-way place. It looked like locals only, the non-English-speaking kind. Good. Sneaking a look

around, he saw there was no unusual movement. Walters exited his car and strode into the bar hoping he showed more confidence than he felt. But he believed that old saying of never showing fear or letting them see you sweat.

At the threshold, he paused to let his eyes adjust to the dimness of the interior. Floating in the smoky air hung the stale odor of old fryer oil and tortillas, along with the smell of beer and a hint of lime. Spotting *Tres Dedos*, he moved to the booth in the back corner. Walters skirted the edge of the room, staying in the shadows as much as possible. When he made it to the table, he watched as *Tres Dedos* tossed a shot of tequila back. Grimacing when he saw the three fingers holding the glass, his fear of Castaneda rose. Taking the bench seat, his discomfort with having his back toward the door must have shown in his eyes. *Tres Dedos* grinned at that, he seemed to love the look of fear on a man's face.

“Señor Walters, *El Ángel de la Muerte* wishes for you to follow the instructions in here.” Pushing an envelope across the table, *Tres Dedos* poured two shots from the bottle in front of him, handing one to Walters.

“Keep your voice down, and don't use my name or his. And I'm not drinking that rotgut with you. I only drink with family and friends. You are neither.” Walters pulled a couple of sheets of paper, as well as a map and a photo from the envelope *Tres Dedos* handed him.

A devious grin crossed *Tres Dedos*' face. “This is extra añejo tequila, aged for five years. Eh, Señor, after this, we will be very good friends.” The grin widened as Walters' face paled at what he was reading.

Perusing what was on the paper, Walters gasped, grabbed the shot from the table and downed it. Coughing from the burn of the tequila incinerating his throat, he sputtered, “I can't do this, the risk is too high. What reason would I have to send retired agent Harte to retrieve Thornton? He'll want to know why I wouldn't have an agent just go get him. And Harte would be able to tell the authorities that I was the one who called. And how is this going to take care of Thornton anyway?”

“Señor, you will set this up as asked and all will be taken care of. You have no need to worry about Harte.” *Tres Dedos* leaned forward, getting into Walters' face. “You do not want to know how you will be taken care of if this is not done as asked.”

Walters' face blanched even more, going beyond his usual white to pasty. Quick movements had the papers shoved back into the envelope. Beyond caring about appearances at this point, he just wanted to get out of the bar and back to his office. He was close to running as he hit the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Simon Harte had cowboy-booted feet up on his desk again. Watching the activity in the outer office, where his secretary-slash-office manager's desk was, along with those of the two men that worked as his agents, he was pretty damn pleased with how far his little company had come in the city of Tucson. When he had first started out, it had been him and Jesse Moreno, another ex-agent. They had worked the first year together just the two of them. Then a year ago, he added the other agent and the office manager. They now had enough work that he could pick and choose which jobs they took. He could have hired more men, but he feared he'd lose the family feel of the business. Well, as much as a private investigation and bail enforcement agency could have that type of feel.

He hadn't wanted to lose the ability to take off when he needed to search for clues. He kept thinking that Justice Thornton had to have left one someplace. He just had to find it. In the two years since he'd left the DEA, after his partner at the agency had been killed by Thornton, he hadn't given up tracking the man down and bringing him to justice—no pun intended. He just couldn't let the man who had killed Guz get away with it, even if he hadn't been able to stay working with the agency. His heart hadn't been into doing the job anymore. He kept seeing good men get killed and the killers walk free. What was the point? So that more drug lords could buy their way out of jail, if they ever went into jail in the first place?

Scrubbing his hands over his face, he still couldn't believe he'd been so wrong about Justice Thornton. Though they hadn't spent much time together in the office, Simon had seen him around enough to have believed that he was a dedicated agent, honest and hardworking. That he was doing the job they all thought was worth the risks. And then there was the fact that everything about Thornton had pushed his libido buttons and made every part of his body want—need—to feel the man under him. He'd been ready to ask the man to meet for drinks, just the two of them, to see if there was any interest on Thornton's part, when the drug raid had gone to shit. He always did have the worst timing. It was almost as bad as his taste in men. He had to choose a traitor, but damn, that didn't jive with the man he'd seen around the office.

He watched as his office manager Sarah, a mom-type woman in her late fifties, pushed the button to answer the ringing phone. She still used a handset instead of the wireless earpiece with microphone that he'd gotten her. She said the headset made her feel like she worked at McDonald's or something. He watched her place the caller on hold, laughing again when instead of buzzing on the intercom like most people would do, she rose from her chair and headed toward his office.

Seeing where he was resting his feet and shaking her head, she pointed a finger toward his feet. "Simon Joseph Harte, you get those dirty boots off that desk. Poor Lulu doesn't need more to clean than she already does. And she wouldn't have to work so hard if you didn't always make such a mess of things. You, getting that darn mud everywhere."

With a laugh, Simon swung his legs off the desk, "Yes, Mom."

"Don't you sass me, Simon Harte. I'm the same age as your mama and I am best friends with her, so you watch yourself, young man. And I know for a fact your mama raised you right." Wagging her finger, she tried to hide her smile. She'd known Simon since he was a twinkle in his parents' eyes. And when her dear sweet husband died and left her with nothing but bills, Simon had stepped in, giving her a job when she'd had no skills. "Oh, and the whole reason I came in, you have a call on line one from a Conrad Walters. He said you knew him."

He scooted his chair forward so fast he almost tipped it over. "Conrad's on line one?" What the hell did his old director at the DEA want? Did he have news about Thornton? Praying to whoever would listen, he hoped that was the case. "Sarah, please close my door on your way out. Thanks."

Taking a deep breath, he grabbed the handset and pushed the button for line one on his desk phone. Leaning back in his chair again he said, "This is Simon Harte speaking."

"Simon, Conrad Walters here. I have some news for you," Pausing to let that sink in, Walters continued when he got no response. "I also have a job you might like to do for the agency, freelance."

"What, Walters? No hi or how are you doing?" Simon had never quite trusted the Branch Office Director of his previous employer. He'd always

thought the man resembled Brain, the mouse from the *Pinky and the Brain* cartoon. He had the same pale complexion, bulbous forehead, bald head—the whole package. He also had those little beady eyes. Walters even had some of the same arrogance that Brain had, a small man’s complex. Assistant Special Agent in Charge—yep, he was special all right.

“I don’t have time for bullshit. Do you want this job or not, Harte?” Pausing for a breath, Walters continued, “I figured you of all people would want to bring in Justice Thornton. Was I wrong?”

Sitting up ramrod straight at the name Thornton, Simon spoke with deceptive calm. “No Walters, you weren’t wrong. I’ll take this job. But I’m wondering how or where you got your information when none of my sources could get any.” In two years Simon only had a couple of leads, both of which had gone nowhere fast.

With a disgusted snort Walters tried to put Simon in his place. “I have more sources than you could ever imagine. And this isn’t the time to question the how. Do you want the job? If yes, just say so.”

“I already said I’d take it,” Simon growled.

“Then I’ll send you the intel and wire money to your account. This job is strictly off the books, no one here at the agency will have any knowledge about it. I am your contact and your only contact.” Walters rattled off a phone number that, even after two years, Simon knew didn’t belong to the agency. Focusing again, he heard Walters continue “Let me know when you leave. I think about two weeks should do it, for the retrieval.”

Simon’s trouble radar started beeping with every word, but his excitement at a chance of capturing Justice Thornton overrode his good sense. There was a question he knew should be asking, something off with how Walters got his intel, but his focus was on getting his hands on Thornton. Little bits of knowledge floated in the back of his mind, things he’d heard and rumors that had run through the office—stuff that he hadn’t paid any attention to at the time. The devil on his shoulder was asking if he really cared, and the answer was definitely *no*.

When he realized Walters had hung up, Simon’s mind went to all of the things he needed to get settled around the office before he left. He wasn’t

going to inform his crew. He was going to have to take a vacation somewhere remote. His crew would never believe him since he hadn't taken time off since he'd started the business, but they wouldn't ask questions. If he needed help, he'd call. They'd have his back.

CHAPTER FIVE

Not for the first time, or the second, or even the third, Simon cursed a blue streak as he once again slid halfway back down the muddy embankment. The stench of rotted vegetation assailed his nose and mud oozed its way into his boots. Who knew mud could smell so bad? It was a thick, black, viscous slime that was working its way into his gloves, too.

Who in the fucking hell lived so far out of civilization, in a place that time forgot? This made no sense, and it was making him angrier with every slide back down the slope. The steady drizzle and misting that wouldn't stop had water running down his neck. His pant legs were soaked, mud caking everything from his knees down. He didn't think he could get any more miserable. He was cold, wet, and just plain pissed.

Was he turning into a wuss? Two years out of the business and he'd lost some of his edge already? This was really no worse than the mud course in Basic Training. Okay, so he'd been cutting his gym workouts, but damn, not that much. If he ever got Thornton and got back out of this hell on earth, he had a new boot camp workout to recommend to his gym. "Mudbog-Hill Climbing 101". He could make an infomercial and make a fortune.

Grunting with the effort needed to slog his way back up the bank for the fourth time, he'd have whooped with glee at the top if he hadn't looked up into the barrels of a shotgun pointed right at his face. Damn, those barrels didn't look that big when you were on the other side of them.

Pushing himself up slowly, he took a good look at the man. At least he thought it was a man—maybe he'd found Bigfoot's cousin. Damn, the man's eyebrows almost met his beard, but then his beard started right under his eyes. Hell, Simon couldn't really tell which hairs were from his head, his beard or eyebrows. They all seemed to grow together, meeting in the middle of his face. What little bits of weathered skin he could see were around tobacco-colored eyes. He didn't want to check the nose hairs, the ones that looked like they made up part of his mustache. Dang, the top of his nose had one that looked at least a half inch long. This man was one hairy, matted, walking fur-ball. He

took a deep breath, and then wished he hadn't. Seemed Sasquatch hadn't had his annual bath yet. Given how much Simon could smell him over the rotted vegetation and mud made him real glad he wasn't downwind of the man.

Simon raised his hands into the air. "I'm just going to stand up now." He thought he heard a grunt, but wasn't sure. But then, he wasn't sure what was standing in front of him was human, so who knew? With his hands raised above his head—which just galled him—he said, "I'm standing up now. I don't mean you any harm. I'm just looking for the Thornton place."

The... hairball in front of him grunted again, and lowered the shotgun. "Well, ain't too many folks knowing 'bout the Thornton place still being here. Being as you do, guessing it be okay to tell ya where it be." Swinging the barrel of the shotgun around, he pointed to a spot. "But most folks woulda used the road yonder to get here. Yep, be tad easier that way."

As he turned to where the man pointed—and he thought only DNA testing could prove that he was a man, notwithstanding the fact that his speech seemed to be a form of English—Simon thought he saw a couple of parallel ruts in among the thigh-high weeds. The weeds weren't disturbed often from the looks of them. Guess traffic jams weren't a problem around these parts.

This little trip just kept getting better all the time. It had taken a day for Walters to get the information to him. Then it had taken him a couple of days to get his jobs squared away at the office, and then he had to fly halfway across the country to the great Appalachian Mountains. To a place time hadn't just forgot but flat-out ignored.

"Son of a fucking bitch, there's a road?" Simon was going to kill the rental car agent who had given him the directions and GPS coordinates to this lovely little corner of the world. And damn Walters for not having all of this in the intel, so that he'd had to rely on the rental people.

With a deceptively fast move, the shotgun barrels were pointed back to his face. "Son, we don't abide to that kind of talk 'round these parts. We're a God-fearing folk living here. We read our Bible, be respecting our elders." Turning to point back down the other direction he said, "The Thornton place be down that way a piece. And folks 'round here will be a watching y'all. We don't take kindly to strangers 'round here."

Simon looked in the direction the old man had pointed. Swinging his head back to ask a few questions, he was startled to see no one in front of him. “What the hell?” Surveying the surrounding area, not even a leaf moving indicated where the man had gone. It was eerie how there was no sound and no movement around him. And yet, he could still feel the man’s eyes on him, watching every move like the old man had said.

Muttering to himself, “*That way* he says. And just how far *that way*? And how do I know when I get there? Is there a sign that says ‘you’re here’?” Stomping his feet to remove more mud, he heaved a heavy sigh. Hiking up his backpack, he started to scuffle his way down the rut that passed for a road in these parts.

A look to the sky showed that the sun would be setting in about an hour. Simon wanted to get into place, set up a blind and keep a watch on Thornton. He was going to have to wait till dark to scope out any kind of security Thornton might have. And he knew there would be some serious systems in place. He’d wait till just before dawn before confronting him.

CHAPTER SIX

A feeling of *déjà vu* woke JT, caused by the brief touch of cold steel being pressed against his neck before it backed away. How the fuck had someone gotten around all of his security systems? Why had he not heard anything? Goddamn moonshine he'd had last night to forget. He'd just wanted to get through a night without the nightmares that had plagued him since *that* night. Finding the mole in the agency was all he wanted. He knew there had to be one, there was no way Castaneda should have been able to get away without help. Finding them would clear his name and let him get back to his old life. It was a fact that without the agency's assets, he had a much harder time getting the information he needed, much less getting anyone to help or the access to resources and the databanks.

The voice was barely above a whisper, and the words sent a suppressed shiver down JT's spine. "Just give me any reason to blow your head off instead of taking you back in to face justice. Please, just do it."

JT *knew* that voice from somewhere, flipping through the names and faces in his mind. Fuck! Simon Harte, Guz's old partner. Damn, of all the voices that he could have heard, this was one that he dreaded the most. But he guessed it made sense because Harte and Guz had been partners at the agency for years. Last he'd heard, the man had left the agency about a year after everything had gone to hell. So why was he the one coming after him now? Had the agency sent him?

He'd seen the man around the office. From what he remembered, Harte was—or had been—the stuff of his dreams. Almost the same height, maybe a bit taller, with light brown hair and a body that had rivaled his own. Harte's body might have had wider shoulders, but he had the better abs. He worked hard to keep in shape, and he'd seen Harte at the gym, so he knew Harte took care of his body, too. JT appreciated a fine looking body like Harte's.

Simon Harte had those intense amber eyes—except there always seemed to be chips of ice in them when he'd been in agent mode. He had always appeared to be a cool and controlled bastard. It was one of the things that made

him a great agent, total focus. JT had spent time wondering what it would take to make those eyes melt or if Harte even kept his ice-cool demeanor while getting his dick sucked. Or if the ice melted when someone was balls-deep in his ass, or if he ever let anyone tap that ass. The fantasy of melting that ice had taken hold in his mind and dreams back when he'd first been introduced to Harte. While he didn't know for sure, he suspected that Harte was gay, but had never been able to get any real handle on if he was or not. Maybe it was just wishful thinking on his part. JT had always wanted the chance to find out.

“Now you're going to pay for Guzman's death. It's taken three fucking years, but I'm taking you back. You're cuffed to the bed and I need a few hours of sleep. But we'll be out of here before the good folk of this Godforsaken area start stirring.” Harte's barely audible voice got harsher and louder with each word until he was almost snarling. “I'm light sleeper, as I'm sure you know, so don't try anything. Or do, and you'll save me the time and effort of dragging your ass back to civilization. Now nod once that you understand.”

Swallowing hard, JT did just that, the slightest nod. For the first time he felt the flex-cuffs around both wrists. He didn't want to give Harte any reason to kill him before he got a chance to prove that he was innocent, and wondered if anything he could say would make a difference. It startled him a bit when Harte lay down on the bed beside him. “Didn't realize you were into kink, Harte. If you wanted to play bondage games, you just had to ask.” He wasn't imagining the spark of lust he maybe saw flash in Simon's eyes, was he?

Simon paused for the barest fraction of a second before stating emphatically, “Like I'd play any kind of sex game with you? I believe in keeping your friends close, and your enemies closer. I'll feel it if your breathing pattern changes even a little, or if you twitch a muscle.” Harte made a show of crossing his left arm across his chest showing that he had his gun in hand. Reaching out to the small pine table next to the bed, he placed the gun well within his reach.

With a cough to clear his dry throat, JT wanted to make one statement before closing his eyes. He was resigned to having to convince this man he'd been set up. No time like the present. “I didn't do it.”

The derisive snort from beside him was followed with a quiet but emphatic, “Shut the fuck up.” Well, he hadn’t thought it would work, but he was going to keep hammering the point until he forced Harte to believe him. He also tucked away the fact Harte hadn’t denied his statement about bondage a second time. That was something to explore when they got out of this mess.

With a sharp tug on the cuff on his right wrist, he realized that Harte was smarter than he’d thought. Harte had cuffed him to the bed rail on the right side and his left wrist to Harte’s own right wrist. JT knew that like most of the agents, Harte had military training, so he was able to fall asleep at the drop of a hat, and unlike most people, who had to toss and turn, sleeping flat on his back was no problem. From the steady, even breathing beside him, Harte was already asleep. But JT knew that if he made any move, Harte would be awake instantly.

His own sleep was going to take a bit more work. The heat from Harte’s body felt way too good. And he’d been without sex for way too long. JT told his dick to behave and his mind that any warm male body would have given him the same response. It couldn’t be anything else, since this man hated him with what seemed a justifiable reason. It just wasn’t a real reason, but JT was the only one who knew the lies. Closing his eyes, he willed his mind and body to the oblivion of sleep.

It felt like several hours had passed since he’d closed his eyes, aware of the warm hard body next to him the whole time. A cycle of dozing for a few minutes here and there during the night didn’t cut it anymore. Damn, why did it have to be *this* guy that was pushing his dormant sex drive into overtime? It had been just him and his right hand—a few times the left for variety, of course—but just the three of them since all this shit had happened. The man next to him wanted him locked up for years—or better yet to stand in front of a firing squad—and still made his dick want to stay hard all night. Morning wood, they all got that, but the rest of the time? Hell, what was he going to do then, how did he explain that he’d been lusting from afar after Harte for years?

He’d always known that Guzman was a pass-the-time, scratch-the-itch, kind of guy. Lying next to Harte and waking up next to him in the morning,

even in this fucked-up situation, made JT think about waking up next to someone every morning. Shit, under other circumstances Harte would have been the kind of guy JT had been looking for, that would bring the word forever popping to mind. How fucked up was that?

Harte had caught his interest more than three years ago, and that hadn't changed any over all this time. Back then JT had watched Harte every chance he had when Harte wasn't looking. Most things that appealed about Harte were the very things that JT was looking for in a relationship. He treated everyone with respect, both fellow agents and the public. Any suspect they had in custody got the courtesy due any human being. While he didn't appear to most as real friendly, JT thought that was because he was so dedicated to the job. He was serious about the oath he swore and making a difference in the world and keeping people safe.

His sleep deprived brain suddenly realized that Harte wasn't in the bed anymore. How the hell had he slipped the cuff off and slid out of bed? Pulling his left arm, he realized it was now cuffed to the left side of the bed. And Harte had done this all without waking him up. No wonder he'd heard people calling Harte, "the ghost". JT lay there listening for sounds that would pinpoint where in the cabin Harte was, or if he was even still in the cabin.

Hearing nothing, he lifted his head and did a scan of the room. In the dim light of pre-dawn he found Harte peering out of the window. And damn, if JT didn't see Harte packing some wood too. If the situation wasn't so fucked up he'd be laughing. Then he noticed the pair of backpacks sitting by the door. It looked like he was on his way back to civilization. The time to clear his name on his own had run out. Would he have the time to air his case, would Harte listen to anything he had to say?

"Unless you have a vehicle of some kind hidden around here, we have a two-day hike out. So let's move." Harte moved to the bed and cut the flex-cuffs, releasing JT's wrists. "Use the john, shower, and you can leave the bathroom door open. Then get dressed. I left some of your clothes on the sink. We'll eat a couple of hours from here."

A controlled snort escaped JT, "The john, as you call it, it is the two-seater outside." At the look that snapped around to face him, he lost it. "We can even

take a shit together so you don't lose me. Won't that be fun?" He was still laughing when Simon pushed him through the door, making rude comments about bat-shit crazy backwards people, hairy walking fur-balls, and time warps.

They hiked for several hours, eating a protein bar for breakfast as they went. Some of the time, Harte let JT walk ahead of him. Before they had started out, Harte had used flex-cuffs to secure JT's hands to the belt loops on either side of his jeans. He had attached one cuff around JT's wrist before sliding another cuff through that one and attaching it to the belt loop. It left JT with a small amount of room to move his arms, but Harte knew it was not enough to attack. JT had protested, asking what happened if he fell. Harte looked at him and gave the answer he knew JT expected. "Don't fall."

It was just after noon, and they both needed a break. Neither was in the same shape they had been in their agency days. Thornton had used the hike to keep a running commentary going with all of the questions and a few statements he had about that night.

He'd thrown out questions like, *why would I have betrayed a mission I was leading?* And then pointed out that it would have made more sense to sabotage someone else's raid. Or wondering out loud how the blueprints had been so fucked up. Why did the building have doors—and maybe rooms—that hadn't shown up on them? Who had gotten the blueprints? How had Guzman's backup gun shown up at the raid? And if his gun had been found on the table, why was it there? He sure wouldn't have put it down willingly in the middle of a raid until everything was secure. And the big question of the day—how and why had Guzman been transferred to his team at the last moment?

The steady monologue of questions and statements were things that Harte didn't have answers for. Reverting to what he always did when he didn't know what to say, he'd given a few grunts and told JT to shut up a few times. Otherwise, Harte didn't respond to JT's babbling. But damn it, some of the questions made sense and that pissed Harte off. Because then he had to start questioning what the agency had told everyone.

Simon finished securing JT to a tree using a cable mostly used to attach bicycles to posts, making sure that JT had enough slack to lie down to sleep

and not much else. JT's sleeping bag was laid out and close to his tree. He'd already let JT take a leak and eat his MRE. At least the drizzle had stopped, but the damp earth left a chill in the air. He wished he could light a fire, but that might bring forest rangers or other campers, if there were any out in these woods. He didn't need or want to explain why he had a man tied to a tree. Sitting down with his coffee, he just stared at the enigma that was his prisoner.

With the full moon out, there wasn't enough light to see the expression on JT's face. Finishing his coffee, he laid down on top of his sleeping bag, waiting to see what JT would do. The look on the man's face when he'd locked him to the tree had been priceless. None of this should have been funny... but some of it was.

JT tugged at the cable attached to his waist. Well, hell. JT liked to think he was a cool, calm and collected, hard-core DEA agent. And being captured, frog-marched back to civilization was bad enough, but tied to a tree like a dog? He was tired, cold, still hungry and fucking pissed. Pissed because he'd talked his head off and Harte hadn't reacted to any of the things he'd said. Grunted—the man had just grunted. Like a pig. He did a lot of grunting and not for any of the right, fun reasons. And now he was going to sleep? *Fuck that!* Squirring, trying to get comfortable, he made as much noise as he was able.

“Would you fucking stop with the whining, you're worse than my sister's five-year-old.” Simon gave JT a stare with enough frost in it to freeze hell. “It's been a really long day, I just want to get some sleep. Do not make me get up because if I do, I'll be putting a gag in your mouth. Or just shoot you instead and save the taxpayers a lot of money.”

“Shoot me? *Shoot me?*” A snort of disbelief erupted from JT, “Really? Well fuck you, why don't you try having my day?” Frustration laced his words. “I shouldn't whine—well let's trade places if you think this is so much fun.” JT was feeling equal parts of mad, exhausted, and though he wouldn't admit it, a small bit scared. Plus there was a tiny part of him glad to have this forced resolution. He was tired of always looking over his shoulder.

Turning his eyes toward JT, abruptly Simon sat up, pulled his gun and...

“Harte, what the hell are...?” Crouching, JT tried to make himself a

smaller target. The shot whizzed by JT's shoulder and he heard it ricochet off a rock. He also heard a yip and the sound of running paws.

Harte rose and went over to JT's backpack pulling out a pair of boxer-briefs. "Coyote, I saw the eyes glowing behind your tree." Fighting a smirk, Simon tossed the briefs to JT. "Here, I figure you need to change now. Since you won't be sleeping for a while, shout if they come back." He stretched out on his back, pulling his sleeping bag up, calmly going to sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sunrise had come too early and another long day of hiking had come to an end. *Tres Dedos* had never been so tired. As the right-hand man and assassin for *El Ángel de la Muerte*, he shouldn't be out here in the wilds chasing these men. His dignity had taken a major hit when *Jefe* had ordered him to eliminate them. But ordered he had been, and he knew that he couldn't come back—or didn't dare come back—without taking care of this problem. And *El Jefe* wanted proof, which meant he either had to capture a picture on his cell phone or maybe—Smirking at the thought that crossed his mind—maybe he should bring back a finger or two. An eye for an eye, so, eh, a finger for a finger.

Tracking his targets wasn't *Tres Dedos* style, he'd never had to before. *El Jefe* was still punishing him for the raid gone wrong. None of it had anything to do with him, and yet he was the one missing fingers. It was these gringos' fault, now he could get some payback. *El Jefe* may have been right to send him. If he brought back two fingers from each of them, he would have his dignity back, *como no?* That would be a type of poetic justice for him. People would have to stop laughing behind his back.

Another day in this wilderness, when it should have already been done with. He'd been almost to their campsite when one of them started shooting. *Locos Americanos*, crazy Americans. He'd made a quick retreat, knowing that they'd be on high alert now.

He'd had to find a place to camp for the night, sleeping in the dirt. Bah, why do people do this? The forest is filled with bugs, and is dirty, there is no coffee in the morning, no room service. No cute *putas* to take care of his needs. No tequila to ease his thirst.

This part of the job should be done today. Then he could head for home and regroup. He still had his new friend Conrad to pay a visit to, so yes, today. All of it had to be over and done. He wanted his life to go back to normal. But for now, it was more hiking and climbing, keeping them in his sight. Then when they settled down for camp, he would take his shot. Tonight it would go as he planned.

The routine had continued, same as the day before, when they stopped to make camp. He'd once again let JT piss and eat, and then tied JT to a tree. And the same as yesterday, JT was moaning and groaning. Simon decided he wasn't going to let part of last night happen again. He really would cap JT's ass.

Simon listened as JT started bitching about a bug bite on his ankle and watched as he stretched to scratch it. He opened his mouth to ask a question when he heard a familiar *ping* and wood splinters filled the air. Diving flat, he scanned the area.

What the fuck, someone was shooting at them! When a second shot pinged, sending more wood flying from the tree just above JT's head, Harte realized that no, they were shooting at *JT*, not him. If JT hadn't bent over to scratch a bug bite on his ankle, the shot would have hit him between the eyes.

"Well, someone doesn't want me to make it back to stand trial, now, do they?" muttered JT. "I wonder why, when I'm so guilty. What would anyone have to gain by me not making it to trial? And, by the way, I'm also a sitting duck tied here, so if you don't want my life expectancy greatly reduced, fucking release me!"

As Harte tossed JT the keys to the lock, Harte decided it was time to at least listen to—and maybe even believe—what JT had been telling him this whole hike. He had to at least consider that with all that JT had thrown at him there was some truth in it, otherwise someone trying to kill JT made no sense whatsoever. The agency wanted JT back to stand trial, which left a very small pool of suspects wanting or having any reason for JT's death. "So you figure it's one of Castaneda's men maybe?"

"That makes sense to me. He's the only one I know that wants me dead. Well, besides you of course." Shrugging, JT went to work on the lock, trying to keep a low profile to avoid becoming a target again. Glancing up he added, "Or whoever the real mole in the agency is."

Ouch. Simon deserved that comment. He didn't really want JT dead, he only wanted justice for Guz. He had hated the idea of a dirty agent, but it being JT had bothered him even more. Harte didn't know why, other than he got a good case of lust every time he saw JT around the field office, saw his tight

ass in those jeans he wore. They'd never had the chance to work together, maybe hanging out after work a few times for beers and to shoot some pool with the guys. That had been enough, though, to pique Simon's interest in the man.

Sadly, more often than not, they weren't even in the office at the same time, since frequently he and Guz would go out on a mission and then JT's team would be out when they got back. Also, he'd never been a hundred percent sure which team JT played for. He'd never seen JT with any kind of date, never even heard him talk about a date. Unlike his partner, who bragged about every pussy he had bagged. But then in all honesty, he didn't either, because he was gay. He didn't try to hide it, but he didn't wave a rainbow flag in anyone's face, either.

In Simon's defense, all of the evidence pointed to Thornton. He hadn't even considered there being a mole in the agency. He'd gone with the information that he'd been told about that night from Walters and the other agents there. Why wouldn't he believe what they all had told him? Shit. None of the agents had thought to question what they saw. A doubt built in Simon's mind where there had only been complete certainty before. With that doubt also came the possibility that his partner of five years hadn't been the man he thought.

"But hey, it can't be Castaneda. No... I did him a favor, right? I took out Guzman and let him escape." Derision laced his voice as JT made his move on his belly over to Harte's location. "Do we make a stand here or try to get away?"

Simon shook his head at both the sarcasm and about making a stand. "Not here, when we don't know who's doing the shooting. I'm going to fire to see if I can run him off." Without taking his eyes off the area he thought the shooter was hiding in, he reached for his hunter's backpack and his AR-15. All he needed to do was fire several shots off to make the shooter retreat so they could get the hell out of there. "Gather all of our gear together, pack it up and be ready to run." Crawling forward a bit, Simon asked, "Did you get any sense of where the shooter was?"

"Someplace across the ravine, about five hundred yards. Whoever he is,

he's a damn good shot at this range. But not great. At this distance, he shouldn't have missed that second shot."

"Hate to tell you this, JT, but if you hadn't leaned when you did, you'd be sporting a hole in the middle of your forehead from the first shot." Simon tried to make light of it, figuring that with all of the bodies he'd seen over years, what was one more. But this felt different, seeing JT go down—nope, not the time to think about that. "I think he's over by the stand of trees, near the outcrop of rocks."

JT must have nodded, forgetting that Simon couldn't see him, because Simon got nothing but silence. He turned his head slightly toward JT, who must've realized that Harte hadn't seen his head shake, because JT said, "Yeah—there, between the two of those rocks, in that little niche."

"As soon as I fire, grab the gear and let's go." Chambering a round, he threw over his shoulder, "When you hear the first shot, make a break for the trees to our right." With an exhale of breath, Simon pulled the trigger several times in rapid succession. He figured if he got the shooter pinned, it would be enough to let them get away. "Go, go, go!"

By the time there was return fire, JT and Simon had already disappeared into the brush.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The sun was just starting to set as they made their camp. The spot they chose was on a small outcropping of rock near a stream. They couldn't light a fire since they didn't know if they were still being followed. The circuitous route they'd been forced to take had added at least another day to their journey. While Harte hadn't cuffed him back up while they had been running, JT wondered if he would now that they were down for the night.

“Thornton, I don't think we should set up the tent tonight. If the sniper is still following us, we'll need to be able to make a fast escape. So just get the sleeping bags out.”

JT nodded. “First I'm going to take advantage of the water, though, and take a quick wash.” He waited for a reaction from Harte. Was the other man going to go back to playing the hunter with his prey? Hadn't they gotten past that yet? He thought Harte had started to believe him.

“Don't take too long. Maybe I should be with you and stand guard. We have no idea where that fucker is.” Harte picked up his rifle and motioned for JT to precede him to the water.

JT started stripping at the water's edge, while Simon planted himself on a rock. JT realized that Simon was trying to ignore him as he peeled his clothing off. Damn! Simon kept his eyes moving, surveying the surrounding forest, but JT could sense every time Simon's gaze touched him. He hoped Simon liked what he saw. JT had muscles, but they were the lean runner or swimmer type and he knew his abs were rock-hard. While they were the same height, Simon had more mass—and a fine mass it was.

Harte cleared his throat, and JT paused hip-deep in the water to look at him. Was Harte staring at his ass? He *was*, and JT blinked at the flush he could see on Harte's jaw. Harte announced, “You know what? I need to get clean too. As long as we stay close to shore and make this fast, we should be okay.” Standing, he peeled off his clothes, leaving them in a pile next to JT's, laying the rifle on top. Keeping his sidearm, he placed it on a flat rock within arm's reach of the water.

JT frowned. “Okay... This water is just barely tolerable and I think my dick is trying to climb inside my body, so let’s make this real fast. It’s not like we have a lot of soap to use anyway.” As he watched the reveal of Harte’s body, he was glad that his own dick was under water. The water wasn’t cold enough to keep his blood from filling it.

Harte had the type of body that had always pushed JT’s buttons. Wide-set shoulders, a sprinkle of hair on his chest, and a hint of six-pack abs. His stomach was flat, with a dark-blond happy trail leading to a semi-flaccid cock that was way more than average-sized. Strong thighs that weren’t overdone. All in all, everything JT was seeing seemed to be a tasty-looking, well put together package.

Turning his back as Simon made his way into the water, he kept his back to him so Simon didn’t see him staring. Hearing the splash of water, JT figured it was safe to turn around. It wasn’t, Simon hadn’t gotten into the water any farther than mid-thigh. JT gave a choked laugh and told Simon, “Just take the plunge, make it fast and maybe your balls won’t try to crawl back up into your body.”

JT wanted to laugh at how hard they were both trying to keep from staring at each other. He’d seen the quick glances Simon had thrown his way. And he could read the sexual tension in Harte’s body because it matched his own. And it wasn’t like he was doing a great job of keeping his eyes where they belonged, either. Shit, maybe they just needed to get each other off or fuck each other, do something to relieve the pressure building up inside his balls.

Deciding to see what kind of reaction he’d get, and since he still had the soap, he lathered his hands and ran them over his chest, over his tight nipples and down to his abs. Dipping his hand into the water, he ran them around his cock. Oh, yeah, that got a response from Simon, who was standing there not moving a muscle. Moving slowly, he made his way over to Harte. Hoping that he didn’t get his lights punched out, he reached for Simon’s cock.

“What the fuck?” Harte pushed JT away. JT watched several emotions play across Harte’s face. There was indecision, followed by a small bit of fear and what JT hoped was a good deal of lust. As much as his show had seemed turned Harte on, he could see that he wasn’t sure this was the right thing to do.

God, JT wanted Harte to stop thinking. He needed to get Simon past thinking and into doing. If they got to that place, then maybe Simon would start to believe that JT had been set up.

“What do you think? I want to fuck you, and I think you want to fuck me. God, I hope you want to fuck me too.” JT moved back toward Simon. “I’ve been wondering what it would be like to fuck you off and on for about five years.”

Simon shook his head, eyebrows raised in apparent disbelief. “You’re gay? I wasn’t sure. I’d heard a few things around the office, but I never saw you with either a man or a woman. And you never talked about your dates, never bragged about your conquests like the rest of the guys did. So, sure, I noticed you around the office, I wondered. ’Cause yeah, I’ve thought about you, too.” Clearing his throat, Simon shrugged one shoulder, and JT thought, what the hell? Did they just have a greeting card moment?

“Guz never told you that we were a couple? He never talked about me?” Reaching out with his soap-covered hand, he pushed Simon toward the bank until the water hit them mid-thigh. Simon’s glorious cock was now exposed, filling to what had to be an eight-inch length. Thick and veined, the sight made JT drool.

“Guz and you were a pair?” Simon snorted. “I don’t think so. Guz chased and bedded more pussy than any man I’ve ever seen. And not once did I ever see him with a man. Not fucking once. So I’m supposed to believe Guz switched teams?”

JT decided now was not the time to get into it. He had to get his hands on that beautiful cock. But later they were going to hash it all out, and Harte was going to learn a few things he wasn’t going to want to believe. To distract Simon from the unpleasant conversation, JT reached out and stroked the semi-hard length from the nest of curls to the mushroom head. After several strokes, it filled some more, so he added a rotation to the up and down movement. The head was turning a delicious plum color, the shaft thick and dark with blood. A moan left JT’s lips as he thought about having it pounding into his ass. JT took it for granted that Harte was a top, but he realized that maybe he should ask.

Simon gasped, drawing a deep breath. Damn, the man had fine hands and knew how to use them. That subtle twisting motion around his glans had him going from zero to sixty in nothing flat. Earlier, watching JT wade into the water, Simon had JT's beautiful, tight ass pointed right at him, and God, he'd wanted to take a bite out of it, just before he spread those cheeks and sank his prick deep inside. Thinking of that tightly-packed ass had him thrusting his hips, pushing his dick through the tunnel of JT's hands. He needed to sink between those cheeks, but for now he'd settle for the other way around or any way as long as he got off. Taking the soap, he started working JT's dick. It wasn't as thick as his, but it still was impressive in size, nice and long.

JT looked up from what he was doing, heat glowing in his eyes. "I'm a switch hitter. I think both feel equally good. What about you?"

"I switch too—it feels too good to not do both. But right now, I'm pitching," Simon told him. "I have got to feel your tight ass in my hands and bury my dick inside you. And soon—I don't think I can last much longer. We need to make this fast, though, we're too out in the open here. By now, whoever was shooting at us may be getting close."

JT waded over to a large flat rock on the water's edge, and he had to be feeling Simon's eyes following him. It was just high enough for him to lie on and keep his butt at the right level. As he lay down on his stomach, he looked back over his shoulder. "Is this what you had in mind?" Then JT laughed, probably because Simon almost did a face-plant splashing his way to the rock.

Simon reached out to massage those beautiful ass cheeks. They were a thing of beauty—tight, firm and oh-so-slightly bubbled. Running his fingertip down JT's crease, he circled the rosette now exposed. With every pass, it winked at him as the muscles loosened. "Fuck!"

JT moaned, "Ah, yeah that's what I was hoping for."

"We don't have condoms." Water or spit would work for lube, but Simon had never barebacked anyone, and now wasn't the time to start.

"Harte, check my jeans' pocket for my wallet. There might be one there." At Simon's look, he shrugged. "Hope springs eternal? Or I was a Boy Scout? Or they were just there? I have no idea how long they've been there? No? The

truth? I was hoping I'd get lucky? No, really, I have no idea how long they've been there. I always have some in my wallet."

What the hell, how come he hadn't checked JT's clothes and wallet before they'd moved out? Jesus, that was a rookie mistake. "Yeah, whatever, just glad you have one."

Harte rifled the pockets, coming up with a couple of condoms. Lubed, thank God. Taking one, he returned to JT. With the spit on his finger, he gently circled JT's pink little hole. Adding pressure with each pass, he started to sink his fingertip in, then his whole finger. Heat and tightness gripped him. He kept working until he had three fingers inside JT's ass.

JT sounded like he was in heaven. He wasn't able to keep the moans to himself as he reached down and started jerking his own prick to the rhythm of Harte's fingers. After putting on the condom, Simon gathered his spit and slicked up his cock as best he could, starting to push the tip past the guard muscles and stopped.

JT growled, "Don't you fucking stop now, move, move it now!"

"I just didn't want to hurt you. And I needed to slow down a bit or this won't last too long." Harte panted, retreated, and then pushed until his pubic hair settled against those cheeks. Stopping again to let JT adjust, he got the hint when JT pushed his hips back to take more of Simon's cock, that he wanted it harder.

"You're not going to break me, so move! I like it hard and deep."

Harte decided to take him at his word. Setting a pounding rhythm, it wasn't long until he was ready to spill, but he didn't want to go alone. "I'm so close, damn, it's been too long. Come with me."

"Been too long for me, too." JT was stroking his cock faster and faster, and then he was over the edge. With each pulse of come shooting out of his cock, his ass clamped down on Harte's dick. As the warmth of Harte's release filled the condom there was a strangled gurgle of sound that he realized was coming from JT's mouth.

Simon thought maybe he'd shot his brains as well as his come out through his dick. Collapsing on top of JT, he waited for his breathing and heart rate to

get back to a semi-normal level. He grinned when he realized that JT was breathing just as hard. “Let me catch my breath. We should rinse and get back to camp.”

Once they had rinsed, dried, and gone back to camp, Simon pulled out his satellite phone.

“Who are you calling?”

Simon smiled at the worry in JT’s voice. “I’m calling my office team and having them start to do some digging. Things aren’t adding up and I want to know why.” While the phone rang, he thought back to the call from Walters.

“Harte Investigations, how may I help you?”

“Sarah, Simon here. Can I talk to Jesse?” Hearing a sharp inhale of breath, he added, “Please.”

“That’s much better, Simon.” Sarah replied. “Let me put you on hold and go get him.”

Simon suppressed a snort, knowing that Sarah had put him on hold and was walking two desks over to tell Jesse he had a phone call. Some things would never change in his office.

A click on the line sounded as Jesse picked up the line. “Yo, boss-man. What can I do for you?”

“Jesse, look, I need you to do some discreet but thorough digging. Adrian Guzman, I need you to look at his financials, bank accounts—look for something offshore maybe. Sudden inflows of cash. And his phone records too, check for anything that possible links him to Castaneda. Track his movements too, if you can. Did he take any trips out of the country? You know the drill.”

“Ah, boss, wasn’t he your old partner at the agency?”

Simon heard the unasked question. “Yep, he was. But I’m finding some things about him aren’t adding up.”

“Will do, boss. You want me to call when I get something? And this has to do with your ‘vacation’?”

“Yeah, Jesse, I do.” Harte replied. Looking at JT, he told Jesse, “My vacation got very complicated. And while you’re at it, get someone to do the

same for Conrad Walters.” The more he thought about that call from Walters, the less he liked it. Deciding to come clean about his mission, “I was sent by Walters to retrieve Justice Thornton. Now that I have him, we’re—or more precisely JT is—being shot at.”

“You need a team out to help?”

Simon thought about it. “Not yet, but if we can’t shake this guy then I’ll have the team come to the rescue.” After ending the call, he put the phone back in his pocket, turned and grinned at JT. “And now to more pleasant pursuits, like sleep maybe.”

JT shook his head. “Walters sent you after me?”

“Yep, he did. And he had the map and coordinates for your location. Which is one of the reasons I added him to the list my team is going to dig into.” Simon added, “How did he get his information when nobody could find you?”

Dark had settled, and without a fire there wasn’t much to do. JT looked at him. “I think we should turn in and get an early start in the morning.”

Simon nodded. “Yeah, that sounds good. Why don’t you zip the sleeping bags together? It may get cold tonight since we won’t be in a tent and that way we can share body heat. I’m going to pack everything else up so we’re ready to roll at first light.”

“I’ll get right on that.” JT felt better than he had in a long time. Harte was starting to believe him. That felt almost better than the sex had. He had hopes for tonight too, since they’d be sleeping next to each other. Maybe it would be his turn to tap Simon’s ass. He placed a condom and a one-time-use lube pack just inside the bags.

When they crawled into the bags, they made some small talk, which led to kisses, then to hands stroking bodies. JT rolled Simon, putting that hard body under his, getting no protest from Simon.

This was starting to feel like more than sex, this was what JT thought lovemaking was. And it was every bit as good slow and languid as the fast and

furious fucking they'd done in the water had been. It was all about them taking the time to see what pleased each other.

They explored, kissing and licking, finding all of the hot spots on their bodies. It was a slow building of passion and sexual tension. Taking the lube packet out, JT coated his fingers and prepped Simon's hole, smiling when Simon jerked at the cool liquid. He worked his fingers in one at a time until he had three inside. Rolling on the condom, he finished using what lube was left in the packet on the condom and lined up his cock with Simon's well-oiled channel. Exerting a steady pressure, he sank into the warm heat of Simon's body.

The pace was slow and steady, yet it still didn't take either of them long to reach their orgasm. Lying together, neither said anything as they waited for their breathing to return to normal. Both men were lost in their own thoughts as they continued to stroke hands up and down each other's bodies. They couldn't seem to stop touching. And although they weren't spooning, they were pressed together from shoulders to hips, with their legs tangled. It seemed to JT that they were maybe both were thinking that maybe they wanted to continue to explore where this was going when they got back. At least that's what he was hoping for.

Once Simon caught his breath, his thoughts turned to the man at his side. He was glad to know that he hadn't been all wrong about JT. This man matched the guy he'd seen in his office, the agent with honor and integrity. The man that was accused of killing a fellow agent obviously hadn't, and yet that's what the evidence had said. Shaking off those thoughts, he wondered where the two of them were headed relationship-wise. Would they have one when they got back?

Then another random thought crossed his mind. Snuggling together, Simon asked, "And where did you get the lube? Were you planning on this?"

"No, that was in my grooming kit. I always have that in there. Hey, I was a Boy Scout. And no I didn't really plan on this, you and me. But I hoped, and I can't say I'm sorry it happened. I hope you're not sorry either. And I hope we get a chance to do this again and to see if we can make this work between us. I

like you. I think you might like me. And I'm babbling, sorry. Usually I'm way more suave than this," JT said with a sheepish grin.

Simon sighed. "I want to see where this goes, too, JT. But first we need to get some sleep and see what my team digs up." Simon reached out and pulled JT close as they settled in for sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

At dawn, they were back on the road, trying to make up for the time and miles they lost yesterday trying to avoid the sniper. They decided to continue in the circle they had started, aiming for getting back on the trail they'd been driven from. They spent much of the hike trying to learn more about each other. Likes, dislikes, favorite foods, movies, all the normal things people talked about while getting to know each other, beyond the stuff they'd known while working together.

Simon looked across to JT. "I have to confess, I used to watch you at the office, at least whenever I got the chance. We weren't in the office at the same time very often."

"I watched you, too. And the never being in the office at the same time is why you probably never knew about Guz and I. We really never got to spend a whole lot of time together. Those few times we were all in the office, I couldn't take my eyes off of you. And that made me feel like the biggest ass in the world when my lover was right there too." Heaving a sigh, JT continued. "I guess I knew that Guz and I weren't in it for the long haul, but hell, I don't know what I thought. As trite as it sounds, I guess I was just lonely. I couldn't seem to get your attention at the time as much as I wanted it. Guz showed up after work one day when I was having a beer, seemed interested and things just took off from there."

Just as they decided to take a break and eat, Simon's phone rang. "Harte here."

"Hey, boss-man, we worked all night digging and called in a shitload of favors. But damn, JT is in a world of hurt—and you are too, since you were sent to get him. There are some nasty people pulling strings here, and some of those are attached to your Mr. Walters."

"Jesse, we figured that. We just need to know who it is pulling those strings. Is it Castaneda?" Harte leaned over putting the phone between their ears so that JT could listen in too. "And we need the fucking proof, too."

"That would be my guess. All the evidence we've gotten so far seems to be headed that direction. We found secret bank accounts, for both Guzman and

Walters.” Jesse whistled. “And man, they were pulling in some serious cash. Like twenty grand a month.”

JT leaned in closer. “But why target me?” He had to know the answer.

“It looks like you just were in the wrong place at the wrong time and got handed the wrong assignment. Not that it will make you feel any better, but whoever got this handed to them was a dead man, no matter who it was. From what we could find, Guzman had been on Castaneda’s payroll for about four years. Walters seems to have been collecting payments for a couple of years longer than that.” Jesse continued, “As far as the shooter goes, we got a report that *Tres Dedos* was seen crossing the border from Mexico, but we have nothing on him since.”

“Well, I think we all know where he is. He’s here taking potshots at us.” JT ran his hands over his face, then through his hair.

Jesse had to know Simon’s answer, but asked anyway. “Boss, you want us to come out and help you?”

Harte smiled. “No Jesse, stick to digging some more for now. This is personal now, and I’ll take that fucker out myself.”

“Ah, boss, wouldn’t it be better to bring him in for questioning?” asked Jesse.

An exasperated exhale left Simon’s mouth. “Yeah, of course it would, that was just wishful thinking on my part. Just keep working on the evidence, if we get this bastard, I’ll send for you.”

“You got it, boss-man, but ask for help if you need it.” Jesse hung up.

JT and Simon sat just looking at each other. JT probably didn’t want to say “I told you so” and Simon didn’t want to hear it. But they both were thinking it.

“Simon, I don’t think *Tres Dedos* is going to give up. So... I’ve heard that the best offense is a great defense.”

Harte nodded. “I agree. When the sucker shows up this time, we’ll be ready. As much as I hate to do it, I think we need to use you as bait. When he shoots, you go down like you’re hit, and stay down. Then I’ll run, circling

back. He's either going to chase me, so he leaves no witnesses, and you can take him down, or he'll check to make sure you're dead, and I'll get the privilege of taking that bastard down. I'm betting he's going to check on you. He'll have to have some kind of proof you're no longer a problem. He may figure that I'm done hauling your traitor's ass back or I want to save my own. Or he's as stupid as we think and forgets about me altogether."

JT swallowed. "Um, and what if he really does hit me? He could get lucky, you know."

Simon snorted at that. "If he didn't hit you yesterday, I doubt he'd be able to today. Besides, we're going to set it up so that he only has one direction he can be shooting from. And remember, he's not a sniper, he's a paid assassin."

"Oh and that makes me feel so much better... Not!" whined JT. "It's my ass on the line here. And if you like the way it feels, you better make damn sure I don't lose it."

"And a damn fine ass it is—I don't want it damaged either."

They decided to do some more hiking until they found a location that would work for the trap they wanted to spring. It took them more than an hour, almost two, but they eventually found it. By that time, it was about an hour before sunset. The location was closed in by rocks on two sides of them with a forested slope on the third, leaving just one direction that *Tres Dedos* could hide and shoot. They figured the nearest cover was close to the same five hundred yards as yesterday.

As they went through the motions of setting up camp, they both could feel the hair on the back of their neck start to stand on end. The feeling of eyes on them grew stronger. No sooner did they both sit down, JT with his back against the rocks, than the first shot ricocheted off the rock above his head. Diving to the side into a crouch, trying to keep his head down low, meant the second shot grazed his shoulder. *Fuck, that hurt!*

Playing it up with a loud grunt of pain, JT went down in a heap, falling into some bushes for cover. He stayed still like he was either dead or unconscious. Simon took off, winding his way through the thick trees, grabbing his rifle from where he'd stashed it earlier. The urge to return fire was strong, but for this to work they had to lure *Tres Dedos* to their camp.

For fifteen long minutes, there was no sound and no movement of any kind. JT lay there not moving. His sniper training had taught him how to stay still, breathing shallow so that *Tres Dedos* bought the setup and didn't suspect a trap. The sting of the shot was down to a throbbing ache, and he thought the bleeding had stopped. With his face in the dirt, he couldn't tell what was going on or where Simon was. He tried to listen for sounds that would let him know what was happening.

Simon had stopped, and he was having a harder time not moving from his tree perch. His every instinct was to check on JT's wound. He had to hope that it was a flesh wound and not serious. Simon was starting to think that they were going to have to give up on their plan when he saw movement coming from the open side of camp.

Tres Dedos, coming to check his handiwork. Simon held his breath as *Tres Dedos* crept up on JT, watching him lean over JT's prone body.

Silently, Simon climbed out of the tree and snuck up behind the assassin. He really wanted to kill him, but knew they had to take him in for questioning. Just as he got within reach, *Tres Dedos* must have heard him and started to turn.

Simon made sure he got up close and personal with the butt-end of his rifle. He wasn't going to give the other man any chance to fight back. *Tres Dedos* went down hard, unconscious. In minutes, Harte had him trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey.

With a tug on the rope and using absolutely no care at all—so what if he got a few scrapes and bruises to go along with the lump on his head?—Simon dragged him over to a tree, and using the same steel wire cable that he had on JT, he locked him to it. But unlike JT, he didn't give the guy any slack. As he looked over his handiwork, *Tres Dedos* started moaning. Simon decided that he wasn't going to listen to that all night, so he searched for something to gag the man. Not seeing anything close to hand, he ripped a strip from *Tres Dedos'* T-shirt, stuffing a wad in his mouth before using another strip to form a gag, and tying it behind his head.

“JT, are you all right?” Helping him to sit up, Simon checked the furrowed flesh where the shot had grazed JT's shoulder. It had bled a lot but it wasn't

deep. “It needs cleaning and a bandage for now, or at least till we can get you to a doctor. I don’t think its deep enough for stitches. But I see a tetanus shot in your future.” Then he couldn’t help himself, he had to gather JT in his arms and kiss him. How the hell this man was already coming to mean so much to him was a little scary. He had never done the strong emotions thing before. He’d never believed in love at first sight—although that wasn’t really the case here, since he’d been quietly lusting after JT for a while—but this was darn close. He felt bad that it had taken something like this to allow him to spend time with JT and get to know him.

JT kissed Simon right back. Relief was making it feel good, and it also felt just right, having JT in his arms. It felt like long term, at least on Simon’s part, and he was sure hoping for at least a chance to see where this thing between them would lead.

“So how do we get him and us out of here? I am not carrying him! I suppose just leaving him for the animals to take care of is out of the question?” JT grumbled.

Simon sighed. “No, we can’t leave him here for the animals. I’m going to have my team send a chopper to pick us all up.” Resting his forehead against JT’s, he continued, “Babe, it’s over. We can go home. I’ll call for the chopper to pick us up in the morning. One more night out here, that’s it. Now let’s get you fixed up. I should have antibiotics and painkillers in my kit.”

Simon gave JT the painkillers before cleaning the wound. He could only get JT to take one, when he should have had two. Having been shot before, Simon knew how bad the shoulder had to be throbbing. And having it scrubbed to get the dirt and pieces of shirt out wasn’t going to make it feel any better. “Are you sure you don’t want another pill?”

JT shook his head, gritting out the words between his teeth. “No, just get it over with. If we had some bourbon, I’d take that instead of the pills. Those pills make me way too fuzzy and stupid. Besides, if I take another one, I won’t be able to stay awake long enough for you to fuck me six ways to Sunday.”

“Uh, JT, I don’t think fucking is in the cards tonight.” Simon shook his head in disbelief while cleaning JT’s shoulder.

A smirk on his face, JT answered, “I can fuck just fine, if I let you do all the work.”

“But then you’re not fucking, I am, if I’m doing all the work.” Simon wondered how much more bizarre this conversation could get. “And I don’t believe you when you say you’ll let me do all of the work.”

“Ha! I’ll let you cuff me again so I can’t move. So there, smarty-pants,” JT giggled.

Had he just heard a giggle come out of JT’s mouth? “Did you just call me smarty-pants?” It was getting harder by the minute to hold back his laughter. Simon now knew that even one of the painkillers was too much for JT. Some people had the strangest reactions to pain pills—JT seemed to be flying higher than a kite.

Wagging his eyebrows, JT leered at Simon, telling him, “We can get kinky. You can tie me up like you did at the cabin.” Simon bit the inside of his cheek to keep a straight face when JT blinked at him like an owl, and said, very seriously, “But no spanking, nope, not into the whole spanking thing. Not into pain.”

Grabbing the bandages and straightening JT’s body to keep him from doing an end-over, Simon couldn’t hold back his laugh this time. “Have you ever been spanked?” Folding a gauze pad, he gently placed it over the wound. “If not, don’t knock it till you try it. I think you’d like it. Maybe if I’m the one doing the spanking you would.” He finished bandaging the shoulder, just as JT slumped over. Laying him down on the sleeping bag, Simon laughed again when a gentle snore issued from JT’s mouth. “I should tie you up, just because. Or at least gag you before you start snoring like a freight train.” Lying down, he pulled the other bag over them and hoped he got some sleep.

The sun was rising when they broke camp and started dragging the unwilling *Tres Dedos* to the closest landing zone for the chopper. It was several hours of hiking away, down out of the mountains. As they moved along, Simon kept pulling on the wire cable attached to their prisoner to keep him going. *Oh gee, Tres Dedos stumbled and fell.* Maybe he’d have a few falls along the trail. Too bad.

JT knew they were going to have to stop every so often for him to rest. It wasn’t a real bad wound, but it still would be taking something out of him.

He'd woke up unable to remember much of what had happened after he'd taken the painkiller. He thought he'd talked about sex, but he couldn't remember if they had followed through. Had he made a total ass of himself? He knew he shouldn't have taken that pill, they always messed him up. "So, did I miss any fun last night, Simon?"

Laughter poured out of Simon's mouth. "You don't remember any of last night, do you?" JT's headshake sent Simon into even more snorting and choking, trying to catch his breath. "Well, let's see, you said you knew you could fuck. And you would even let me tie you up so you wouldn't move and hurt your shoulder more. Then you started snoring."

"Just shoot me now." JT couldn't remember the last time he blushed, but he figured he was doing it now.

Chuckles erupted from Simon again. "Oh, and you don't do spanking. Nope, no spankings for you." Simon burst out laughing at the grimace that crossed JT's face.

"Just fuck my life!"

"Oh no," Simon said, leering into JT's face. "I'd rather fuck you."

After another few hours of hiking and dragging the uncooperative prisoner along, plus several rest breaks, they made to the pickup site. The chopper was already there waiting for them, and they both agreed that it was a damn pretty sight. As they approached, the side door slid open and a man in fatigues jumped out and rushed over to greet them.

"Hey boss-man, been having a nice leisurely stroll through the mountains and forest, have you?"

"Oh yeah, Jesse, it was lovely." Tilting his head toward *Tres Dedos*, Simon added, "And being ecologically minded, we even picked up some trash on our way out." Turning to JT, Simon made the introductions. "JT, meet Jesse Moreno, Jesse, JT."

Jesse's eyes widened a bit before he schooled his features. Simon tried not to bristle—he knew JT was exactly Jesse's type, and Jesse enjoyed looking at great scenery just as much as the next guy. After a second, he exchanged a rueful look with Jesse—Yeah, that's how it had gone down. Jesse's mouth quirked and he gave an almost invisible shrug, and Simon relaxed a tiny bit.

Jesse nodded and said, “Hey boss, let me take that trash off your hands for you.” Reaching out, he roughly jerked *Tres Dedos* forward to the waiting bird.

Pushing JT ahead of him, Simon said, “Let’s get out of here. We still have some work to do once we get back home.” Climbing into the chopper, they strapped themselves in. JT turned as far as his harness would let him and leaned into Simon. By the time the chopper had banked toward the nearest airport, an hour away, JT was sound asleep.

Fighting to stay awake, Simon caught the grin Jesse sent their way—and knew exactly what he was thinking. “Take that picture and I will make you one sorry bastard,” he grumbled, the last thing he managed to say before the stress and lack of sleep finally caught up to him and he went under.

After the helicopter landed at the nearest private airport, they put *Tres Dedos* in holding, in the care of Simon’s team. They had to hold him someplace safe while they waited for Castaneda to make a move. That is, if Castaneda even tried to retrieve his assassin—there was a chance he’d write him off as a liability. Chartering a small plane, which was all the local airport had, Simon and JT headed back home to confront Walters. They wanted to get back as soon as possible. Jesse would be following them back by SUV, stopping at a safe house to drop off their prisoner when they got back to town. They didn’t want all of them together at the same place at once, on the off chance that someone now knew *Tres Dedos* had failed and would be looking to finish the job.

CHAPTER TEN

It was late evening when they reached home. Simon had Sarah from his office pick them up at the airport and drive them back to his condo. JT's shoulder was starting to ache and it needed to be dressed again. Even with the catnaps they'd had on the plane, they were both still exhausted. Neither one of them had the energy to take a shower before they crashed on top of Simon's bed. They'd catch a few hours sleep, clean up, and then confront Walters in his office. Simon was betting that seeing them together was going to send Walters into a panic.

Waking up feeling only slightly more rested, they took their showers. Together, which of course led to various parts of their lower anatomy getting cleaner than other parts of their bodies. There wasn't much better than shower sex. Simon found some clothing that would fit JT, since they were more or less the same size. They decided to get some breakfast before confronting Walters.

"JT, I have eggs and bacon, or I can make pancakes. I also have cereal. What would you like?"

A huge grin crossed JT's face. "Look at you being all domestic-goddess-like."

"You want to fix your own breakfast?" Seeing JT shake his head, Simon retorted, "I thought not." Simon was enjoying the easy banter between them. It felt good, easy—none of the awkwardness that usually came with meeting someone and dating. He'd been afraid that some of their feelings stemmed from the situation they had found themselves in.

JT cleared his throat. "How are we going to do this? Are we just going to storm the office or what?"

"I think we should act like I'm doing what Walters wanted, bringing you in. I was supposed to call him when I got you back here and make arrangements for transfer, but I think we should just show up and give the man a big ol' surprise."

The smile on JT's face was full of mischief. "Works for me. Does this mean you're handcuffing me again? You do seem to have this thing about tying me up, you kinky little bastard you."

“Yeah, well you just wait till I get you into an actual bed and have my wicked way with you. Then you’ll see how kinky I am... or not.” Simon tried to give his best dirty-old-man-leer look to JT, which must not have been very good. JT snorted his milk through his nose, laughing.

Huffing out a sigh, Simon told him, “Enough with the making fun of me, finish eating and let’s get this started.”

Over breakfast they had continued getting to know each other. “JT, do you still have a place to stay here? Didn’t you have a condo or something? Will you be able to go back to it?”

Nodding, JT replied, “I still have my secret condo here. I had the property manager have someone go in and clean and do any upkeep needed. I also had them pay the bills from a fake account I set up.” JT chewed his bite of bacon before continuing. “My car should still be in the garage, too.”

Simon was a little disappointed, but then he didn’t want to rush things, either. But he would have offered his place for JT to stay if the other man hadn’t still had his condo.

“Why do you ask? Would you have let me stay here?” JT had a speculative look on his face, and Simon guessed JT was wondering the same thing he was—how much of what had happened with them was just a “heat of the moment” thing?

“Yeah, I would have, if you didn’t have anywhere else to go. But I want to take this slow, and you moving in seems like it would have been rushing it a bit. But I wasn’t going to let you have to stay in a hotel or anything like that.” Picking up his dishes and placing them in the sink, Simon turned back to face JT. “This place is a two bedroom, so you would have had your own space if you needed it. And damn, I don’t know, I just want to keep seeing you.”

“Well, I want to keep seeing you, too, and if it ever gets to the moving-in stage, we’ll have to flip a coin and see whose place we move into. I have this lovely wrought-iron headboard that’s just screaming for someone to be handcuffed to it.”

Simon groaned. “You are never going to stop riding me about that are you?”

JT laughed. “Oh I’ll never stop riding you. It’s the handcuffs that are the optional part.” Placing his dishes alongside Simon’s, he said, “You ready to roll?”

“As that group, shit—what group *was* that?—said, ‘let’s get this thing started.’ Fuck it, let’s just go.” Simon snagged the truck keys, and they went out the door and into the parking lot. Simon started the truck and pulled into traffic for the fifteen-minute ride to the office.

As they pulled into the parking lot, they noticed that Walters’ agency car was in its assigned spot. Reaching the office, they pushed through the doors. Every agent in the room gasped then stood, most of them moving their hands to rest on the butts of their guns. Most of them knew Simon and JT on sight. Since none of them had been told about Simon being sent to retrieve JT, they were clueless about what was going on. They just saw a fugitive standing in their office with an ex-agent.

“Back off—I have the prisoner I was sent by Walters to retrieve.” Simon flipped his jacket back, resting his hand on his own gun. They had decided to have JT back in the flex-cuffs for show. They were so loose that JT had to hold them on. “I’m just taking him back to Walters’ office.”

Striding down the corridor, Simon rapped once on the door and then opened it.

“Fuck! Where is that goddamn little weasel?” Turning in a circle, Harte saw that the office was empty. Walters had somehow gotten the news that they were there and fled.

JT looked at Simon. “Bet when *Tres Dedos* didn’t check in, Castaneda and Walters went into panic mode. Walters is probably halfway to the border by now.”

Sitting down on the couch in the room, JT felt like this had been the longest fucking week and it wasn’t over yet. He just wanted to sit there and rest a while.

Harte went to Walters’ desk and picked up the phone. He dialed the Southwest regional director and gave him the full rundown. The director, in

turn, started the ball rolling with getting a BOLO out to every border crossing across four states and Canada, just in case. The agency would be using the information that Harte's team had come up with regarding the various warehouses and other possible leads, but it was going to take a bit of time and planning to gather enough teams to start the sweeps.

“Sir, we also need you to clear Justice Thornton of all charges and remove him from the wanted list.” He listened as the director told him that as far as he was concerned, JT's name was in the clear.

The director would take care of that after they finished their phone call, but it would take some time to make it all official. He also informed Simon that they both would need to come in for a debriefing. The director would have someone make the arrangements for them to fly to Dallas and would get a hotel room for them as well.

“Yes sir, we will in a couple of days. I'm sorry, what did you say? Yes sir, we would be more than happy to pursue this. We'll be sub-contracted for this assignment, I understand.” The phone call continued for the better part of an hour.

After hanging up, Simon turned an incredulous look on JT. “The director just gave us the okay to continue searching for Walters and Castaneda, with the use of as many of the agency's resources as needed. The director just made a comment that my company may be getting a contract for sub-work.” A smile broke out on Simon's face. “Dude, we've got it made in the shade. We get to do the same job as we did when we worked for the agency, but without all of the red-fricking-tape.”

JT smiled at how happy Simon was—it was obviously a big deal for him to get a sub-contract with the agency. But he was more concerned about his own status right now. “Simon, is it really over? All charges are being dropped? I'm off the most wanted list?” After living with this over his head for three years, it felt a bit surreal that it was done.

With a pull, Simon had JT up and in his arms. “Yes, babe, it's finally over.”

“*Babe?* Did you just call me *babe?*” JT stared at Simon in disbelief. “I am not a babe, not for you, not for anyone.”

“Well, how about cuddle-bug or sweetie pie or my little stud muffin?” Simon snorted with laughter at the look on JT’s face.

JT retorted, “Yeah, that works just fine, honey-bunny.”

Simon was sure his face now had the same expression on it. “We’ll work on the pet names. For now, let’s get busy catching Walters. That man will not be getting away. We can work out of my office downtown. We need to see what else the team found. And since we are allowed access to anything we need, let’s grab Walters’ desktop and see what my tech guru can pry out of it.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After a month of calling in favors and searching everything they could get their hands on, Simon's team still didn't have anything concrete on Castaneda's whereabouts. They would need to be careful, because until he went down, JT and Simon were both still at risk.

They had found a bunch of information about warehouse locations, suppliers, and dealers on Walters' computer. Raids at several of the warehouses had netted several million dollars' worth of product, a large amount of cash and a huge arsenal of weapons. Most of Castaneda's pipeline had gone down. He was going to have a hard time getting his drugs through to the United States. Hopefully they had scared him enough to keep him lying low for some time. *Tres Dedos* still wasn't talking; his fear of *El Ángel de la Muerte* was greater than anything the US government could ever do to him. And after looking at where his missing fingers should have been, most of them could understand his fear. It just wasn't helping them get any closer to Castaneda's capture.

Simon and JT had also spent the month trying to track down Walters. He'd gone into hiding. JT had wanted to go chasing any and all clues, but Simon was smart enough to wait Walters out. He just knew that Walters would make his move when he thought things had cooled off enough.

When the end came, it was all too easy. Walters was caught trying to sneak across the border into Mexico. The facial recognition program matched his facial structure even under his disguise—not that the wig had made that much of a difference in Walters' appearance. Border Patrol held him until Simon and JT could pick him up, as they had wanted to do the job personally. He wasn't saying how he'd gotten out of the state and to the next. The interstate check points had been given the same BOLO as Border Patrol had gotten. The careful digging Simon's team had done unearthed hidden bank accounts, an electronic paper trail of e-mails as well as phone calls, and cars bought with cash but never transferred into his name. The BOLO had listed the license plates of all vehicles they found for Walters.

Having left Walters in the care of the DOJ's Bureau of Prisons, Simon and JT pushed through the office doors and out into the sunshine. JT had been

officially cleared of all charges, and now needed to figure out where he went from here. The only thing he wished for was to finish pursuing this thing that had started in the woods with Simon.

Simon nudged JT off balance, bumping him with his shoulder. “You want to go back to the new office with me?”

JT frowned. “What new office?” He didn’t have a clue what Simon was talking about.

“Well it’s not really a new office. We’re adding another room for your desk and just expanding the office name to that of Harte and Thornton Investigation, of course. You’ve been working with us there for the last month anyway.” At the puzzled look on JT’s face, Simon grinned. “What, you thought we were done? Not going to happen any time soon. We’re too good working together, and I know you need a job now. Well, I need a partner. One at work and one in life—thought maybe you’d like both jobs. I’d like to see where this can go between us. I’m hoping you do too.” With a whistle, Simon strode off, leaving JT with his mouth hanging open.

JT didn’t stay that way long. A smile crossed his face as he ran to catch up with Simon. With a slap on Simon’s ass, JT smirked and said, “About that partnership? Yeah, I’d like that, both of them... and you still owe me a bondage session, too. Since you cuffed me to the bed first, guess that means it’s my turn. And... do I remember something about spankings? You do like spankings, right?”

THE END

Author Bio

Hi all, I am a married mother of two grown children. Hubby and I had our twenty-ninth anniversary in June of 2013. I live in the San Diego area, and have for most of my life, though now in a semi-empty nest. The kids are out, but now we have a fifteen pound cat and a five pound dog.

I was always the daydreamer in school and have been creating worlds and characters in my head most of my life. And I've always, always, always been a reader. Now I've decided to try my hand at getting some of those worlds and characters on paper. This will be my first work to be available for public consumption.

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LOVE HAS NO END

By Jonathan Treadway

Photo Description

A well-built man is facing the camera at a bit of an angle, with his right arm up over his head, showing his hairy pit. He has an attractive face, with a bit of a crooked nose, and a mustache and goatee. His chest is thick, covered with light brown fur, and his biceps is well developed. It's his brown eyes that capture your attention, though, looking at you with a bit of a knowing smirk.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My love and I have been together over twenty years now and, like many long-term couples, we sometimes take each other for granted. But we try to do that as little as possible, seeking creative new ways to shake things up so we remember to appreciate each other. Those range from the mundane, like making sure we don't get too used to sitting in a particular seat at the table, to the sublime, with adventurous holidays exploring the world together.

Most popular romance stories—movies and books—end when the couple commits to sharing life together, “and they lived happily ever after.” But I've often thought the best part is what comes after the Happily Ever After, the daily grind of making a life together year after year after year.

I went to bed late last night, grumpy about having had such a long day. He was already asleep and I just crawled in beside him and conked out. Then I woke up this morning and saw him beside me, and I felt such a wave of love and gratitude that he's here and he's mine. As I watched him sleep, I started thinking about some of the challenges we've faced and ways we've made it work, those things that brought us to this moment right here and now.

This particular scene doesn't need to occur in the story; I was just using it as an illustration to create a context. I'm looking for an older, established-couple story, but within that framework, anything goes. Well, assuming they're still happy together at the end. And I'm not a big fan of BDSM. But this could be contemporary, historical, futuristic, sci-fi/fantasy...

Sincerely,

Jess

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: established couple, visual arts, businessmen, lawyers, sweet no sex, over age 40, tattoos

Word count: 3,657

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Dedication

To the real Tom and Brian. I love you guys!

LOVE HAS NO END

By Jonathan Treadway

“*Sheee-it,*” I sighed as I crawled into bed at last, grumpy about having had such a long day. Brian was already asleep, not that I was surprised since it was after midnight. This was the third night I’d had to work late on my case and I was ready to explode at the way the previous law firm had handled it. How could the judge have let the totally incompetent defense lawyer get away with what he did? I wasn’t going to go over that whole conversation again, though. It was time to sleep and I needed it.

I just rolled over and conked out; you know, the kind of heavy slumber where you don’t hear a thing and wake up groggy? I hated that but it just showed me how tired I really was. Like I didn’t already know. I blinked as I slowly gained control of my brain, which seemed to be wandering onto weird topics as I alternately dozed and woke. I looked over at the clock, trying to remember if I had to get up for work today. *Hallelujah, it’s finally Saturday!* I recalled that I told Brian that if I could work late on Friday night, that I would be able to take off the entire weekend. It was our fifteenth anniversary today, and we were throwing a BBQ later for all our friends and family. Poor Brian had had to do the majority of the work getting ready, and I felt bad dumping it on him like that. It had been my idea, after all.

I glanced over to be sure that I hadn’t slept through Brian getting out of bed. No, thank god; he was still there, lying beside me on his back, his long hair splayed around his head and over his shoulders. I felt such a wave of love and gratitude that he was here and totally mine. Fuck, I missed Brian when we didn’t spend the evening together. It had been a long two weeks, and this week had been a killer. Once the case was over, I was going to take a vacation and we were going to head back to Maine to veg out and spend some time together with no one else around. Brian didn’t know this yet; it was my gift to him. We were going back to the same place we had met.

Christ, fifteen years. It seemed both forever and a flash in the pan. We were so good together now, but man, did it take a lot of work at the beginning.

As I watched him sleep, I remembered how we met, and it started me thinking about some of the challenges we faced and how we finally made it work.

It was raining cats and dogs when I pulled into the camping place after driving for what seemed forever, but was probably about six hours. Girding my loins, I poked around in the backseat until I found my raincoat, then opened the door, and sprinted into the office. The guy at the desk looked up in surprise. I found myself looking him over once I noticed the tats down both arms.

“Geez, I didn’t think anyone would arrive in this weather. Welcome to our camping grounds. Do you have a reservation?” he said in a bored voice.

“Yes, it’s under Monarch.”

“Thomas? Peter? Michael? Oh wait, there’s a Thomas and a Tom. Probably not Bethany.”

“Definitely not Bethany. I’m Tom. Thomas is my grandfather.” I watched the guy as he checked his clipboard and then turned around to get a key from the board behind him, where there were keys hanging from hooks with numbers over them. He grabbed the one under number eight, and put it on the counter.

“I need a credit card for expenses. It looks like the cabin is paid for already.”

“I don’t have a credit card. Can I just give you some cash?”

“No, I need a credit card.”

“Oh, come on. I don’t own one, and I probably never will. What if I promise to not charge anything to the room?”

“Yeah, like I just fell off the turnip truck.”

“Shit, are you this rude to all your guests?” I shook my head in amazement. I was feeling a little less than welcome and wondered why the management would put such a punk in charge of handling guests. He looked a bit like a punk too, with the colorful tattoos covering both his arms down to his wrists, and what looked like a tail of some sort that went around his neck and down

his chest. It made me itch to pull up his shirt and check what it was and where it ended up, while getting to admire those amazing pecs. He had long, dark hair pulled back into a ponytail that hung down to about his shoulder blades that immediately made me jealous. My hair was mousy brown and very fine and straight, and while it wasn't receding, it wasn't lush and full like his looked. I had to use a shitload of product to make it decent most of the time, although tonight was not a good hair day. The rest of him was nice to look at too, and it didn't hurt that he was about my height. I didn't like dating men taller than me very much as it made me feel... wait, who said anything about dating?

I looked up at his face and found the guy glaring at me. "Well I'm sorry, but it's after one o'clock in the morning and I'm tired. I've already worked an eight-hour shift and gone to three classes, and my dumb sister sprained her ankle today, so I have to take her shift too. I've got a test tomorrow that I have to do well on because it's a major part of my grade, and..." He stopped, looking sheepishly at me. "Shit, sorry to dump on you. It obviously hasn't been a great day for me but you certainly don't need to know that. Here's your key. Just don't charge anything, okay, or my dad will kill me because I broke the rules."

"I'll see if my mom can put it on her card tomorrow. They're going to show up sometime after lunch, I think."

"Yes, there does seem to be quite a group of Monarchs arriving tomorrow. Or rather later today. Family reunion?"

"Yeah, how'd you guess?"

"Experience. We're a popular place for reunions."

I gave a huge yawn suddenly, flushing a bit when I finished. "Sorry. It's been a long day for me too. I need to hit the sack. How do I get to my cabin?" The guy gave me directions and I braved the rain twice more before I was finally pulling off soggy clothes and crawling into bed, not even caring that the sheets felt a little damp. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow, and I didn't wake up until after eleven. Knowing that once my family arrived I'd have no peace whatsoever, I grabbed a granola bar and a bottle of water from my bag and hit the beach, enjoying the sunshine, clean air and quiet lull of the

waves on the sand. There was only one couple there with me, which surprised me until I remembered that my mom said something about booking almost all the cabins. Since it was Friday, most people in my family wouldn't be arriving until later tonight.

I sighed, wishing I didn't have to be here. All my friends were going down to New York City this weekend to see *The Lion King* without me, and I was pretty pissed that I was missing it. It wasn't my fault my parents had to change the date to accommodate my grandparents. Last weekend would have been fine with me, but no, I couldn't miss this weekend reunion because who knew how many more my grandparents would be able to make, and this year the Irish contingent was coming to the States, blah, blah, blah. Once I got over my pout, I knew I'd have a good time and it would be good to see my mother's parents. I didn't get to see them very often since they moved to Ireland, but still. It was *The Lion King*, and we had bought great seats.

While I sat there brooding, my attention was caught by the guy who gave me my key last night. He was walking down the path looking down, seeming to head towards the dock. I hadn't noticed the rowboat there, but he was aiming directly towards it. Quick as lightning, it occurred to me that if I were out in the middle of the lake, no one else could bother me for a while, and the eye candy wouldn't hurt either. I stood up and followed him, thinking that a trip on the water might cheer me up and give me a chance to check this guy out. He was looking pretty awesome with a black tank top and cutoffs. Maybe he'd take off his shirt and I could see what belonged to that tail.

"Hey!" I called as I stepped onto the dock. He turned around and looked at me, one eyebrow raised. Damn, I wish I could do that!

"You rang?"

"Yeah. What's your name, by the way?"

"Brian."

"Hi Brian. You thinking about heading out in that rowboat?"

"Yup."

"Do you mind if I come with you?"

"Nope."

“Thanks. A man of few words today, huh?”

He grinned, brightening his eyes and suddenly I couldn't look away. He was beautiful when he smiled and his eyes were actually twinkling. I didn't think I'd ever really believed that someone's eyes could do that, but who knew?

“Yup.”

Laughing, I helped him untie the boat and stepped in after him, settling in front on the narrow seat.

“Did you take your test yet?”

“Yup.”

“How'd it go?”

“Good.” I shook my head in exasperation at his short answers.

“Seriously? We're going to play twenty questions this afternoon?”

He smirked and started rowing, his biceps plumping nicely as he pulled with powerful strokes. I admired his legs, which were thick and sturdy with dark hair all the way up into his shorts. He obviously didn't shave his chest, since I could see a spattering of hair where the tank didn't cover his golden skin. Man, I hadn't really appreciated just how gorgeous he was last night. I must have been beyond tired to miss that!

“So, Brian, what are you studying? And where?”

He actually began to tell me about his courses and it turned out he was an artist; a sculptor and painter, eventually going for a Masters of Fine Arts in Boston, but he was taking a history and math course locally over the summer to get them out of the way. His test this morning was in history. “Sorry about last night. I'm filling in for my brother, who had to take his wife down for some medical tests in Boston. And my poor sister twisted her ankle playing lacrosse and is out for the playoffs. It's pretty bad, I guess, and she's in a lot of pain. My youngest brother covered for me while I ran over to campus to take it.”

“Hope your sister-in-law is okay.”

“It's nothing too bad. They're just having trouble getting pregnant.”

“Oh, that’s good. So, do you have any pieces of your art here? I’d love to see some.”

“Sure, my parents have some at their house. Maybe I’ll take you to see it tonight while they’re working.” By this time, we were in the middle of the lake, and I lay back to soak up the sun. To my relief, Brian pulled off his tank top and lay back too. His tattoo was amazing—a fiery dragon that came down across his chest, with a sinewy neck that curved back up his abdomen so that the fire curled around his belly button. Of course, some of the tattoo was hidden by his shorts, but enough showed that I could admire it.

“That’s an amazing dragon.”

“Thanks. It’s my own design. The wings go around to my back and the tips are worked into my shoulder designs.” He turned to show me, and I longed to touch the smooth skin on his back and trace the lines from his neck to his crotch. He was watching me when I came back to myself, and I blushed at his knowing look. Shit, my face must have been an open book of lust. I was embarrassed as hell, but couldn’t help glancing at his basket, which was fuller than last time I saw it.

Startled, my eyes rose to his face, and he was grinning again. He moved his hand from the oar to my knee, and squeezed it. I jumped, and fell back off the seat. Swearing, I jostled around, trying to get back on while he just caught one oar that started slipping out and pulled the oars into the boat. Just as I wrapped my hands over the edge of the seat and pulled myself up, he leaned forward to help me and we hit our heads together. Hard.

“Ow!”

“Shit!”

I fell back again and lay there laughing while I rubbed my forehead, checking to be sure that Brian was okay. He was rubbing his forehead too and laughing just as hard.

“Stay there.” I pulled myself up again onto the seat, and tried to stop laughing. But every time one of us would look at the other, we would burst into guffaws again.

“Oh my god, that was hysterical,” Brian said after we had calmed down a bit.

“What, you laughing at my incredibly graceful movements? You, young man, should keep your hands to yourself unless you want to start something you won’t be able to stop.”

“Young man? Come on, you can’t be more than a couple of years older than me.”

“I’m twenty-six.”

“I’m twenty-five.”

“Really? So you think I look old, huh?”

“Nah, you’re ageless. That’s why I couldn’t figure it out.”

“Ageless? Shit, that sounds like I’m ninety!”

This time when he reached over and pulled me by the hand to sit beside him, I was as graceful as a swan, and we only hit our noses the first time we tried to kiss. The second kiss was much more successful, and I found myself lost in the taste and feel of him. I drew the elastic from his hair and grabbed chunks of it while I pulled him closer, loving the softness and length, while his arms slipped around my waist. When we had to finally pull apart to breathe, he was gasping as hard as I was.

“Let’s go back to my cabin. I’m there alone this weekend.” With the two of us rowing, it took no time at all to get back to the dock and only a few minutes to tie up the boat and run to my cabin. Wow, let’s just say we were super compatible in bed and it was hard to leave him when my parents showed up. I made nice that evening and caught up with everyone, but slipped away as soon as I could so that I could meet up with my hunky guy.

He took me to see a couple of his paintings, and he was really talented. They looked like photographs with amazing details. I was floored by them, so he showed me where he was working while at his family’s camp and the sculpture he was in the middle of. He was creating a picture using little bits and pieces of all kinds of stuff, and I loved it. I immediately wanted one for my apartment but didn’t know him well enough to ask. Plus I figured I probably couldn’t afford it anyway.

While I made it to most of the family events, anytime I could, I would grab Brian, sneak away to my cabin and lock the door. We spent as much time as

possible together that weekend, and talked about getting together again later that summer. This man intrigued me; he was artistic, creative (in bed, too), smart, funny, versatile, and we fit together like hand in glove.

Back in Connecticut, I tried to forget him because long-distance relationships don't generally work, but I missed him and ended up calling him a week after I left. He said he was glad I had called and that he was regretting not getting my number. We talked on the phone for hours and got to know each other pretty well. I finally made it back up to Maine for ten days, and we spent them together camping further north. I knew I was falling in love with him but I was stuck in Stamford with my job at a good legal firm, and Brian was still in Boston. It took a year of traveling back and forth over weekends but we finally moved in together when I got a great job in New York City. Learning to live together, when we were so used to being apart, took a while too, and we even broke up for a week, but that's a whole other story.

It took a lot of love, tons of communication—which we sucked at but learned how to do—and the ability to compromise, which we also sucked at, but here we were at a major milestone. I still couldn't believe it was fifteen years.

I ran my forefinger over his cheek, which had dark stubble on it and felt prickly. I watched as he woke up, smiling at me leaning over him.

“Hey there, love. Morning,” I said, feeling my face light up.

“Hi beautiful.”

“We should think about getting up soon if we're going to be ready for the hordes planning to descend on us this afternoon.”

“I've got a lot of the prep work done so we have a little time. Gee, I wonder what we can do? I bet you still need to relax a bit, huh?” he said, his eyes twinkling. God, I loved his eyes. And his face and his body and his cock and...

“Hmmm, what would relax me the most? Reading? Going back to sleep?” My thoughts pretty much fled when I felt his hand cover my rigid cock.

“Oh, I've got that covered.”

I leaned down to kiss my partner, more than happy to let him lead this time, knowing that I would love him forever. He was my soul mate, and no matter what happened in the future, we would still be together. It was true wuv.

THE END

Author Bio

Jonathan Treadway is the pseudonym of Jennifer Swanson, who lives with her family in northern Massachusetts, very close to New Hampshire. Jen has a professional job doing market analysis during the day and writes in the evenings and on weekends whenever she can. Her stories focus on the romance between two men and all the trials gay men have to survive in order to have a healthy, happily-ever-after (or for now) relationship. To her there's nothing sexier than two men exploring each other physically and emotionally as they fall in love.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Blog](#) | [Goodreads](#)

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WHAT COMES TO HAND

By Tripoli

Photo Description

Two well-built, naked, dark-haired men are in a high-ceilinged room with a wooden floor and white-painted decorative moldings on the walls. The photo catches them in a kiss. The man against the wall is blindfolded with a long length of black lace, and he entwines his legs around the other as he is lifted off the floor, hands grasped firmly, and pressed to the wall in passion.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I think these two men have decided to spice up their love life a bit by trying something new. They are in a fancy hotel and have used whatever came to hand. Where did that lacy scarf come from?

Take care,

Annette

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: BDSM, established couples, troubled relationship, hurt/comfort, dub-con, medical play

Content warnings: This established couple relationship does not fit the definition of safe, sane and consensual practices of BDSM. Extreme insect play!

Word count: 9,751

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Anyta and Lenore, our awesome beta readers. Any mistakes remaining clearly come from edits made after their suggestions. Also, thanks to Annette, without whom we wouldn't have discovered this story.

WHAT COMES TO HAND

By Tripoli

I jerked awake. The bed was cold—though that was something I should be used to by now. As was the dim light coming through the crack under the door. Swinging my legs out of bed, I stood and debated for a minute before opening the door and padding down the stairs to the lounge.

“Rob?”

No response. Just the gentle tapping of keys and the glow of the computer screen. The computer illuminated his face in a soft blue light, making him look like someone I didn’t know. Not the man I’d spent the last seven years of my life with.

“Rob. Would you stop for a second?”

He said nothing, just hummed, deep in his throat.

The ten-pound weight in my chest settled in further, restricting my breathing.

“Eli. You planning on going to Denny’s retirement party after work?” I sighed and glanced away from the wall of my cubicle, towards Andy. So far today I had counted twenty-three imperfections in the fabric, sharpened four pencils to stubs, and ignored five urgent emails from clients.

“No, I have to get...” Get home? For what? Lonely sheets? “Never mind. I’m in.”

“Great! I knew you wouldn’t miss it. Did you go in with the group to get him a going away gift?”

A gift. Right. Crap.

“Er, no. No, I haven’t yet.”

Andy raised his brows mischievously. “Chip in with me, then. I hit on something I wanted to give Denny on my own. I figure he and Mona would need something to keep each other entertained, seeing as they’ll be around each other all the time from here on out.”

“Uh oh. What did you do?”

Andy’s eyes widened in mock innocence. “Why, whatever do you mean? Besides, you’ll have to wait for the party to see.”

I groaned slightly and turned back to my desk. The phone was ringing again. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea. Thanks anyway, Andy. I’ll get Denny a bottle of scotch or something. I’ve got to take this call.”

A fading chuckle was the only answer. I sighed again and picked up the phone.

O’Brien’s was packed.

We all piled in once or twice a month after work to drink too much, talk too much, and eat mediocre food. I liked the kelly-green-and-gold interior and the good-natured crowd. The warm wood beams hugged brick walls, and a well-worn bar consumed the back half of the large room. And, well, if there were a few naked figures carved into the wooden beams, they just added to the aged feel of the place.

Andy nudged my ribs. “Denny’s opening my gift now!” Andy’s faced glowed with the excitement of a twelve-year-old boy presenting his mother with his prized catch from a fishing expedition.

I groaned, but my expression of dismay was really just form at that point. By then, the beer had loosened me up too much to care. Still, my eyes were drawn to where Denny was pulling a scarlet bow from a large box roughly covered in purple wrapping.

Lifting the lid, Denny’s cheeks turned ruddy as he worked his mouth, trying to speak. Or breathe, maybe.

“What the hell am I going to do with this?” Denny finally said, shaking his head.

Andy hooted. “Dunno. But you’ve got the time to figure it out now.”

“Let’s see it!” someone yelled.

Denny spluttered for a moment more, before he collected himself and lifted several items from the box. Handcuffs, a spiked collar, a leash, and what

appeared to be a series of metal rings of diminishing sizes held together by a long metal strip. The packaging identified it as “The Gates of Hell.” It looked painful.

“Are you sure you didn’t mix up my gift and your wife’s birthday present?” Denny hollered good-naturedly. There were chuckles and guffaws all around as it was Andy’s turn to flush.

Denny took my bottle of Laphraoig with better grace.

I picked up my phone when I felt it vibrate, but put it aside when I saw it was Rob calling and beckoned to a passing waitress instead. “Two shots of Jameson, please.”

The rest of the night passed in a blur. I talked a lot of crap, drank too much, and when I thought vaguely about flirting with the bartender, I figured it was time to bail.

“All right, I’m heading home!” I poked Andy in the ribs. “You okay to get home?”

Andy nodded with an exaggerated movement of his head. “I’ll hail a cab,” he mumbled, as he swayed to his feet.

“All right then, I’ll see you Monday.”

I found myself waving to Andy’s back, wondering blearily how I’d ended up the last one in the bar. After downing the rest of my beer, I looked around for my coat and scarf, finally finding them on the seat of the other booth. How had they gotten there?

As I leaned over to grab them, I stumbled and nearly tripped. Recovering, I spied a gaudy gift box on the floor under the table. I snorted to myself as I bent to pick the box up. I hefted the weight of it in my hands. Denny had obviously “forgotten” it on purpose, but it reminded me of everything I wanted to hold on to.

I was still clutching the box when I scrambled out of the taxi, passing some bills to the driver. Unlocking the front door, I staggered into the darkened hallway. No comforting light welcomed me home, and I dully wondered if I’d hoped there would be or not. I collapsed onto the sofa, throwing the box, my wallet, and my coat onto the floor.

A loud clatter startled me awake. I pulled a cushion over my eyes, blocking out the harsh sunlight. More banging. Pots and pans. Ah. Breakfast time. Joy. I pulled the cushion away from my face, squinting against the glare.

I nodded off again, waking some time later. Rob was walking out of the kitchen, carrying luggage.

“Rob,” I croaked. I tried to moisten my lips, but my dry tongue touched only chapped skin. I worked my jaw, sitting up stiffly.

“Rob. Where are you going?”

“That’s up to you.”

“Wha—” My voice creaked to a halt. I coughed. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Well, we have a weekend booked. *Your* idea. You wanted us to spend some time together.”

I groaned and lay back down again. Fuck. The weekend. I closed my eyes, and my eyelids told me they’d be thrilled to never open again. I could hear Rob zipping up his bag, as he continued talking. “So, as you didn’t bother to come home till after two last night, or call me, or take *my* calls, I wondered if you’d prefer if I take this packed bag and just leave. Save us both some time.”

Fuck.

I heaved myself to my feet and lurched to the kitchen in search of caffeine. In search of the right words, actually, but coffee would have to do. I felt Rob walk into the room behind me. The jug was still hot, so I mixed a cup of instant and let it cool as I poured a glass of water and gulped it down, turning to face him. I ran a hand over my face, rubbing my eyes.

“Yeah, Rob, you’re right. My idea. I’m sorry. I forgot.”

He didn’t reply.

“It’ll be good to get away. We’re lost. I know...” I took a deep breath. “Look. I know things haven’t been perfect, but we—”

“What the fuck do you mean?” Rob was already shouting. “Not perfect? Christ, Eli, you act like I’m your delinquent teenage kid. You look at me and fucking *sigh*. I’ve been looking for a job. No one is hiring. What the fuck do

you want me to do? I'm sorry if I haven't been paying enough attention to you. I've got other things on my mind."

I stared at the wall and sipped my coffee. It was terrible.

"Rob. I care, I do. I care about us. I *want* us. Look, I have to pack a bag—just a few things, jump in the shower, and then I'll be ready to go. Ten minutes, that's it."

I could see the flush creeping up his neck. "You know what? Forget it. We don't have the money for this anyway. We can barely pay the damn bills. I need to be here to look for jobs. I might have that interview next Thursday. David said—"

"David has been jerking you around for six months! When are you going to get a fucking *clue*? Why not spend a little of your time trying to work on something that *can* be fixed?"

"Not everything broken can be fixed!"

I took a deep breath. "Yes. We can be. And I'm going to the cabin. In ten minutes—no more. I'd like it if you came with me."

"Or what?"

"I don't know. I really don't. But I want you to. I need you, Rob."

He stared at me, then turned from me and walked into the living room. He sat on the couch and stared at the television, picking up the remote.

I picked up my coat and wallet and that damned box and walked upstairs to the bedroom.

Twenty minutes later, I sat in the car gazing mindlessly at the steering wheel. Was I really doing this? Could I? My hand tightened on the door handle before releasing it. I couldn't work on this relationship alone anymore. I could only carry the burden so long before it buried me. I just needed a little help, but it wasn't coming.

I couldn't see as I started the car, tears burning my eyes.

I jumped at the knock on the window, knee hitting the underside of the dash.

“Dammit!”

Rob stood outside the door, holding his bag. I unlocked the door.

He had gotten in the car, but it didn't feel like any kind of win. Silence surrounded us, as it had for the last hour, broken only by the hum of the tires on the road surface, the whisper of the air conditioning, and the occasional *clunk* of the car's suspension as we changed lanes.

Rob faced out the window, staring at the trees and houses as they blurred by. His body was stiff. My finger twitched on the steering wheel as I thought about him reaching out, grasping the back of my neck and pulling my head towards him, hearing his soft breath as he inhaled, feeling his chest rise and fall against mine. I had no idea how to bridge the chasm between us.

I glimpsed the split-tailed mermaid at the same time an SUV pulled out from the curb. I pulled the car over, and Rob looked across at me, eyebrows raised.

“Coffee.”

He nodded, getting out to stretch his legs.

I returned to the car with my Americano and handed him his cup of organic arrhythmia: more syrup than coffee. Rob was leaning against the car, holding a paper bag of peaches and another of oranges. Getting in, he reached into the back seat to nestle the fruit next to our jackets.

He snorted. “Typical. Only now do I realize these are past their best. The peaches are practically fermenting in their skins.”

While he wasn't looking at me, I spoke quietly. Maybe I hoped he wouldn't hear me.

“I'm sorry I didn't come home last night.”

“Or call.” He flipped around, facing rigidly forward.

“And I'm sorry I didn't call.” I knew that hadn't been fair. Rob would never do that to me. He was endlessly loyal, and for all of the abyss separating us, I never doubted he would honor his vows to me.

“Here,” I said, handing him my cup. “Hold this?” I buckled myself in and started the engine, pulling out into the light traffic.

“I know you picked this damn car out because it has cup holders *right there.*” Rob pointed to the dash.

“But it tastes better when you hold it for me.”

Rob’s lips moved slightly, and I was almost convinced I saw a small upturn at the corners of his mouth. Probably wishful thinking.

Rob’s head rested on the side window, gaze glued to the landscape, which had slowly changed from endlessly horizontal waves of prairie grass to gently-sloping hills. Perhaps the lull of the road had a hypnotic effect, because his shoulders had dropped about an inch.

Why did he feel so much like a stranger lately, when I knew practically everything about him? His favorite color was hunter green. He loved bad sci-fi shows. His mind worked at lightning speed, but he was slow to make decisions. He hated making mistakes and detested being wrong. Perhaps that was why the last six months of professional ill-fortune so encompassed his life. Our lives. It was the first time he had truly failed, and he didn’t know how to manage that. The poison of apathy had seeped into everything.

The roads had gotten narrower and more treacherous as we climbed into the mountains, less than an hour from our destination. I looked over, startled, as I felt something on the back of my right hand, which was resting on the armrest between us. Rob was gently tracing the veins just under my skin. My throat grew tight. It had been so long since he voluntarily touched me. My skin tingled where his hand brushed me.

I wanted to say something, anything, but I couldn’t speak; the band in my throat wouldn’t give up its grasp. His fingers wove through mine, squeezing softly, as I drove on.

The place was a bit crumbly, but it was right next to the water. The age of the building added to its character. It was... pretty. Picturesque. And, all right, it wasn’t as elegant as the brochure had portrayed it to be. Clearly an old building, but well-built, well-lit, and right next to the water. Our cabin was secluded, out of sight of its nearest neighbor, far enough away that I doubted we’d even be able to hear them. Or vice versa.

Rob looked out the window, and I saw him taking in the view of the lake.

“So no one can see in.” I grinned.

“This must have been expensive. More than we can afford, at least,” he said, slowly walking around the perimeter of the room. His attention went to the bed first. It was king-size, with a black iron frame and a canopy: solid and immovable. Rob grasped a bedpost and gave it a shake, to absolutely no effect.

I saw him take in the hairline cracks on the walls, for all they were painted a brilliant white. I hoped he wouldn't make a snarky comment. I needed him to invest in this weekend. He stopped by one of the windows and ran a fingertip along the worn wood frame. The window was open and a gentle breeze blew in, making the sheer curtain move slightly. Charmingly, I thought.

Of course, that was when we both heard the distinct buzzing.

“I think there's a wasp's nest here,” Rob said.

“They're called cicada killers. They're solitary wasps with a very mild sting. Or at least that's what the website claims.” I came up behind Rob and peered out of the window, looking down at the rust-colored pattern of burrows on the lawn below. I shuddered. “Scary looking buggers all the same.”

Rob was standing by the window, looking out, but I didn't think he was seeing anything. He looked remote, like his mind was elsewhere. I slid my hand up his back, rubbing him through his shirt. “Want to try out the bed?”

He turned away, reaching for his luggage. As he moved, my hand fell from his back. I grabbed for him and tried to pull him onto the bed. He shrugged me off and carried a pair of pants to the closet.

“Not now, E, I'm unpacking.”

“You can unpack later. No one here will care if it's a bit wrinkled.”

“No point doing it later if I can do it now.”

“You've just *got* to have everything your way, huh?” The words burst out as he walked around me and calmly finished unpacking. I bit my lip, regretting the comment.

He looked at me, and asked, “Didn't that used to be what you wanted?”

“Hey, I’m not the one who stopped—” I bit back my reply, dropped my own bag on the rack, and sat down on the bed. I stretched out, groaning as my stiff muscles pulled taut beneath my skin, then lay back, watching Rob as he precisely folded his underwear and lined them up in the dresser.

When Rob finished with his bag, he unzipped mine. I saw a familiar glimpse of garish paper.

“Don’t—”

Rob’s eyebrows rose. He reached in the bag and pulled out the box. Denny’s box.

“What’s this? A present?”

I laughed shakily. “No. At least, not one for you.”

“You’re buying presents for other men? Or you’re *getting* presents from other men?”

He pulled the lid off and raised his hand, cuffs dangling from a single fingertip. He examined them, looking almost perplexed.

“No, it was Denny’s retirement present. From Andy, the joker.”

Rob looked at me curiously. “And you stole his present to bring away with us. Is there something you want to share, Eli?”

Fuck it. Nothing ventured...

I rolled onto my belly, then pulled myself to my hands and knees.

I crawled across the bed, trying to think sexy, prowling thoughts. I pushed myself upright and reached for Rob’s hands. I walked forward, pushing him against the wall. I circled his wrists, and slowly drew them above his head, pressing them into the wood paneling. “Don’t move”.

“What... What the hell are you doing?” Rob stammered.

I felt awkward. This wasn’t exactly what I wanted, but I was willing to try. Maybe he needed to relinquish control for a while, as much as I wished I could.

Rob’s eyes were wide, startled. “But I—”

“No talking,” I interrupted. I pressed my lips against his, gently at first, then harder. Mouth closed, but stamping myself upon him.

The cuffs were still grasped in his hand, above his head. I gently pried his fingers away, staring at the cuffs. I could almost feel them tightened on my wrist. The glinting metal entranced me, but cuffs seemed wrong for Rob. I glanced to my side and spied a piece of black lace, standing in for a curtain tieback. Dropping the handcuffs, I tugged the lace loose with one hand, running my fingertips over the cloth. A soft scratch rasped against my skin.

I lifted the lace, whispering, “Hold your arms there. Don’t move them.” Rob stared at me as if I’d lost my mind, but he held his position.

I placed the lace gently against his eyes, tying a loose knot against the back of his head. I grasped his arms, still flush against the wall. It felt good to use my slightly larger frame to lift him up for a change, lick his lips, push my tongue inside, and kiss him roughly. I lowered him to the floor and pulled his arms down by his sides, gripping them tightly.

“Eli?”

“Shhh...”

“Eli, you don’t want—”

“Let’s try this, okay? Trust me.” If only I trusted myself. I was improvising, every minute, every detail. But I knew him. Or I thought I did.

My hands dropped to his shirt, slowly undoing the buttons. It had been so long since we had taken the time to explore each other. As his shirt fell open, I saw the hard, brown nubs of his nipples poking out at me, begging for my mouth. I leaned over, teasing one with my tongue. Rob gasped as I bit lightly. I couldn’t decide which nipple to focus on, so I switched back and forth until both were bright red and swollen, before the thin trail of his hair drew me down.

Rob wore khakis, but I could see the thick stalk of his cock straining against his pants. As I unbuttoned them and drew them down his thighs, I saw the heart-shaped head peeking out of the top of his briefs. I wanted to taste him—so damned bad—but I also wanted to tease him. As Rob stepped out of his pants, I drew my tongue up the length of him, through the thin cotton of his underwear. I laved his cock, then leaned down to take one of his balls into my mouth. The fabric hampered my efforts, but I didn’t care.

“Eli, I need to feel you.”

When the cloth of his briefs was translucent, I leaned back. I had always loved Rob’s cock. It was perfectly shaped—not too long, but thick; sturdy, like Rob. A few prominent veins ran under the surface of his skin. His cock curved slightly to the left. I loved that curve. Mostly when he was inside me.

“Eli, it’s cold. The fabric—” Oh. I hadn’t thought about that. Well, I would warm him up. I quickly drew his briefs down until he stepped out of them, then gently swiped the head of his cock with my tongue. His precome—his essence. It was like coming home. His hands gripped my hair as he tried to force his cock into my mouth. I didn’t object—it was where I wanted him. He filled my mouth steadily until he bumped against the back of my throat. I held him there, not wanting to lose an inch of him until I needed to breathe. As I eased back, I inhaled the aroma of him. Musky, spicy, with a touch of citrus. I had missed him too much.

My own cock was throbbing, almost to the point of pain, but I ignored it as I focused on his. Rob was demanding, pushing his cock into my throat quicker and deeper each time, as I concentrated on using my tongue and lips and mouth to make him feel amazing.

“God, Eli, don’t stop!”

All too soon, I felt his balls tighten. I pulled off quickly, drawing a tight circle around the base of his cock with my thumb and forefinger. I didn’t want him coming yet, but I felt like a trespasser, holding his orgasm hostage.

His fingers tightened on my hair, trying to push me back to my ministrations, but I resisted. I stood up, quickly stripped, and stepped between his legs, our chests and cocks brushing together. My hands returned to his wrists, holding him in place as our legs tangled. His right leg came up, wrapping around the back of my leg. As I grabbed his hips and pushed against him, his other leg wrapped around me. I grabbed his wrists again and pushed them back against the wall beside his head. I almost felt the blood thrumming through his veins.

“I could push inside you, take you,” I breathed into his ear.

“I know,” he murmured, as I took his earlobe gently between my teeth. I ground against him, my cock in the crease of his hip, his cock rubbing against

my own hip. Already, like this, we were closer than we'd been the few times we'd fucked in the last six months.

My pace quickened, our cocks lubricated by precome.

“Oh fuck,” Rob groaned as his head leaned back against the wall. I felt the warmth of his come against my hip, and couldn't stop myself from coming as well. We were both panting as he eased his legs down until he was standing again. I leaned my head against his shoulder while I caught my breath.

After a minute, Rob straightened and removed the lace covering his eyes. “Shower?” he asked.

“Go ahead, I'll be there in a few.” I sat on the edge of the bed, as I wasn't certain my legs would support me for long. My skin felt itchy, tight and... wrong. That had been the hottest sex we'd had in a long time, but I somehow felt... empty inside.

I was still sitting on the bed when Rob got out of the shower. Droplets of water gleamed on his chest, and a towel was slung low on his hips. He reached out and ran his hand through my hair, slowly trailing the backs of his fingers down my cheek. So what if I felt a little off after sex? This... I'd do anything to have this back.

I woke up with my wrist stretched over my head and gripped by Rob's hand. He was tying it to the bedpost. “I guess you don't want to go down to breakfast,” I joked.

He finished with the wrist and reached for the other one. I obligingly gave it to him. The dried semen from our earlier antics itched on my hip. I couldn't scratch it.

He reached for my right leg.

“Oh come on, what if I want to wrap those around you?” I made as if to shift it out of his reach but he was surprisingly fast as he pinned it against the bed. He tied first one foot and then the other, until I was completely immobilized. He wrapped the lace curtain tie around my head, just as I had done to him.

“You know, those toys you bought are cheap pieces of crap.”

“I didn’t—” I tried to sit up, protesting.

He leaned forward and licked my mouth. “No,” he whispered. “Lie back down. No talking.”

As I settled back, Rob touched his hand to my lips, speaking in a low voice like he was talking to himself.

“All sharp edges, tacky fittings. Luckily, you don’t need any of that to have fun. We still had some gear in the car. It calls for some improvisation, of course. Whatever comes to hand.”

He sat up.

“I think I do feel like going down to breakfast, after all,” he said. Bastard. He patted my thigh. “If you’re a good boy, I’ll bring something back for you.” I could hear the smirk in his voice.

“Boy?” I queried. Rob ignored me, getting up and heading for the door. Wait, he really meant it? “Hey!”

But I was talking to an empty room.

When Rob returned, I felt as if I’d been waiting hours. Weeks. Six bloody months.

As soon as I heard the door open, I yelled, “What the fuck, Rob?”

Silence.

“Rob!” Oh, shit, what if it was a maid or something? I didn’t think they’d be here till after we left on Monday, but what if? “Rob, is that you?”

Steps walking toward me. And then he was pulling the blindfold off my face and grinning down at me while I blinked.

My anger bubbled to the surface. “How could you leave me? What if something had happened?”

He tsked under his breath. “Did I leave you?”

I thought back. His footsteps had faded away, the door had opened and closed. The utter absence of sound. The certainty I had been abandoned. “You were gone. I heard you.” Or rather, I heard nothing. The silence of an empty room.

He lifted my hand and placed an object in it. Cool plastic, a screen, and a keypad. “My cell phone?”

His lips brushed my ear. “I called myself on it before I left—the phone was on the nightstand the whole time. I could hear every sound you made. Every sweet whimper.” He paused a moment, then stepped away.

Rob quirked his lip, those gorgeous eyes shining with delight as he spoke. “I think it’s time I returned the favor from last night.”

“You wanna top?” I grinned back at him, relieved. I could roll with that. “How about you feed me first?”

“But you haven’t been a good boy, have you?” He looked at me consideringly, as his smile suddenly vanished. “I heard you yelling before. You said some not-so-nice things. And you’re not addressing me with the proper respect.”

What the... oh. “Sir?”

“Yes, Eli?”

“Will you please feed me, Sir?”

“No.” Shocked, I watched as he turned to the table and set down the paper bag he’d been holding. “Maybe if you behave, you can have some fruit later. Right now, I have other plans for you.”

“Look, I want to play, but I’m hungry!” I whined. “And I gotta go! You tied me up without even letting me piss this morning.”

He smirked. “I know.”

“Rob!”

“Ah-ah.” He wagged his finger at me. “Wrong address. I’ll have to punish you for that.”

“Sir,” I amended. I wanted to play too, but... “Sorry, Sir. Please punish me... but maybe not till you release me and let me eat?”

“You know, you are much too mouthy. I’ve been letting you get away with far too much. I think maybe the blindfold should go back on until you’ve re-learned proper respect.” He walked around to the other side of the bed and

climbed on, crawling forward until he straddled me, his weight squarely on my overfull bladder. I squirmed beneath him, but mindful of his calling me “mouthy”, I stayed silent. It didn’t stop him from producing the black lace again and winding it around my head, covering my eyes. I felt him leaning closer, his breath on my face. “I want a kiss.”

He pulled my lower lip into his mouth and sucked gently on it. It was being tied down and utterly helpless that did it to me every time; I melted into his kiss. I strained to feel his arms around me, to be surrounded by his power. I needed his strength more than anything. I shuddered when he pulled away and whimpered when I felt him climbing off the bed again.

I heard the crinkle of the paper bag and then his steps walking away toward the bathroom. Damn, he’d turned the water on. I tensed in an effort to hold it in.

And then he was back, suddenly slapping a cold wet towel on my cock. I gasped at the shock of sensation, shrinking away. My testicles rebelled, trying to climb into my body. He rubbed vigorously, and I warned, “I’m gonna either piss or come on that towel.”

“No, you won’t. And you forgot the ‘Sir’ again.” He took the towel away. I heard a small squeak, like a bottle opening, and smelled rubbing alcohol. What the hell?

“Sir, what’re you doing?”

“Quiet.”

Something cold and wet enveloped my cock again, and the smell of alcohol strengthened. He gently cleaned me, concentrating on the slit of my cock, pressing on it. My confusion returned, as did my pressing need to urinate.

“Uh, Sir?”

“Quiet.” He said again. “And don’t move. Or you might hurt yourself.”

I wasn’t about to move, but worry was turning into something a bit darker. I started shivering, unable to stop thinking about the alcohol. Was he going to cut me? There were some lines, and blood play was one of them.

I felt his hand holding me straight and his fingertip pushing against my

cock, firmly, rhythmically. The slit felt weird, something squishing inside it. Lube?

A moment later, something sharp poked at the head of my cock and was abruptly pushed inside.

He laid my cock down on my stomach, and I felt him moving up, his hands going around my face, fiddling with the blindfold and then pulling it off.

I blinked up at him, at the broad smile on his face. Together we looked down my body at the clear plastic tubing sticking out of my cock, a simple clothespin clamping it closed. I yelped, twisting away as much as I could.

“Stop that!” The command was reinforced by a sharp slap against my stomach. “It’s happening, so you’d better accept it.”

“Christ, this is too much!”

Another slap against my stomach. “Address.”

Damn it. “Sir! I don’t want to be catheterized, Sir!”

“Too bad. You’re the one who started this again.” I didn’t need to see him to know he was smirking.

I felt the tube going in more, moving incredibly fast, until I thought there must have been a foot of it in me. The urge to pee became overwhelming.

When the tube stopped moving, I was panting from clenching my abs and bladder. Rob sat beside me for a long, quiet moment, holding my cock still, running his fingers tenderly down my flank. The only sound in the room was my fast, unsteady breathing, until even that quieted and calmed.

“I’m in charge. You move when I say you can. You piss when I say you can.”

He knelt up, running his palms across my chest, up my neck, cupping my face. “I’ve missed you, Eli.” He grinned. “And it looks like I brought you breakfast after all.” He triumphantly raised a muffin. Sitting next to me he broke it into tiny pieces, feeding morsels to me one by one. While I chewed, his hands roamed across me, grasping firmly one minute, then softly caressing. When I was done, he tilted my head up and held a water bottle to my lips. I groaned silently, but sipped obediently. He tipped the bottle a few times to let me breathe, and brushed the crumbs away from my lips.

“You good?” he asked.

I nodded. I was going to explode. He must have seen the agony in my face, because he took pity on me and reached for the clothespin.

“I... can't—just take it out.”

His hand paused as he looked at me consideringly. “Eli, we've been together the better part of a decade. I've seen you pee before.”

He wasn't just watching. He was controlling it. Directing it. Taking even my most basic bodily functions and making them his. He said nothing, just resumed stroking my stomach. Rob looked me in my eyes, his voice soft and loving. “You can do this for me. You want to do this for me.”

I paused, pondering his words. I wanted to please him. But I couldn't let go of the feeling of shame. Shame that I wanted this, that I needed him to do this to me. Shame that vanilla was never going to be a strong enough flavor for me. Rob tenderly stroked my abdomen, waiting for me to decide. Accept him. I finally just... let go; of my cramping muscles, of my worries, of my tension. I reveled in the relief and let myself float.

I glanced at Rob for reassurance as he took the clothespin off. Yellow liquid made its way through the clear tubing to where Rob had stuck the other end into an empty water bottle. My face filled with heat.

He smiled, almost dreamily, and continued rubbing my stomach for long minutes. “I knew you could do it. Better now?”

I nodded, worn out.

He replaced the clamp and took the bottle to the bathroom to empty and then placed it next to the bed, but he didn't sit down again. Just stood there, looking at me, face expressionless.

“Thank you, Sir,” I tried.

“I'm going to check out some reading,” he said. “You need to be quiet. I want to know that you've thought this through—about how you want us to be. We don't have to do this, you know.”

“W-wait, you're leaving me here?”

“No, I'm staying. I'm staying right here. But I have to know if you still want this.” He touched the catheter tube gently, and I felt it shift deep inside

me. “And this.” He tied the blindfold again. “And all of it.”

I listened to the faint tap of his retreating footsteps and the harsh screeching scrape of wood on wood as he dragged the easy chair across the room. A drawer opening. The quiet flap of a dust jacket. Rob sinking into a chair. The almost imperceptible brush of Rob’s finger down paper, and then the slow, rhythmic sound of pages turning. I felt his hand on my foot, just touching. Resting. Being there. I let my breath out, drifting off.

The heat of the day rose, and I fell into a restless slumber. When I woke, I felt like the pressure in my bladder had increased again. The room was utterly silent.

“R-Rob?” I quavered.

There was no response. I rubbed my head against the pillow to see if I could get the blindfold off, but Rob had done a pretty good job of securing it. It didn’t shift at all. I yelled Rob’s name this time. Nothing.

I felt my heart rate start to climb, my breath shorten. And then, like a benediction, a hand on the top of my head, pressing oh so lightly, stilling me. The relief overwhelmed me. I think I might have cried a little. The fingers played with my hair, tugging softly, then stroking. At some point I dozed off again.

I jerked awake, I don’t know how much later, when I felt a pull on the catheter tube.

“Rob!”

A hand rested on my forehead. “Shhh.”

“Good boy.” His voice, rich with approval, sent a shiver of warmth through me. He fumbled with the blindfold and drew it away. I blinked open my crusty eyes.

He was so beautiful, watching me with tenderness as his fingers stroked down the side of my face. He had a soft damp cloth, and he wiped my face and eyes carefully. “You were so patient. Do you need to go again?”

I nodded, a little desperately.

“Just be patient a little longer. For me?”

I was bursting, but the deepest part of me wanted to please him more than anything. Despairing, I nodded again.

“Such a good boy.” His hands stroked down from my head, caressing my shoulders and chest. He gripped my hips while trailing open-mouthed kisses over my chest and pinching at my nipple with his lips. A wave of arousal made me dizzy, momentarily pushing back the need to relieve myself. My skin felt hyper-sensitized, tingling at every touch.

Rob unfastened my right leg and turned my hips, rolling me to the side. He ran his palms over my ass, massaging, kneading. He pulled my knee up, placing one leg over the top of the other. I craned my head to look and saw him holding a bottle of lube. I felt him position it at my hole, squirting until the slippery fluid filled my crack and seeped in.

He was so focused, his whole attention on preparing me just for him. I squirmed back, wanting more. His fingers massaged the ring of muscle at my anus but didn't penetrate, just pressing in every direction, then stroking down to the tender spot behind my balls, until I thought I'd burst with need. A high-pitched whine escaped my throat, wordlessly pushing him to *hurry*. To give me more.

“Needy.” He breathed, and his cock replaced the teasing fingers, shoving in, all in one thrust. I moaned, welcoming the sharp pain and the feeling of fullness. My bladder felt full and my cock was so hard; the mix of sensations was driving me wild. Rob thrust fast and hard, and I knew he wouldn't take long. I didn't last at all, the ridge of his cock head pressing on my prostate, forcing the orgasm out of me. I looked down, as my come burbled out of my slit, around the catheter, dripping onto the sheets. I closed my eyes in ecstasy. A cry told me Rob had come right after me, and then his heavy body collapsed on mine. We lay together for long minutes, catching our breath. I could feel the drumbeat of his heart against my back, and reveled in it.

Rob reached for the empty water bottle, stuck the end of the catheter tube in, and removed my clamp. I felt no shame this time, too relaxed to try to halt anything, as the stream of fluid rushed out of me.

The relief was so great, having him here with me, that I was swamped with gratitude and love.

“Thank you, Sir!” The words came out without any second thought.

“You are very welcome.” Rob smiled at me as he held my limp cock patiently until the last drops fell from the catheter. He carefully and gently extracted the tube from my body, then retrieved the damp cloth from beside the bed, cleaning the come from our bodies. He leaned forward and kissed the soft skin of my prick, as I let my eyes flutter closed momentarily and blessed my good fortune.

I felt Rob lean over me, reaching for something out of my view. A paper rustle, then the familiar clack of a pocketknife. A sweet, cloying smell. Peach. Seconds later, juice dripped on my chest. I imagined it running out of the fruit, between Rob’s tightly gripped fingers, as he straddled me, pinning my hips.

I looked up, to find Rob grinning mischievously as he shifted the peach in his grasp and slowly, oh so slowly, peeled away the outer layer. The skin dropped onto my belly, and I squirmed as I felt the juice run down my side.

“Housekeeping is going to wonder what the hell we were doing with these sheets,” I rasped, as Rob carved out a section of peach. He reached forward, touching the flesh to my lips. I curved upwards, trying to grab the slice with my teeth.

I could see Rob’s face in deep concentration as he pulled the peach just out of my reach. I jerked my wrist ties and snapped for it, playfully, trying to catch the juice in my mouth. Rob touched it to my tongue, then jerked it away.

He dragged the peach slice downwards, skirting my nipples, over my abs, then, shuffling back, teased me all the way to my cock. He rubbed the slice up and down my shaft, as I moaned. The sensation was delicious, but too teasing, too soon after coming. Fuck, I couldn’t keep still. I wanted his hand on me, but all I had was this gentle, soft, wetness. He moved the slice down to my heavy balls, rubbing almost too roughly, and I caught my breath. Then lower still, and I grunted as he worked his thick finger into my hole, pushing the residue of the peach in alongside his come. He leaned forward and let his tongue dance over my hole. I could hardly hear his whispered words, “You are so sweet.”

In moments, I could barely sense the trail the peach slice had left behind; the room was already hot and humid, and my skin was damp with sweat. The too-sweet smell of peach juice was sugary and overwhelming.

Rob stood up, and moved to stand beside my head.

“Shhh. Close your eyes.”

The back of his hand stroked my brow, and then his fingertips were in my hair, working my scalp, rhythmically circling and stroking. I hummed and shut my eyes, sinking into the bleached cotton in deep bliss.

“Did you think about us?” he mouthed against my hair.

I nodded my head, choking the words out through my tears. “I’m certain. I’ve always known what I want.”

He looked up at me from under his soft, brown hair, eyes meeting mine.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Yes, Sir.”

“Then don’t move. It’s okay. Just wait there.”

His hands continued for a moment and then left me. I leaned back, eyes closed, the tension holding my muscles tight. I strained to make out Rob’s movements from sound alone. I could hear his soft footfalls on the floorboards, and my heart leapt for a moment, as I wondered momentarily if he was leaving after all.

A light thump. More footsteps. Then the unmistakable sound of duct tape being peeled off the roll. A squeak, then a soft, slightly sticky noise. Scissors? Cutting? A pressure at the side of the bed, next to my hips. The scrape of metal on glass. I could feel my blood pulse as my dick stiffened, and my Cowper’s glands wept, anticipating Rob’s mouth. I let out a faint groan, aching for his touch again.

Suddenly Rob’s hands were on my cock, along with the edge of something hard. What the hell? Was Rob putting that cock cage on me? From the gift box? We had never done that, but if he wanted to try... I was still semi-hard though. I stirred restlessly. I wasn’t sure how much more my cock could handle.

“Wait,” came Rob’s command. The cage settled around my length. I felt a gentle prickling. My head tilted almost imperceptibly as I tried to work out what he was doing. Warming lube? Bengay?

Rob huffed out a breath, full of satisfaction.

“All right. You can open your eyes now.”

I opened them, but his hand blocked my view.

“Eli.”

My eyes flicked upwards to where Rob stood over me. His face looked intense, but pleased. I craned my neck, trying to look around his hand, to see what was happening with my cock.

“Eli! This is very important. Are you listening to me? Stop. Look at me.”

Some hint of urgency in his voice registered with me, and I paused.

He spoke slowly and deliberately as he lowered his hand.

“Eli, it’s crucial you hold still, do you understand? Don’t struggle. You’ll make them mad.”

Part of me heard what he was saying, but his voice seemed very far away. Beyond Rob’s fingers, over my genitals, an inverted iced tea bottle stood, held upright by Rob’s other hand, and trapped within it, a dozen wasps. And my cock.

Terror struck me with a hollow ringing in my ears. Fuck, I wanted to move, to leap to my feet and run and run and never stop. Fuck. They’re on me. On me! Oh, God help me, I could feel their fucking feet as they crawled over my dick! As I watched, a wasp traversed my frenulum, circling the glans. A drop of pre-come hung there, trembling to my pulse. The wasp lowered its mandibles, sampling the sticky goo. Its companions roamed over me, insect mouths lapping at the sweet sticky liquid on my skin.

I froze, except for my eyes, which frantically searched out Rob. He smiled as he pulled long strips of duct tape off the foot of the bed and taped the bottle to my thighs, belly, and hips, keeping it upright.

Instantly, I was jerking to get free, flailing my free leg, without conscious intent, my body moving from some deep, primitive instinct. I barely registered the high-pitched hum as the wasps became agitated, but I felt the sharp pains in my cock telling me they were less than impressed. My balls mounted a full-scale retreat up into my body.

“Ow, shit!” I cried.

Rob grinned broadly and ran his thumb over my lip. “Eli, I told you to keep still. Just take this, okay? Because this is what I choose to do to you. I want this.”

“You want this?” I looked at him, questioningly, as he gave a decisive nod.

Then another sting, and my cock throbbed. The pain was deep now. What if my cock swelled? What if I couldn’t get it out of there?

“Ow, fuck. Yellow, goddamn it! Fuck, no, stop, I’m not fucking kidding.”

Rob sat back and looked squarely at me. His gaze searched my face, and, not for the first time, I wondered just what he was looking for. God, I hoped he found it.

I tried to take a deep breath, but panic was gripping me. “Hon, please. Yellow, okay? I need up. All right? Please?” I could hear the edge of hysteria in my voice.

He reached a calloused hand out to my face and stroked my cheek tenderly.

“We both know you don’t mean that.”

My breath caught in my chest.

And then I screamed and screamed. I wished for hypoxia, begging silently for anything to distance me from this room, this bed, the crawling bodies that were touching me, invading me. I desperately hoped this wasn’t happening. Please. *Make this not be real. Get them off me.*

Every time I inhaled, I heard a soft voice, speaking calming words. I couldn’t understand a single syllable. The crawling, stinging, aching sensation on my dick extended for a lifetime.

Finally Rob’s voice kicked in, and my tears stopped, my breathing calmed. “Eli. Hi.” He smiled at me. “You’re still my good boy, Eli. Well done.”

I opened my eyes and there was a hand in front of my face. He was holding a small, incongruous, cheerily lime green object in his hand. He settled on his knees by the bed. His hands drifted to the soft inside of my thighs, caressing softly. “I want this. I’m in control again now, OK?”

I nodded quickly. As much as I tried, I couldn't control the... excitement that bubbled up inside me. This Rob, the one with the fast hands and knot skills, was familiar, but he'd been gone for so long he seemed almost a stranger. The moment he lost his job he'd stopped being my Dom, as if my need for him controlling me ceased along with his paycheck.

His hands kept stroking my thighs, the movement hypnotizing—calming me. I could feel the crawling sensation still, but I felt as if I had passed right through the terror, to some calm, still place beyond, where all I wanted was to know what Rob wished for.

“Somewhere along the line I forgot what we were to each other,” he started. “We can't do that again. I *won't* do that again. So... I... I'm giving us a physical reminder. He lifted the lime green implement, caressing its stubby tines. His other hand never stopped gently rubbing my thigh. I could feel my cock hardening, reaching for his hand, despite my awareness of the constant caress of wings and feet.

“What is that?”

His grin was a smidge mischievous, but wholly evil. “It's a spork.”

“A what?” I was sure I had misheard him.

“A spork. On one end, a regular spoon with tines, but *here*... well, as you can see, the serrated edge might come in handy. Don't worry, I sharpened and disinfected this end. It's entirely safe.”

A baseball was stuck in my throat. I was sure of it. “What's it for?” I rasped. I could barely talk—my vocal cords had seized. Rob's fingers never stopped caressing my thigh. My skin was becoming numb from it.

“Like I said, I forgot what we were to each other. That won't happen again. This spot,” his thumb pressed harder against my thigh. “This spot is now mine. I own it. Well, I always did, but now... now you will carry me with you.”

“I don't understand.”

“You don't need to. You just need to lie still.”

“Please, Rob.” My eyes filled with tears.

Rob sighed, then leaned down and traced his tongue where his thumb had been. “My name. It will go here. Each morning, I will trace my name in your

skin with the blade. Just a scratch, not enough to cut, mind you, but I'll keep the skin raw, open. The longer we can keep the abrasion open, the better scar will result. You will always feel me there. I will always know I'm there, etched into your skin—*under* your skin. Every day. “

“You want to scar me?”

Rob smiled. “I want us both to know you're mine. That I'm under your skin as much as you are under mine.”

“Don't you know that already?”

“I do, but I need to see it. I need to know it in my bones.” His eyes welled, before he nuzzled into the side of my face. “I lost myself, Eli. I didn't feel like I had a right to own you, and I lost myself.”

He pulled back, and his face grew serene. “You can't move, not at all.”

I wasn't certain about this, but his confidence was enough to carry me through. I needed the Rob I knew back. God knows, I already belonged to him in every way. If he needed this... I nodded.

Rob swiped my thigh with what smelled like an alcohol pad, then placed the barely-sharp serrations against it. I couldn't watch, but I could feel the burn against my thigh as he drew a line about an inch thick down the inside of my leg. It wasn't painful initially, and I began to relax slightly, but the crawling on my cock held me back from reaching the peaceful place where the pain wouldn't touch me.

With every movement of Rob's hand, the pain deepened. After a few minutes, the burn became almost unbearable. “Rob—I can't anymore. It hurts.”

He paused, leant forward, kissed my lips. “You can take a little more. For me. You can.”

He carved deeper, and I struggled to find my calm inner peace, to not move, not squirm.

After what seemed like years, he announced, “Okay, I'm done”. He set the spoon on the desk and blew lightly on my thigh. The cool air soothed the burn slightly. When he moved his head back I saw a raised red “ROB” on my inner

thigh, about two inches high. He leaned in and licked it, running his tongue up towards my groin, where the wasps circled defensively. He turned away for a moment, then his fingers returned to my thigh, rubbing in a minty-smelling cream with his fingertips.

“Ow—FUCK, what is that?”

“Toothpaste. This will ensure the wound scars properly.”

I flopped back, letting go of all my tensions, as the burn seeped through me. Letting Rob in.

When he'd ceased torturing my wound further, he wrapped it in gauze and released me from my bindings. He kissed me gently, tongue outlining my lips.

“I'm proud of you. It will hurt more tomorrow, but I know you can handle it. We're going to get this off you now.” He reached for the jar, and his nails scratched at the duct tape, slowly peeling it up, piece by piece. My hairs caught and he gave the tape little jerks to free it, as I winced and tried to lie still. I was not going to look. Finally he lifted the jar off, and I couldn't stop myself—I glanced down to see him pick huge hornet-like shapes off my cock, one by one, and drop them in the jar.

“See,” he grinned at me. “No permanent harm.”

I lay calmly, perfectly still, and Rob walked to the window and shook the wasps free. Everything ached with released tension. My cock burned and throbbed; it felt the size of a mango. My skin still shuddered reflexively.

Leaning over me again, he freed my wrists and remaining ankle and dropped the jar to the floor.

“Roll over.”

It took me a few tries. The stiffness in my joints wasn't going away quickly; I'd been on the bed for most of the day. Rob knelt, then lay down beside me, partly covering my body with his; slightly smaller, slightly lighter, but strong enough to keep the world back. It was safe to cry. Rob looked up at me from under his lashes for a moment, then leaned in and kissed my bicep. He didn't raise his head again, mumbling calming nothing-words against my skin I felt more than heard.

I sobbed for a while as he held and petted me. I held desperately onto him, touching wherever I could get my hands on skin, grasping his back, kneading his shoulders. I needed to know he was here; that he'd never leave me. I was nothing without him.

I tried to speak, but snot blocked my nose. I was incapable of forming words.

I finally choked out, "Thank you. Thank you so much, Rob. That was exactly what I needed."

I rested my chin on the top of his head, feeling his warm forehead on my collarbone, tears still running down my cheeks. I registered how sore my throat was from screaming. I was embarrassed as I croaked, "Rob, you're my everything. I don't care what you do for a living. You're always my Dom—that never changes."

Rob nudged my head back, cupping my face in his hands, and gifting me that heartbreaking smile.

"I'm sorry I left it so long."

I just held onto him and nodded. I tried to reply, but I could barely force out an inarticulate grunt before I shuddered and started to cry again. Everything hurt. Rob tenderly kissed my lips, my eyebrow, my cheek, over and over, until my tears stopped.

"I love you, Eli."

"I love you too, Sir."

I fell asleep, finally cradled in his warm arms.

THE END

Author Bio

Tripoli is a collaboration by three avid readers of male-male romance. Mild-mannered professionals by day, dub-con fiction enthusiasts by night, they thought they would try their hand at writing something just a little unsettling.

Contact & Media Info

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STICKING IT

By K. Vale

Photo Description

A young, heavily muscled man, with his dark hair in a pompadour, is performing a gymnastics routine on a pommel horse wearing only his underwear.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I know I'm not supposed to be on the equipment after hours, but when my frat brothers dared me to strip down to my skivvies and start scissoring, who was I to say no? We snuck in and now, here I am. We all do dumb shit when it's just the guys, after all, right? And I mean, clearly they've seen me before when I was competing on the college team, but I guess it's an understatement to say that they've never seen me perform in such—ahem—brief attire.

Most of the guys looked uncomfortable, but I noticed one of them looking at me like he had something else in mind. He's new and kinda one of the more quiet ones among us, so I don't know much about him. I've only just started to realize that I might... well, kinda sorta totally... like guys and not girls. Is it possible he could maybe be... like me?

Sincerely,

Confused... Curious... and Crazy Limber

Note: Hi! I'd like an HEA (or at least HFN) and would prefer no BDSM, dub-con, menage (or the more unusual stuff like sounding, watersports, etc.). Just some dirty sexy times (maybe some dirty talk?) and cute college boys, please! Would love it if one of them were a little geeky or nerdy. Not sure if that's squeeze-in-able, but just thought I'd throw it out there. :D

Thanks!

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: fraternity, college, closeted, gymnast, athlete, masturbation, geek/nerd, virgin

Word count: 13,067

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STICKING IT

By K. Vale

CHAPTER 1

“Hey, Skinny Elvis! Twenty bucks says you won’t drop trou and do your pommel routine.”

Dane Christakos gave Justin Burns a dubious look. Behind them, a few of their fraternity brothers—Ben Erenfeld, Tyrone Martin, and the new guy, Adam Kennedy—laughed with varying degrees of control.

“Seriously? Where’s the challenge, dude? This is only my second beer.” Dane handed his headache-in-a-can over to Justin with a sympathetic shake of his head. “No taking it back, sucker.”

“I’ll even pay up front.” Justin crumpled his own beer can in his fist, tossed it over his shoulder, and took a sip of Dane’s Bud while fishing in his pocket. He produced a wrinkled-up bill, which Dane snatched out of his fingers and shoved in a front pocket of his jeans. He’d already shucked his Vans and lifted his shirt over his head, careful not to fuck up the perfectly coiffed pompadour that had earned him his nickname. Dane had learned long ago that sticking out like a sore thumb on purpose was better than trying to fly under the radar and failing miserably.

Walk in a room like you own it, and you will.

Being a gymnast could’ve gotten him beat up, and *had* once or twice in high school—only because he was outnumbered—so first semester freshman year, he began rocking his crazy hair, and that spring he rushed the most prestigious frats at Cornell. It’d definitely been the way to go, because giving up gymnastics to fit in was never an option.

He was popular in his fraternity, and if everything went as planned, he’d qualify this year for the next Summer Olympics.

When Dane unbuttoned his jeans and slid them off his hips, he was glad he’d only had tighty whities in his clean laundry pile this morning. Boxers

would have set him up for unintentional flashing and restricted his movement. As it was, he saw a few sets of averted eyes as he grabbed his beer back from Justin to finish the dregs.

“Easiest twenty bucks ever,” he said with a cocky twist of his mouth as he handed back the empty can. Dane mounted the horse in a liquid motion born of countless hours of training.

His routine was second-nature at this point, even with his faint buzz. He’d done it a thousand times: front support, to leg cuts, to rear support. Hold, and then into scissors. Circles to a handstand, down to flairs and back up again. From his upside-down position he saw the guys ribbing each other.

What’s the big deal? All of them had roamed the house naked, or close to it, at one point in time or another. Hell, a few of the guys had even engaged in three-ways with the occasional sorority slut. There was no modesty in their house.

Well, except maybe for the new transfer, Adam. He hadn’t been around long enough for Dane to catch him half-naked and stumbling to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

But Dane sure as hell was looking forward to it.

He came down for a cross support travel that spun into a dizzying series of Russians, and then lifted into a final handstand before spinning parallel to the pommels and sticking his dismount.

Adam, eyes glued to Dane while he walked back to his pile of clothes, gave a slow clap. Was that sarcastic? Because the way Adam’s gaze followed him while he bent and grabbed his pants looked like he might have appreciated the free show.

“Thanks, man. That was exactly what I needed.” Justin flashed his phone at Dane. A picture of him, ass mid-circle, flying nothing but a Fruit of the Loom flag, filled the small screen. He wasn’t looking at the camera, but that shock of black hair was unmistakable.

“Come on, Burns. That kinda shit could get me kicked out of my club.” As it was, Dane was lucky to have his coach trust him enough to give him a set of keys to practice after hours. It was close to impossible to find a college with a men’s gymnastics team, and Dane had settled for a school he loved with a

private team one town over. His parents would disown him if he got caught doing stupid crap like this, after all the money they'd poured into his sport.

"Payback's a bitch, Elvis," Justin said with a smirk.

And now it suddenly made sense that Justin had insisted they sneak into the gym for shits and giggles. Dane had just figured the guys were drunker than he was.

I fell right into it. Any excuse to show off in front of Adam, huh? Dumbass.

"Payback for what?" Adam's sandy eyebrows pinched together with authentic concern. At least he wasn't in on it.

Tyrone filled him in. "Oh, damn! My man covered—I mean covered—Burnsie with permanent marker one time when he was passed out. Couldn't wash that shit off for a week. The pictures were everywhere. Burnsie's been biding his time, Elvis!"

"Come on, Burns," Dane tried to sound cool but convincing, even though nausea twisted his gut. "That was haze week! Can't blame me for that."

"Nah. I blame you for the picture of my green dick that went around. I didn't get laid once last year, and it's all your fault. This baby's going global as soon as I figure out how to post it on the school web page."

Shit. This didn't even compare to what Dane had done. Students were still referring to chlamydia as "The Burns" on campus. Weak as this was, though, it could do a ton of damage to Dane's gymnastics career.

"Oh, that's a simple hack." Adam spoke up. Dane glared at him, but the guy with the waves of sun-kissed brown hair was smiling easily at Justin. His bright blue eyes were framed by wire-rimmed glasses, and Dane was floored, as usual, by the dimples that marked his sculpted cheeks every time he grinned. "I can handle that, no problem."

"I knew the computer geek would come in handy!" Justin cackled. "And to think I voted *no* on you." He gave Adam a slap on the back that jumped his glasses to the end of his nose. He pushed them up with one finger and Dane tried not to find the act charming.

And here I backed that fucker. Thought he might be good to have around in

more ways than one. Screwed over by a pretty face, Dane. You are such an idiot.

“Go ahead,” Dane shrugged. “I’m sure it’s not gonna stop *me* from getting laid for the next year. If anything, you’re doing me a favor. It’ll be business as usual.”

Plenty of the guys in his house lied about who and how many women they slept with. Dane had dated a couple of classmates in the three years he’d been in college, but none of them had felt like more than friends. No sparks flew. Nothing had lasted. Recently, he’d made up his share of fictitious names, and shot down plenty of real women who’d been interested. So far, no one seemed to think he was anything other than straight and swinging-single, which was fine with him.

Dane casually scooped up empty cans, and then whistled and pointed a thumb at the exit sign. “I need to get something to eat.”

Adam had driven them all. He had an SUV because his parents wanted him to have “the safest vehicle possible.” Dane could imagine the guy’s sheltered and pampered upbringing: chess club on Saturday mornings, and freakin’ junior engineers’ camp over the summer. They were probably grooming him to be the next Mark Zuckerberg or something.

But Adam had walked into that first rush party and Dane couldn’t take his eyes off the guy. His hair was longish and curled in loose, wild waves around his perfect face. He was a few inches taller than Dane’s five-eight, not hugely muscular, but lean, and those fuckin’ glasses were adorable.

Dane had popped a semi just shaking hands with him. He’d known from that first meeting that he wanted Adam Kennedy in his house—hell, in his mouth. Fuck the fact that Dane wasn’t out; wasn’t even one-hundred percent honest with himself that he was gay until recently. If Adam was interested, they’d find a way around that.

And now this shit blew it all to hell.

“Where do you wanna get food?” Adam asked, and Dane played like the situation wasn’t eating him alive.

“Ah, whatever,” he mumbled. Adam pierced him with those baby blues, almost as if he wanted to convey some silent message.

How about I'm sorry for being a disappointing dickhead?

"I wanna get to that house party at Smithberger's," Ben said. "We're outta beer, anyway."

"You're the douche who didn't buy enough," Tyrone said, kicking Ben's ass from where he walked behind him. Dane held up the rear, ready to lock the gymnasium doors after everyone was out. Adam seemed to drag his feet to keep pace with him.

"Yeah," Justin agreed. "You guys down?"

"I'm in," Tyrone answered.

"Nah," said Dane. "I got practice in the morning. Need my beauty rest."

"I can drop you guys at Chad's, and then take a spin through the drive-through if you want," Adam offered, looking at Dane.

"Yeah, sure." Dane's voice had a hard edge to it that he hoped wasn't too obvious. Fuck all of them.

At least he still had Justin's twenty for a super-sized midnight snack.

"You guys gonna be able to find a ride home?" Adam asked, as he maneuvered his truck into a street space outside the mammoth brick Colonial.

"If I don't find a piece of ass to ride me home, I'll walk to the bus stop," Justin said.

"Have a nice walk, Don Juan." Dane couldn't help it.

"Hey, Poindexter," Justin directed at Adam. "You good for doing that computer thing tomorrow?"

"I can probably get it done tonight. Email me the picture."

Justin pulled out his phone. "What's your number?"

Adam rattled it off and Dane tried hard not to commit it to memory. Adam's phone purred in his pocket as the data was received.

"Cool. See ya later." Justin slapped the passenger side door.

Fuck you.

Adam pulled away from the curb and said, “McDonald’s or Wendy’s?”

Dane swallowed down the anger that swelled in his chest. “Doesn’t matter,” he said, his eyes trained out the window, taking in black night periodically assaulted by the rhythmic passing of lit up homes.

“I’m not really going to put that picture up, you know.”

Dane turned swiftly. Adam stared straight ahead until he slowed to a stop at a red light and finally looked over.

“What do you mean? Justin’s gonna be pissed if you don’t.” Not that Dane wanted to convince him otherwise. And the sliver of hope that accompanied Adam’s words was growing exponentially inside him—he wanted to tame it, slow it down before he set himself up for more letdown.

The light blinked green, and Adam turned down Elmira toward the Mickey D’s.

“I’ll just set up a dummy template that looks like the school site. Direct all traffic from any IP address connected to our house to be diverted to the fake address. Put your picture up and encrypt the proxy page and the original photo with a virus that will wipe it out after Justin logs on to see it. He’ll just think the school took it down.”

“Are you serious? Can you do that?”

“Of course. I’ll phreak his phone when we get home just to be sure he can’t send it anywhere else. He might show it to people at the party, but there won’t be a trace of it tomorrow. Unless you wanted a copy?”

“I don’t even know what that means, but it sounds fuckin’ awesome. No, I don’t need a picture of me in my whites. Burn the evidence.” Dane wanted to suggest Adam keep it. “I totally thought you were gonna screw me over.”

“Never, Elvis.” Adam gave him a smile and a head shake that turned Dane’s stomach inside out.

“So you like that? Skinny Elvis?”

“Least it’s not *Fat* Elvis. Either the king of rock, or else they call me James Dane—you know, instead of James Dean? I’m used to it. I guess I asked for it.” Dane smoothed a hand over his upswept hair for emphasis.

“You’re a little *Rebel Without a Cause*. I can totally see it.”

“I always have a cause.”

They stopped at the drive-through microphone. “What do you want?” Adam asked.

To lick you up and down.

“Umm. Get me a number five. And whatever you want—I’m buying.” Dane handed over the wrinkled bill.

“Does that mean you’re gonna expect something later?” Adam chuckled and placed the order while Dane’s pulse pounded in his temples.

“Hey, it’s the least I can do. You computer guys charge more than I can afford anyway.”

Adam gave him a sideways smile, those dimples killing Dane a little more every time they flashed. He pulled up to the window to pay. The woman handed him two medium Cokes and a white bag that smelled like deep-fried heaven. Adam passed Dane the sodas and set the bag between them.

Dane found drink holders for the cups, and then reached for a fry. His hand met Adam’s in the sack. “Sorry. You want me to hand you your burger?”

“Maybe I’ll just park so I don’t have to drive and eat. That okay with you?”

“Yeah. Fine.”

Adam nearly reached the parking lot exit before he swung into a vacant spot far removed from the nearest car. Dane pulled out a thick wad of napkins, and passed him a sandwich, leaving the fries a mess at the bottom of the bag for them to share.

“So, how are you liking Cornell so far?” Dane asked with a full mouth.

“Great. Their computer science program is one of the best. Are you a native New Yorker?”

“Yeah. Well, born in Boston, but my parents moved when I was a kid. How ’bout you?”

“Connecticut.”

They chewed, swallowed, and sipped in silence, until Adam spoke again.

“You were unbelievable back there—your routine. I’ve never seen anything like that in real life.”

“Thanks. You should come to a meet sometime.”

“Yeah? Do you do that vault thing and tumbling and all that?”

Dane nodded. “We have to have a routine for all the events, but the horse and rings are my strongest.”

“Must be your huge arms. I’d love to come watch you.”

Gulp.

“So, why’d you end up transferring, anyway? Where were you going before?”

“I was at Stanford. Fantastic computer program, but turns out I’m not a West-Coaster. I missed seeing my family.”

Their hands met in the fry bag again, but Dane didn’t pull back. He let his salt roughened-knuckles leisurely brush over Adam’s as he snagged a handful. He popped four fries into his mouth and sucked the salt off his fingers after he swallowed. Adam’s gaze followed his lips. His blue eyes looked black in the dim light, and they widened behind his glasses. Dane’s jeans grew tighter in the crotch.

“Yeah. They have some great gymnastics programs out there, too, but I kinda feel the same. You have brothers or sisters?”

“A sister. How ’bout you?”

“Two brothers. I’m the third. My poor mom rolled the dice hoping for a girl and got me.”

“Well, I’m glad she tried again,” Adam said, and then quickly slurped a mouthful of Coke as if to keep from saying anything else. *Or maybe that’s just my wishful thinking.* Dane would have given anything to trade places with that straw.

“Well, I guess we should head back. I still have to copy a website tonight.”

Dane glanced at his watch. “Yeah. I might even have time for a quick jerk-off before bed.” *Why the fuck did I just say that?* “Better than counting sheep,”

he added, not sure if that made it worse or better. He grabbed his soda to give his mouth something to do other than talk.

“Feel free to get going on that. The drive-through chick gave us more than enough napkins.” Adam handed Dane a fistful of M-stamped paper products with a laugh.

Dane choked on his soda. “Yeah, right,” he said, his voice strained by the introduction of cola to his lungs and the surge of blood to his dick.

“What? It’s not like anyone’s gonna see.” Adam shrugged, nonchalant almost. But not quite. His tongue darted out to nervously lick his lips. Dane’s cock twitched in his pants, eager to accept the challenge.

“Right. Like you’d give yourself a low five in the McDonald’s parking lot.”

“Why not?” Adam shrugged. “I’ll race you. Whoever gets off first wins.”

Oh my god. Keep talking like that and I’ll finish before I get it out all the way.

Dane positioned his cup in the drink holder, clapped his hands together, rubbed them, and said, “Game on.”

Adam stared a moment, as if surprised by Dane’s response, but a slow grin twisted up his lips. He dropped his drink and snatched a couple of napkins off Dane’s lap. Dane willed his hips not to press up toward the guy’s reaching hand.

With a swallow, he pulled at his fly, and realized he was coming out at least half-hard and was going to give himself away. But his fingers were already skating over his bulge, pulling up his sack as he lifted his ass off the seat to tug his jeans down enough to free up his dick.

Adam watched him, his hand frozen over his own junk for a moment.

“Hey, Quickdraw, you better get going or you won’t stand a chance.” Dane spit on his hand and rubbed the lube over his head while his other hand cuffed his base. *Fuck it. Let him see me hard. It was his idea, anyway.*

Adam took a deep breath and wrestled his cock from the gap in his boxers. It was far from soft, and Dane’s shoulders dropped with relief. He wanted to tear his eyes away instead of practically drooling at the sight of Adam’s six

inches and counting. It was on the thicker side of average, too. A fine piece of pale, cut meat with a pink head that made Dane's own cock fill to rock-hard as he watched Adam rub thumb and forefinger along his tip. He wanted to stick his tongue in that glistening slit and taste him.

Dane's balls pulled up high, and that zip of electricity hummed along his spine telling him, *we're ready when you are*. But he wasn't. *Fuck*, he wanted to see Adam shoot. Wanted to pop his load at the same time. Adam's breath was louder than normal, with little grunts escaping now and again, and he was giving Dane's hand-fuck his undivided attention.

Dane wanted to give him a better show than the one in the gym. He leaned over and lobbed a wad of spit on his own dick while he clamped his fingers around the base. The wet trail landed perfectly on his blushing purple head and oozed over his helmet, sliding down his length. Dane's fist pulled up to meet it, enfolding it in his foreskin. He worked his knob with a slick palm while his unoccupied fingers reached under his nuts to finger his taint.

Adam's panting sped up and he deposited a loog into his own palm.

"Mmm," Dane murmured. "I love chokin' my balls."

A strangled sound came from Adam and his hand slowed on his dick.

Gotcha.

"Fuck," Dane continued. "I'm gonna shoot a fuckin' monster. My nuts are so full."

More grunting from the driver's seat. Adam was barely stroking his cock. It stood up straight and fat. Probably seven inches of hard man just dying to come. But this wasn't really a race to see who got off first. Nope. This was a competition to see who could make the other spurt without even touching him. At least, it was to Dane.

Dane wondered what Adam would sound like when he let loose. *Bet I can make you scream. Just give me the chance.*

Slowly. He'd take this nice and easy. Two guys jerking off in each other's presence didn't exactly make them gay. The guys sometimes watched porn and beat-off together at the house—not a big deal.

But they weren't looking at naked women, here. No siree.

Dane could barely keep his eyes off Adam's rod—didn't want to miss the first arc of white-hot finish when it started. But when he glanced at Adam's face, the guy's gaze was trained below Dane's belt. His teeth bit his full lower lip, and his eyebrows were pinched in concentration. His intensity—his strong jaw clamped so tight it made dents in his high-boned cheeks—made Dane just as crazy as the dude's spit-slick dong being greased between long fingers. Fingers that could fly over a keyboard as masterfully as they could work a stiff dick.

“So fuckin' hot.” Dane's words came out in a raspy growl, and the expression on Adam's face went from strained to pained. His mouth opened, pink tongue glistening beyond those lips as a savage groan ripped out of him.

Dane looked down to see him spurt. Creamy pulses shot high and smacked against his shorts. Come bubbled out and over his twitching fingers, dripping down his knuckles. Dane licked his lips and blasted his load.

His breathing was still labored as he gave a thin laugh.

“You win.” Dane still had one hand wrapped around his wet cock—keeping it warm after the workout—as he grabbed the napkins with his other. They dabbed off in silence, white paper clinging to palms and pubes. Dane was glad his underwear hadn't been hit. He tugged his pants back up, trying desperately to think of something to say.

Why don't you sneak over to my room later tonight?

So, how do you like your cock? Fucked or sucked?

Got a smoke?

He was still undecided, his eyes trained on the vacant parking spaces beyond his window while he muddled through possible conversations starters, each more awkward than the last.

“I don't want you to think...” Adam's voice, unnaturally high until he cleared his throat, filled the gap. “You know, that I'm into dudes or anything. 'Cause I'm not.”

“What?” Dane felt like he'd just taken a gut punch from Mike Tyson, but he forced out his words. “Nah. Course not.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. No matter what he'd told himself about the other guys stroking off to porn in the same room, the notion that this had been in any way

unqueer had been obliterated by how hot it had been. Adam's eyes devouring him. The live-wire of sexual excitement humming through the vehicle just a minute ago. Dane's piercing desire to grab the wavy hair at the nape of Adam's neck and pull their mouths together, no matter who might drive by. *Fuck!*

Adam was already backing his car out of the spot. He swung into traffic, his mouth set in a grim line. A Virginmarys' tune came on the radio and Dane reached over to turn it up and drown out his disappointment.

They walked into the enormous stone house together, without a word spoken between them. Dane's room was on the first floor, Adam's on the second. Dane grabbed the guy's arm before he could beat a fierce path upstairs.

"Hey. Thanks. For everything."

He added the last bit because he meant it. It was a small slice of his secret fantasy dished up for the taking—one he wouldn't even hesitate to make public. He'd built up his reputation here, had climbed to council member in his fraternity, and cultivated his I-don't-give-a-shit attitude long enough so that it finally felt natural.

Just like Dane and Adam together.

He was interested—enough to make it work whatever way fit with Adam. Something told him Adam's heterosexual claim was a load of bull, and denial and distance didn't really play into his plans. Unfortunately, neither did pushing. Dane just hoped his meaning came through clear enough for Adam to read him. Stick it all out there and see if it attracts attention. Okay, maybe not all, but he'd cast a weak line. A hungry enough fish could find it and nibble if he wanted to.

"It's... yeah—nothing. No problem." Adam's eyes darted from side to side and then landed on Dane's grip on his forearm. Dane let him go.

"Well, it's something to me. So thanks." Dane turned to his room before he could say anything worth biting his tongue over. He risked a swift glance into the hall as he closed the door. Adam stood where Dane had left him, an unreadable expression on his face.

Adam closed his bedroom door and let out a long breath. From the moment he'd first laid eyes on Dane in a picture of friendly, grinning frat brothers on the school website, their arms slung around each other's necks, he'd been smitten. He'd already chosen Cornell as his transfer school—his *let's-start-over* school after a horrible first semester freshman year. His college experience had been tarnished by bullying when he'd come clean about his sexuality. And the relationship that had prompted him to come out had been a flash in the pan.

He had no intention of going the same route this time around.

But the image of the smiling guy with the dark eyes and sexy-as-hell black pompadour had swayed him into pledging Sigma Alpha Mu. He wanted to see that smile in real life. Get as close to the fire as possible, even though he could never touch it. Not while he was here studying. There would be time to meet someone after school. He couldn't risk needing to make another transfer—not when he wanted to be in one of the best schools for his major.

And odds were that guy was straight as an arrow. But now Adam had his doubts, and the new knowledge was likely to kill him over the next three years.

He kicked off his shoes and jeans, peeled his crusty boxers off with a sickening sense of remorse, and slid into clean ones. With a sigh, he plopped into his desk chair and fired-up his computer. He brought up Dane's picture on his phone and something gripped his throat in a tight fist. God, he was gorgeous. Adam had run track in high school, lifting weights on the days his coach told him to, but his muscles were much more subtle than Dane's. The gymnast was fucking ripped. He had pecs that begged to be licked, and a fine trail of black hair that began between them and travelled downward. It disappeared over his six-pack abs only to reappear again beneath his perfectinnie, and then vanish once more under the waistband of his tighty whities.

Adam swallowed hard. He'd gotten a close look at what was under those cotton drawers. And the package had been mouthwatering.

Focus.

First, Adam hacked Justin's phone. He saw that the photo had not been sent anywhere other than to himself, and he encrypted the original picture with

a caterpillar virus that would slowly eat away at the pixels until the shot was rendered unrecognizable in a matter of hours. Next, he pulled up the school website and duplicated it, placing Dane's photo at the top of the *Places and Faces* page. He set the new site to default from the house IP addresses, and then accessed the mobile numbers phone book for all SAM members and set them to redirect to the dummy page until the time it was set to crash. After a short delay, all attempts to access the site would reroute to the true school address.

Done.

Adam considered turning off his computer and hitting the bed. It was late enough, for sure—more morning than night, and his eyelids had been replaced with sandpaper at some point during the programming process. But the photo of Dane popped up when he closed the multitude of pages he'd been working on. With a glance at his locked door and a sadness-tinged excitement he couldn't refuse, Adam pulled out his dick and jerked off to the man of his dreams for the second time that night.

CHAPTER 2

“Hey. Can I borrow you for a few?” Adam stepped into Dane’s open doorway and tamped down the warning bells that seemed to start clanging in his head every time he got within a certain distance of the guy.

Dane looked up from his computer. “Sure. What’s up?”

“I need your muscles.” Adam had avoided Dane like he was patient zero all week long. And now here he was pulling a complete one-eighty. If he hadn’t been left in charge of picking up a truck full of industrial-sized tubs of imitation maple syrup, he wouldn’t have risked getting this close.

Dane squinted at him curiously. “You do, huh?”

“You know the Greek House of Pancakes event?”

Understanding lifted Dane’s brow, and he cracked a half-grin that kicked Adam’s pulse to a furious beat.

“Oh, yeah. Freshmen always get stuck doing the grunt work.” Dane stood and walked to his dresser. He grabbed a pair of balled-up athletic socks from the top drawer and sat on the end of his bed to pull them on.

His feet were gorgeous. Adam had never really thought about feet in a sexual way before, but these—long and thin, tapered with a sprinkle of dark hair on his big toes—these made him want to rub them with his own feet between crisp, cool sheets. These he’d even consider sucking on.

Damn it!

Dane was pushing his sock-clad feet into his Vans when he spoke again. “So, you couldn’t find a lowly freshman to help you out? You thought a junior was the way to go?”

Adam’s face burned as he blinked stupidly. *What the hell was I thinking?*

Dane cleared the five feet between them in two strides and clapped a hand on Adam’s upper arm, giving it a squeeze.

“Kidding, dude. What are brothers for?”

Adam let out a relieved breath along with a nervous laugh. “I’m really sorry to bug you. For real. It’s heavy lifting stuff and I just thought of your

arms.” *Shitastic, Adam. At least you didn’t say you thought of his cock. You were pretty damn impressed with that muscle, too.*

Dane’s hand was still on him. He pinched Adam’s shoulder and worked down to his bicep with expert fingers. “Feels like you could handle it on your own.”

Adam closed his eyes for a long blink, searching for the strength to keep his hands to himself—to keep his desires locked away.

“I’ve got the truck, so I got syrup duty.”

“Ah ha. I was stuck waiting tables my freshman year.” Dane ushered Adam out and closed his door behind him. “Spilled orange juice down some guy’s back by accident. Well, mostly by accident. He was a serious pain in the ass.”

“I guess I could have it worse, in that case. Not much of a waiter, myself.”

“At least you’ll get to hang out and watch the band when you’re done. It’s Rat Fink, right?”

Adam shrugged. “Not sure.”

“What’re we raising money for this year?”

They walked out of their house into blinding sunlight and Adam squinted in Dane’s direction.

“We’re teaming with Alpha Chi Omega to benefit domestic violence. It’s over there this year.”

Dane’s movie star silhouette nodded against the bright backdrop. “Well, it’s a good cause, anyway. So, where do we pick up?”

“Our kitchen guys ordered it in bulk for us,” Adam answered as he unlocked his truck and they climbed in.

The ride to the back of the building was quick, thankfully. Adam couldn’t help but replay in his head their last encounter in the vehicle. The evidence was long removed, but he still felt like he could smell French fries every time he got in the car. He doubted he’d be able to patronize McDonald’s drive-through without getting a chubby from now on.

Adam shifted in his seat to relieve the unwelcome pressure in his fly.

The cafeteria manager told them to back into the loading bay. The door was already open when they pulled into the space and popped the tailgate.

“Here is your order.” The guy in chef’s whites gestured toward a stack of four boxes labeled “Andersen’s Pancake Syrup.” They each contained four, one gallon jugs of syrup.

“I guess I could’ve taken them out and moved them two at a time, huh?” Adam said, cracking open the top box and feeling like an idiot.

“I’m honored you thought of me,” Dane answered, sliding the top box from in front of Adam and heaving it up with a grunt.

I wish I could stop thinking about you.

Not to be outdone, Adam picked up the next box without breaking up the contents. It was heavy, but not hernia-inducing.

He slid it in behind Dane’s box. Dane barely moved to make way for him and Adam’s hip skimmed the front of his pants.

“I knew you had it in ya.”

“Guess I dragged you out for nothing.” Adam turned to face him and they stood looking at each other with less than a foot between them.

“You can drag me out anytime.”

Fuck. Please don’t do this to me. Adam may have been strong enough to move syrup without Dane’s help, but he was embarrassingly weak in the willpower department. He swallowed hard and licked his lips. “Are you going to the pancake thing later?”

“Should I?”

“You said yourself it’s for a good cause.” Adam scratched the back of his head to avoid making eye contact.

“Do you *want* me to go?”

“Sure. Yeah. The food should be pretty good,” he added lamely.

“Save me a seat, then.” Dane gave him a triumphant grin before turned back toward the kitchen. Adam followed, fear and lust swirling in his stomach. *It’s just friends—brothers, even—hanging out together. Eating pancakes. No big deal.*

But he was flirting with disaster—poking a sleeping tiger with a stick and the bars between them could melt away in the blink of an eye. He wanted time of any kind with Dane, more than he wanted safety. Couldn't they simply be friends, though? Maybe it could turn into something else after Adam graduated. Or better yet, after Dane left school. That was only a little over a year away. They could keep it quiet.

Adam watched Dane lift another box, his arms cording with concentrated power, and a year living just feet away from that temptation yawned in the distance like an eternity.

Dane was running late. The pancake house started serving at six, but he'd had practice, and had needed a shower more than he needed to be on time. Hopefully Adam would forgive him. He walked into the dark, crowded room to the tune of a rolling snare drum paired with a guitar solo.

“Not bad,” he mumbled, threading his way through the crowd of dancers. Past the corner that served as a makeshift stage, he saw the rows of tables. Most were still full, and he scanned the seats for Adam while his insides twisted with nerves.

Adam looked up from a conversation with a petite blonde girl and locked eyes with him. Dane smiled, bigger than he'd intended, and was glad when Adam returned it.

Don't scare him off. Keep it cool.

“Hey, bro. This seat taken?”

“It's all yours.” Adam pulled the metal folding chair out for him.

“Hey! I know you! Didn't the *Daily Sun* do a spread on you—you're that Olympic hopeful, right?” The blonde leaned forward to speak in front of Adam.

“Wow. I didn't know anyone actually read that.” Dane tucked his chair in and scanned the room, catching a waiter's eye and nodding.

“I work in the editorial department,” the blonde said. He looked back at her to catch a pout.

“Oops. Sorry. I read it.” He pointed to his chest. “Religiously.”

“Right,” she said, and focused her attention on her hash browns.

“I do. Sometimes.” Adam added. But her bruised ego had apparently gone deaf.

“Can I get you a plate?” A freshman guy—Paul Silverstein—stood across from Dane. Paul had rushed Sammy when Adam had. He was a short, stocky dude, with red hair shaved in a crew cut, and was known for being the guy who would take on any dare, no matter how disgusting. His antics usually provided quality entertainment at their house parties and somehow got him an impressive amount of pussy.

“Sure. Heavy on the sausage.” Adam’s leg bumped Dane’s under the table as the guy choked on his coffee.

“And to drink?” Paul asked with a bored sigh.

“Umm. Coffee, I guess. I’ll be up all night.” He bumped Adam’s leg back on purpose.

Paul walked off, weaving between chairs and bodies. Dane hoped he didn’t get a lap full of coffee when the guy returned. It was no easy task moving through the crowd with a loaded tray.

“So, you never told me if Burns gave you a hard time about the website?” Dane rested his head on his hand, elbow planted on the table as he looked at Adam. The seats were close enough to make their conversation intimate, and the swell of background noise obliged.

Adam gave a small smile and shook his head.

Man, those dimples make me nuts.

“I just started rambling on about CLOB fields and Journaled File Systems and he got this glazed look in his eyes. He couldn’t get away fast enough.”

“That’s my boy.” Dane squeezed Adam’s thigh under the table and the guy almost knocked over the coffee cup he was reaching for. “I’m glad. I wouldn’t want you getting into trouble on my account,” he added.

“Would’ve been worth it.”

“Oh, yeah? So, what are you worried about, then?”

Adam stared back at him, those sapphire eyes telling a tale, but he didn't answer.

Dane slid his hand farther up Adam's leg, slipping between to run fingers up his inseam until he reached the stiffening bulge at his crotch. Adam sucked in a breath, his eyes widening.

"Don't."

"Why not? Give me a good reason—like you're not interested—and I'll stop."

"Someone might find out." He swallowed and looked around. Paul was picking his way back to them carrying a plate and a disposable cup.

"Not good enough," Dane replied, but removed his hand and used it to smooth back a hank of hair that had come free of the gel he'd attempted to tame it with. "I'm a communications major. You might be able to confuse me with your fancy computer talk, but at the end of the day, I'll wear you down."

He didn't know if that was true, but he wanted Adam to believe it.

"Here ya go," Paul said from across the table. He handed the plate over, wedging his body between the two women sitting across from Dane and Adam. "I threw on a few extra sausages when the chick at the grill wasn't looking," he added, pulsing his hips toward an attractive brunette. She elbowed him in the thigh with a giggle.

"You rock." Dane took the plate and steaming cup before both food and drink were lost to Paul's antics.

He covered everything on his plate—pancakes, sausages, and hash browns—in syrup, and then stabbed a link with his fork and bit down on it. Between chews he spoke to Adam. "Do you have to stay until this thing is over?"

"Yeah. I said I'd help clean up."

"Uh huh. I'd give you a hand but I have a marketing paper to work on. Damn! We deliver great syrup!" He swirled another sausage in the lake of liquid sugar before cramming the whole thing into his mouth.

"I can see why you're studying communications." Adam grinned at him. "I thought it was too fake-tasting, but you're selling it, man."

Dane picked up the glass syrup dispenser and held it near his face with a painfully wide smile. “Don’t leave your sausage high and dry. Try covering it in Dane’s Delicious Syrup. Once you go Dane’s, you’ll never be the same.” He mimed licking the container while Adam burst out laughing.

“Scratch that. You should probably switch to drama.”

“Too shy.” Dane said, returning to his saturated hash browns.

“Right.” Adam’s leg nudged Dane’s again.

“This band doesn’t suck too bad,” Dane said. He grabbed his coffee to wash down his meal. A decent cover of “Enter Sandman” was shaking the rafters.

“Yeah. The singer is no Hetfield, but the rest—the drummer and the guys on guitar are nailing it.”

“What kind of music do you usually listen to?” There was a stereo system set up in their main living area, but the upper classmen took control of it. It would be a few more years before Adam could blast his own music throughout the house.

“I’m pretty open-minded. Not really into country or rap, but anything else is fine.”

“Yeah? You a big Madonna fan?”

“Okay, maybe not *anything*.”

“Hah.” Dane drained his cup as a slower song came on. “I’d ask you to dance, but I gotta head out.”

Adam gave him a warning look.

“I think most of the guys are going to that stupid toga party tonight,” Dane said.

“What? Oh, that one off campus?”

“Yup. I’m not going.” He stared, unblinking at Adam, letting his words sink in. “Catch ya later.” Dane slapped Adam on the back, and then stood and turned into the press of bodies.

CHAPTER 3

Adam was the last one to leave the building, walking out with Glenn Deecher and Samantha Tully, the couple who'd spearheaded the entire event.

"Thanks for all your help, Adam. Appreciate it," Glenn said.

"No problem." *Thanks for the excuse to stay away from the house for as long as possible.*

They called good-byes as they headed for their separate vehicles. Adam climbed behind the wheel, cringing at the pit of vipers swirling in his stomach. He'd never felt so torn. All he wanted to do was slip into Dane's dark room and then slip between his legs. And the last thing in the world he wanted to do was give into the urgent need that practically vibrated through him.

Of course, if Adam had left Alpha Chi Omega earlier, he probably could have walked past Dane's room easier. There was less chance of running into any of his frat brothers at this time. He already knew what he was going to do, no matter how much he deliberated. If that photo of Dane had been a print, it'd be dog-eared and finger-smudged by now. The nightly jerk-off to the hottest guy Adam could imagine wouldn't suffice this time. Not when the real thing had invited him in.

Dane's door was open when Adam walked in the front door. A pale glow emanated from the foot-wide crack. The hall light was off, the house mostly quiet. Farther down the long hall, TV gun shots and a siren sounded, presumably from the common room, if not a bedroom.

Adam didn't knock, just slid inside the opening and closed the door behind him. Dane looked up from his computer.

"Were you trying to make sure I got this thing done, or did you just want to make me wait?" he asked, standing and running fingers over his face, and then through his flopping hair. "I was starting to wonder."

Adam, despite his brazen entry, was at a loss. What was it about this guy? His looks—certainly. But also his confidence; his nonchalant attitude about something so fraught with potential catastrophe. It made him want to get close just to see if Dane's massive set of balls could rub off on him.

A laugh puffed out of Adam at the thought. Dane smiled back, without knowing the joke. It was a relief to let humor interject on his doom and gloom. Doom and gloom, with a hard-on, that was. No amount of worry could put a damper on his desire.

“I... guess I tried to talk myself out of it.”

Dane stepped toward him and put his hand on the doorknob as if to open it. “Do you want to go?”

Inky-dark eyes looked up into his, and he shook his head slowly. Dane twisted the lock on his door as a smile curled up one side of his mouth. “Good.”

His hands came up on either side of Adam’s face and pulled him down until their lips ground together. Adam’s glasses tilted and were crushed between their cheeks, but he didn’t care. Sensation rushed over him—Dane’s firm mouth against his, his palms on either side of his head taking control and forcing something Adam willingly gave. It flooded every thought.

Dane’s lips demanded, pulled Adam’s between them to suck hungrily. Adam kissed him back. His previous self-denial made the act all the more delicious. Forbidden fruit had nothing on Dane’s phenomenal taste. His fine chin scruff abraded Adam’s cheek as he canted his head and deepened the kiss. Their tongues brushed tips, hot and wet, testing the waters. Then they slid together forcefully, fighting for space in an act that bordered on primal. Desperate.

That was exactly how he felt.

Adam’s hand slid around Dane’s waist, pulled the loosely tucked T-shirt from his jeans and finally found skin. He was unbelievably smooth. Silky skin covered taut muscle beneath Adam’s fingertips and he groaned against Dane’s mouth while he traced ribs and the ripple of cut abdomen. He sifted fingers through the soft trail of fur that spiked down Dane’s chest.

Dane’s stomach trembled and he pulled away, laughing.

“Sorry. Ticklish.”

Adam threaded shaking fingers through his own hair, struggling to clear the fuck-fog hazing his vision.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Dane lifted the black cotton over his head and stood before Adam.

He could only stare, his eyes roving over powerful arms rippling with muscle and seamed with bulging veins. Thick pectorals fanned from each armpit out toward nipples like tarnished pennies. Each tip was tight, expectant. Adam reached a hand out and slid his palm over one hard BB and heard Dane’s breath hiss. He fingered the fine, dark hair that shaded Dane’s chest. It grew denser at the dip between the swell of his pecs, and pointed downward like an arrow to paradise. The happy trail thinned, followed the furrow between blocks of muscle that stacked his abdomen like bricks. They were nearly as hard when Adam slid his hand over them, careful to maintain a firm contact this time.

“That tickle?” he asked, hating how breathless his voice had become.

“No.” Dane swallowed, his own voice clipped. Strained.

Adam hooked a finger in his pants and pulled him closer.

“I wanna see *you*,” Dane objected, reaching for Adam’s button-down and working it open from the collar.

“Not nearly as impressive.” Adam didn’t stop him, though. He freed the buttons at his wrists and shrugged out of his shirt. He wore an undershirt beneath.

“Don’t make it easy, do ya?” Dane smiled and worked the shirt up Adam’s flank. “I didn’t peg you for the wife-beater type.”

“It’s not a wi...” Adam’s words were cut off by the shirt being pulled over his face and knocking his glasses once again.

“I guess I should just take these off,” he said.

“No. Leave ’em.” Dane shook his head and pulled Adam toward the bed by the front of his pants. “I want you to watch what I’m doing to you.” Dane unbuttoned as he led him. He unzipped Adam’s fly at the side of the bed and yanked down his khakis before he pushed him down on the queen mattress.

Adam sat, his cock achingly hard and his stomach a nervous knot.

Do you see what you're doing to me already?

“Lie down.” Dane’s hands were on his chest, pushing him back. Adam obeyed, loving the feel of Dane against him. Loving the authority in his voice.

Dane tugged off one shoe at a time and Adam was thankful he kept his glasses on for the ab and gun show alone. He watched Dane’s chest flex and relax as he yanked Adam’s pants off the rest of the way.

Adam’s cock supported a full tent under his boxers. He held his breath while Dane lifted a knee to straddle his legs; watched him, mesmerized, as he lowered his gorgeous face toward Adam’s straining piece. That hank of black hair flopped forward. It waved between the dark eyes that looked up at him with an almost sinister smile.

Dane’s head lowered. A pink tongue peeked from between his full lips and touched the damp spot over Adam’s tip. He gave it a slow lick, full tongue saturating the fabric and heating Adam’s head. The wet cotton cooled swiftly when he pulled away.

Dane fistfisted Adam’s dick with a low rumbling noise of appreciation. Adam answered with a ragged sigh.

Again, Dane licked him through the cotton, from bottom to top, lavishing spit and attention over Adam’s undeserving shorts. His mouth closed around him from the side, teeth barely grazing his full meat. That might have hurt without the protection of his underwear, but Adam would risk it to get them off and feel Dane’s moist heat wrapped around him, trailing up and down his length. He’d sell his soul for every breath puffing between those lips to tease over naked skin.

Dane’s fingers pumped him while his tongue sought skin between the buttoned fly of Adam’s shorts. He looked up again as his tongue parted the gap and made contact with the real deal. The hot-slick flicker over Adam’s ridge had him sucking in a breath through his wide open mouth.

“Mmmm. I knew you’d taste good.” Dane’s fingers freed Adam’s cock. They slid up to hook on his elastic and slowly pull down his shorts. Adam lifted his hips, but Dane worked slowly, inching the waist down Adam’s dick like he was revealing the ultimate prize to a salivating game show contestant.

“You’re killing me,” Adam whispered.

“Just taking my time. No matter how long it lasts, it’s not long enough.”

Adam popped free and Dane caught him at the base.

Heart jackhammering against his chest, Adam watched Dane’s glistening tongue come down on him. He stared and trembled as the visual thrill was matched by physical sensation. Dane’s wet tip teased at his hole, tasted the overzealous bit of moisture there with a reverence he didn’t feel it warranted. And then lush lips circled him, pulled him inside perfection with a mind-numbing suction. His head disappeared inside Dane and he was slammed with an unreal sense of ecstasy blended with homecoming.

“Oh my god.” His voice quaked as Dane took him deeper, nearly swallowing him whole and humming as he went. Adam’s prick flooded, stretched beyond what he’d thought possible. He closed his eyes and fought to hold back the tsunami that threatened.

Soft slurping noises intruded on the darkness. They pulled him back to the erotic scene playing out on the other side of his lids. Not that Dane’s sweet, slick mouth, his probing tongue, could be shut out. Not possible.

“Fuck, Dane. You... need... to... stop.”

Slippery heat pulled off him and Adam bit down on the urge to thrust back up. Seek nirvana buried in Dane’s body again.

“You okay?” Dane’s voice was husky, sexier than a calendar filled with half-naked firefighters.

“I’m... better than that. You’re gonna make me come.” Adam sat up, resting on his elbows and blinking himself back to reality.

“Yeah, that’s usually how it works. I was actually looking forward to that part.” Dane leaned forward and kissed him. His mouth—with a hint of Adam’s musk—sent another pulse of desire to Adam’s aching balls.

“Not yet. Thought you were trying to go slow.”

“There’s slow and then there’s mean.” Dane pushed Adam back down with his next kiss, his hard body covering him with finality.

Adam reached up to finger-comb the hair behind Dane’s head and pull his tongue farther into his mouth. They shared a sloppy wet kiss, framed by

tickling patches of midnight shadow. Dane's jean-clad hips humped a lead pipe against Adam's naked skin, rough and scratchy and phenomenal.

Adam pulled away. "My turn." He reached down to undo Dane's pants, stroking his thick bulge while he worked. Satin-covered steel finally sprang free. Heat radiated from it.

"I love that you're uncut." Adam said against Dane's ear. "That is so fuckin' hot."

Dane groaned in response and thrust into Adam's fist. "I'm Greek. My dad was born over there," he said in a strained voice. "Wanted his sons to be the same."

"Flip over so I can get a better look." There was only so much Adam could do from his position. And he wanted to do so much more.

"See? Told ya you'd want those glasses," Dane said as he flopped over onto his back.

Adam was done talking, though. He shimmied down to sit on Dane's legs and yank his jeans down his hips. Dane's prick was a shade darker than Adam's. It complimented the olive of his skin. Sweet Mediterranean cock.

Adam pumped it a few times, admiring the smooth play of skin up and down over the purple-red cap.

"Damn. You don't even need lube to jerk-off."

"Don't need it. But lube makes everything better. Just like mayonnaise."

Adam barked a laugh. "I thought that was bacon?"

"Mayonnaise makes bacon better." Dane raised his brows defiantly.

Adam shook his head, grinning. "You want a BJ, or a BLT?"

"BJ. BLT. In that order."

Adam worked up a wad of spit, still chuckling. He stuck out his tongue, teasing just inches from Dane's cock, letting the moisture roll to the edge. Ever since last weekend, he couldn't erase the image of Dane with saliva dangling from his mouth, dropping over his hard dick and sliding down. It was the one image he took from that night guaranteed to make him painfully stiff. In class. In the shower. In the middle of the night. The hard-ons during lectures were a nightmare. The rest he was able to take care of—even welcomed.

He sucked the drool up before it could drop. “I’ve been wanting to spit on your cock all week.”

A rich laugh sounded from Dane and his tongue darted out to lick his lips. “You are a dirty one, aren’t ya? Never would’ve guessed.”

“You bring out the worst in me,” Adam said, his voice thick with the excess moisture he refused to swallow.

“Go ahead. I just spit all over yours.”

Adam let it drop. It hit Dane square on his tip, but Adam followed it down, pushing semi-closed lips against Dane’s head and taking him slowly, offering tight resistance with his mouth. Dane shivered beneath him, his breathing choppy. Maddeningly sexy.

Dane’s hips bucked. He pushed past the barrier, fucking Adam’s mouth. Adam opened his throat and choked back his gag reflex, letting him have his way. The noises from above, deep grunts Dane punctuated with each thrust, had Adam’s own cock dripping. He reached a hand down to slide his fingers over it. Lightly. Not too much. Not too soon.

The taste of Dane changed—bitter salt that accompanied a familiar slippery texture that said he was close.

Adam pulled off. “Want me to fuck you?” He spit on his fingers and fumbled under Dane’s sack, pressing into his crack like he was ringing a doorbell.

“*Fuck*. Whatever. Or I can do you. I’m really close.”

“You got a rubber?”

“Over in that top drawer.”

Adam sprang up and made for the dresser. He tore a condom off a roll and grabbed another square package of lube. It looked almost identical to the prophylactic.

“This is convenient.” He held it up as he walked back, watching Dane sit up and shuck his jeans in a glorious display of muscle. Adam would love to have Dane balls-deep in his ass, but at the same time, the notion of topping the muscle-bound guy made him buzz with expectation.

“Best invention ever. Who the hell wants a container of K-Y in their pocket?”

“You have a lot of sex at unexpected times?” Adam was suddenly, unjustifiably hurt.

“Nope. Just high hopes,” Dane said with a pirate grin that wiped away Adam’s worry in a blink.

Adam tore open the lube and squirted some into his hand, rubbed it over his pointing dick, and said, “How do you want to do this?”

“What’s the easiest for a first-timer?”

Adam’s jaw dropped. “No way.”

“What? I mean, I’ve got enough toys to fill a dirty catalogue. This is only *technically* a virgin ass. On paper.” He seemed endearingly embarrassed and reached for Adam’s dick as if to change the subject.

“Are you sure? I can definitely...”

“No! I want to. Next time I’ll stick it to ya.” He winked and stood, face-to-face and fist to cock, and placed a light kiss on Adam’s lips.

“If you’re sure.”

“Yes. Now... shut up... and fuck me,” Dane murmured between kisses.

“I can’t even believe...” But Adam stopped himself from dumping a truck load of insecurities that would make Dane realize how far out of Adam’s league he was. How impossible this seemed a week ago.

“I think you should sit on me, then. That way you can go at your own speed. Stop if you need to.”

“Okay.” Dane’s near-black eyes cut right through him. “Lie down.”

“You’re very demanding, you know that?”

“Yup. Down.”

Adam fell back on the bed.

Dane grabbed the rubber and lube out of his hand and wrapped his fingers around Adam’s cock as he straddled him. He slicked the gel over Adam, and then moved his greasy hand to his own piece. Dane’s cock nudged at Adam’s

balls and he pulsed up toward the guy who sat on him. The condom fell to the side as Dane's hands pulled their lengths together and jerked them as one.

Adam's head fell back on the pillow, his breath harsh and puffing in and out in time with Dane's hands.

"Oh my god," he panted. "Fuck, Dane. Sit on my dick before I come all over you."

Dane reached for the rubber and tore it open with his teeth. He rolled it down Adam and worked the remaining lube into his hand to cover the outside. Adam watched him slip his wet fingers behind his back and ready himself.

He scooted forward, rose up on his knees, and taking Adam's dick in hand, Dane positioned the tip at his asshole. Adam swallowed, the heat between Dane's cheeks tempting him to press forward. But he held back, allowing Dane to lower himself slowly.

"Don't clench. Just relax," he said when Dane's body fought the intrusion.

"I'm... trying." Damn, he was gorgeous, leaning to one side and displaying a rack of rib and glorious muscle. He could be a statue, but thank god he was flesh and bone and... searing heat and exquisite tightness as Adam's ridge cleared his ring.

It took every ounce of control he possessed not to fuck into that sweet space.

"Hell," Dane gasped, freezing above him, mouth open and brow furrowed.

"Won't hurt for long. I promise."

"Yeah?"

Dane's voice was breathless, but his face was already clearing up. The pained squint lifted from his dark eyes as he lowered farther and farther until he finally sat flush on Adam's hips. He leaned forward, caging Adam with his magnificent arms, and then began to move. Adam skimmed his hands over Dane's biceps, overwhelmed by the sheer perfection of this man combined with the hot squeeze sliding up and down his cock.

Dane sighed each time he took Adam deeper, his exclamations growing louder and less controlled. With a groan, Adam began to thrust upward, unable

to stop himself any longer. Dane took it, rolled with him. They grunted in unison, and Adam snaked a hand down between Dane's legs to work his stiff one.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," Dane rasped against Adam's ear, breath steaming through his hair, washing over him like a seductive storm.

"You gonna... come?" Adam bit the words out as the reins of control slipped through his grasp. Flashes of himself pulling out, coming along with Dane in the most intimate joining he could imagine, did him in. His nuts contracted. The feel of his orgasm mobilizing, of his load coursing through his balls in a fight to freedom, wracked his senses. It was as familiar as his own face in a mirror and still brand new every time—mind-blowingly distinct from every other. Absolute euphoria racing between his legs.

Eyes closed tight, Adam heard Dane's gasp a moment before a warm rush smacked his chest. "Fuuuuuuckkkk," Dane growled against his neck.

"You have a..." Adam swallowed, the thrill of climax dulling his mind and making his tongue clumsy. His body still floated somewhere over the bed despite being pinned between Dane's fantastic legs.

"You have a pretty limited vocabulary for a communications major," he finally managed.

"You have a pretty big dick for a nerd," Dane muttered, lips and scruff tickling Adam's shoulder as he spoke.

"Thanks a lot."

"No. Thank *you*." Dane slowly, almost reluctantly extricated Adam's body from his own. "Sorry for the mess." He reached down and peeled the rubber off Adam's cock with a grin, his hand fast, like he was trying to beat Adam to the prize. Dane bent—his beautiful ass flashing divots with the dance of muscle under warm-toned skin—and grabbed his T-shirt. He swiped it over the puddle of come on Adam's chest and stomach.

The shirt, he threw on top of a laundry pile, the rubber, in the waste basket by his desk, and then Dane walked back to the bed, naked and glorious. Adam felt blindingly self-conscious suddenly. He sat up and reached for his clothes.

“Cut it out,” Dane ordered, sliding in next to him, his hand stopping him from rising.

“I should get out of here. Sounds pretty quiet out there, but I don’t want to get caught leaving.”

“Yeah, there’s no way you could just be stopping over to chat. You look way too fucked for that.” Dane smirked, pushing the covers down with his feet until Adam had to lift his body to allow the shift. Cool sheets covered them, courtesy of Dane’s amazing toes. Adam smiled, remembering his fantasy earlier in the day. He slid a socked foot over toward Dane’s bare calf and rubbed downward, warm fuzzies tumbling around in his chest when Dane rubbed back.

“Just stay for a little bit.” Dane hitched up on his elbow, cheek to palm. “Watch a movie or something.”

“I guess I could...”

“You know you want to.” Dane said it like a back-alley drug pusher. He *was* a drug—the most addictive kind. And now that Adam had sampled, Dane was going to be nearly impossible to stay away from.

“Believe me, I know.”

Dane reached for the clicker on his bedside table, and the television on top of his dresser blasted to life. They watched back-to-back episodes of CSI. Adam had seen them both, but it didn’t matter. Dane, his arm draped possessively over Adam’s hips, spooned up behind him so they could both see. His body heat burned a brand against Adam’s back while his funny comments burned one on his heart. By the time they were halfway through *Iron Man*, Adam’s eyes were heavy and Dane’s even breathing against his neck was a lure to sleep.

I’ll just close my eyes for a few minutes. Don’t want to move and wake him up.

Adam knew it was a bad idea, but he did it anyway.

“Gruber! Bus is gonna leave without you! Get your ass out here!”

Dane was used to shaking off the words outside his door. He could treat them—or something similar—like a snooze button, and roll over for a few more winks. Some of the other guys had considerably earlier classes than he did on Fridays. But the warm body snuggled beside him—sleep-heavy and delicious a heartbeat ago—sat bolt upright and took the covers with him.

“No,” Dane groaned.

“No!” Adam jumped out of the bed, treating the same word to a heavy coating of panic. He grabbed his knot of clothes off the floor and frantically shook them apart.

“Guess we fell asleep.” Dane grinned up at him, his voice lowered.

“You think?” Adam whispered, the question an accusation.

“When’s your first class? You should probably come back to bed for a little while.” They could start the day off right. Get back to the tangle of warm arms and legs they had a minute ago.

Instead he received a snarl.

“Are you nuts?”

“It’s not like they’re coming in.” Dane sat up and rubbed his face. “Door’s locked.”

“And it’s not like I’m getting out of here without being seen, either!”

“Calm down. That was Trey and Mike. They’re out before anyone else.”

Adam gave him a hard look made gut-wrenchingly pathetic by the fear that threatened to ignite a full-on panic attack. Dane wanted to console him, but knew that would only push him further away.

The outside door opened and shut as someone, presumably Michael Gruber, left the building.

“See? I got another half-hour of sleep time before my next alarm goes off. The Goodwin, Schroth, Greene departure is at eight thirty.”

Dane stood and pulled on his boxer briefs. He had a nearly empty Wendy’s bag atop his desk, and he dumped the crinkled wrapper and extra napkins into the garbage can under Adam’s perplexed gaze. He handed the empty sack to him.

“What the hell is this?” Adam took the bag, but obviously thought Dane was the loosest screw on the monkey bars.

“Breathe into it. I’m gonna check the hallway and I don’t want you to pass out. Not sure I could lift your ass all the way upstairs.”

Adam tilted his head, his mouth pinched into a tight line that almost gave way to a smile.

Dane would take it.

He cracked the door and stuck his head out.

“You’re good to go,” he said as he closed it and turned back to Adam. Adam stood rooted to the spot as if unsure what to say or do next.

“Listen... I’m sorry about... everything. This isn’t what I wanted to happen.”

“Seemed like it was exactly what you wanted to happen last night, but maybe I’m just not the greatest judge.” *Why? Why do you have to keep acting like this?* Every time Dane thought he was making headway, Adam insisted on throwing the whole thing into reverse.

“I know. Not that. Well, kinda that. I’m not ready to be in a relationship.”

“So you wanna fuck other people?” The thought made Dane sick. Yes, they’d only had one night, really. A handful of flirty encounters, maybe. But he’d pinned his hopes on this—was ready to make the leap, to hell with what anyone thought.

“No! I don’t want to fuck *anyone*.” Adam combed his erratic honey-brown waves with a shaking hand.

“Again, that wasn’t the vibe you were giving off before.”

“I know. I do... want you. More than I’ve wanted anyone.”

“Awww.” Dane stepped closer to him. “That’s so sweet.”

“But I can’t do this again. I came here to study and I can’t jeopardize that with... this.”

“I’m not going to get in your way. Just think about it. Okay? I wanna try *this*.” Dane scissored open hands back and forth pointing at himself and Adam. “I think it could work.”

Adam bit his lower lip. “I gotta go.”

He slipped out the door without another word.

CHAPTER 4

The meet had taken a lot out of him. Dane's club had travelled to Minneapolis to compete in Nationals. He'd scored high and qualified to compete in the Visa Championships in August. If he made the senior national team there, he'd be eligible for Olympic competition. He should have been on top of the world.

His routine had gone smoothly, he'd even achieved a personal best, but he couldn't get Adam out of his head the entire three days he was gone. Visions of Adam's face—his tightly squinted eyes when he came, his dimples when he laughed, that sad, sorry look when he'd left the other morning—all combined for a big picture that left Dane aching with want and worry.

He tossed his duffle bag of sweat-reeking clothes on his bed and headed upstairs to Adam's room.

I'll just have a talk with him. Help him work this out. Find a way to get past whatever's scaring him.

Adam's room was open and his things were gone.

Dane turned and headed for the next room, pounding on the door in a hinge-shaking display of anger.

"What?" Paul opened the door wearing nothing but boxers. A squeak came from a female-looking lump in his bed, but the sheets were pulled over his visitor's head.

"Where's Adam?"

"Kennedy? He left. Handed in his resignation on Friday. Moved over to west campus, I think."

"What? Why?"

"How should I know? Now, if ya don't mind—busy here." A muffled giggle came from the bed and Paul closed the door in Dane's face.

Dane returned to his room, so lost in thought he missed a step and nearly ended his Adam-induced misery by breaking his neck. With a sigh, he flopped back on his bed and closed his eyes. How much should he push someone who

kept running away? Did he try to find him? Confront him? Or did he just give Adam the space he seemed to want so badly?

Leave it alone, Christakos. Just let it go.

Adam picked up *The Sun* on his way to Uris Library and stopped dead in his tracks when he saw his name on the front cover of the college rag.

He'd been checking the paper diligently, daily, for word of Dane. Since Adam left the frat four weeks ago he'd seen Dane mentioned twice. Once was for his achievement at his National meet. The other was a mention in the e-version of the school paper. The article was about balancing academics, social life, and sports, and listed students who were involved in club activities who maintained a GPA of 3.4 or better.

He'd been equally proud of Dane for both.

Of course, he hardly expected to see his own name featured in an article.

Snap out of it. It isn't you.

"Who is Adam?" the paper wanted to know.

His name was spelled out, large and in stones in the picture below the headline. The photographer had snapped the shot overlooking the gorge from the Thurston Avenue Bridge. Local risk-takers occasionally climbed down into the ravine, illegally, at night. The rock messages, laid out on large, flat stones surrounded by fast-moving water, were a fact of life—a fun blip on the screen that was the walk from north campus down to central for classes. When Adam had lived in the Sammy house, he'd seen the messages on a nearly daily basis. *Gwen is a whore. Go Big Red. Alpha Zeta Rocks.* Stuff like that.

But here was a documented, one-sided dialog between someone named Adam and a crazy, daring...

Adam. Change your mind.

Adam. I'm worth it.

Adam. Please.

Adam. Give us a chance.

Adam. It won't hurt for long.

Adam. I miss you.

Dane.

Apparently, the rock messages had been going on for over two weeks, and campus life had begun to buzz about the mysterious Adam and the equally incognito person, presumably female, who wanted him back.

Adam, in his own little eat, sleep, study, and try-not-to-think-about-Dane-at-all-costs world, had missed it. And *fuck*, he missed Dane, too.

Adam skipped his computer class. Dropped his bags in the library and began the long hike up to Thurston Bridge.

This morning's message wasn't covered in the paper. They lagged behind by a day. Hell, he was impressed they were even that recent.

Adam. Close your eyes and jump.

Students walked by, gaping and joking about the latest message.

“Jump off the bridge!” One guy pretended to push the girl he was walking with. “You're so romantic!” She elbowed him.

Another guy stopped with his buddies. Hands cupped around his mouth he yelled at the top of his lungs. “ADAM! ADAM!” His buddy joined in “STELLA!” And another in a deep bellow, “ADRIAN!”

Shit. This was the kind of stuff they would deal with on a regular basis—especially if it became common knowledge that *he* was that Adam. And his lover was a guy. It was the exact same garbage that had driven a wedge between Adam and Casey—had ruined the brand-new sprout of potential their relationship had been. It had withered and died under the pressure in an insanely short time. The teasing and occasional bullying had not, though. It endured like no first love ever would.

A guy and a girl stopped. “Why don't you ever write me love notes on the rocks?” she asked.

“You know how slippery it is down there? Not sure I like you *that* much,” he teased.

“You just don't want to announce it to the world,” she said dryly.

“This took balls,” the guy remarked, gazing out at the rushing water. “No doubt about it.”

Balls, Dane had. Huge ones. Maybe not much as far as common sense and self-preservation went... but maybe Adam was looking at it the wrong way. Dane was take-no-prisoners incarnate. Act first, apologize later. No way but his way, and screw you if you didn't like it.

And it worked. It worked for him in spades.

Adam continued across the bridge, thinking hard.

Maybe—just maybe—they could make a world unto themselves. Build it up strong and obnoxiously large, and forget anyone who had something bad to say. Maybe together they could make this stick.

“Hey.” Dane's voice cut through Adam's thick veil of thought. He blinked and took a deep breath.

“Hey.” Adam stared at the guy who made him want to collapse in a puddle and raise a castle with a mile-wide moat all at once. He swallowed and gave a smile he hoped spoke for his thumping heart.

“Wanna go get something to eat?” Dane asked, almost shyly.

“Yeah. Sounds great. Way better than object oriented programming.”

“Skipping class? You rebel, you.”

“Yeah, but I *always* have a cause,” Adam said with a grin.

They walked together across the bridge, elbows brushing. Adam closed the distance between them an inch more when the urge to widen it assailed him. But no one was looking sideways at them. No one spit hateful words as they walked side-by-side. No one seemed to give the slightest shit.

Paul passed them, his arm around a petite brunette with a stunning hourglass figure.

“Hey, Dane. Adam.” He nodded, casual as a one night stand.

“Adam?” said the girl as they continued on. “Just like the rocks.”

Adam reached out and squeezed Dane's hand. It was a quick flicker of contact, but more reassuring than an army at his back when Dane returned it. Dane looked at him, brown-black eyes threatening to swallow him whole.

“I missed you, too,” Adam admitted.

Dane bumped him with a shoulder, never breaking his calm, cool swagger. “Good. My plan is working perfectly.” He gave a maniacal laugh that pulled at the corners of Adam’s mouth.

“Oh, yeah? What else are you plotting?”

“You’ll see. Keep those glasses on and I’ll show ya.”

THE END

Author Bio

Kimber Vale writes erotic romance of all stripes, from het sci-fi/fantasy to contemporary M/M under K. Vale. Find her on Facebook and Twitter. Come for the sex. Stay for the story.

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GENIE IN A BEANIE

By Indra Vaughn

Photo Description

A black-haired man with darkly stubbled cheeks is sitting down, holding a baby up to a man standing close and leaning slightly forward. This man is blond and wears a knitted beanie. The baby tugs on the blond man's beard.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The catalyst to bring these two men together is twofold: the baby in the picture and the hat the one man is wearing. The baby isn't either of theirs (but it can be anyone else's you want it to be—no single lovelorn dads please). And one of the men is a knitter who became well known for his blog and designs.

How did they end up starting a campaign to knit for charity? And, show us how they connected along the way.

I say no single lovelorn dads please because I'm tired of overly sweet stories where a gay dad is all alone, caring for a baby and falls in love. But I do like men who are proud knitters. I'd like something different, and that means not overly sweet. A balance between sweet and dirty is fine with me :)

There are no sexual limits or relationship limits on this couple, whatever else you'd like to add, or whatever direction you'd like to take this couple in is fine with me.

Sincerely,

Cole

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, paranormal

Tags: teaching, enemies to lovers, magic users, humorous, knitting

Word count: 15,952

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Dedication

A great big thank you to Silly Goose, who as always did a brilliant job wrangling my commas and holding my hand. I literally couldn't wish for a better writing companion.

Big round of applause to the organizers of this event too. I can't even begin to imagine the amount of work that must go into this. Thank you for giving me the chance to take part.

Cole, thank you for the letter. It turned out a little sweeter than I meant it to, but I hope you still enjoy it regardless. And finally, I don't know if I should be proud of or apologize for that title...

GENIE IN A BEANIE

By Indra Vaughn

There wasn't anything particularly extraordinary about Sable. It was a coffee shop like any other, if you didn't count the rows of shelves with secondhand books for sale. The rack on the far wall filled with handmade beanies in every cheerful color imaginable was a bit odd maybe, but it added to the charm of the store. David liked it, anyway.

As always, when he opened his doors first thing in the morning, rain or shine, David swept his gaze over the interior: the comfortably worn-in couches, the clean counter to the left, the coffee machines waiting to start huffing and puffing their brews. And, as always, when he opened his doors first thing in the morning, rain or shine, David heaved a happy sigh. Yanking the hat off his head, leaving his blond hair free to roam in staticky wisps, David stepped into the warmth of his shop. He may not have had much in this world, but he had Sable.

And he had Max. Well, maybe not had in the exact meaning of the word, but David was able to set his watch by Max's arrival, and there was no point in denying, after all this time, that it was the highlight of his day. At one minute to seven the milk jug stood at the ready, waiting to be steamed, and at seven exactly, Max stepped inside. The winter sun was bright out, and he took a moment—giving a welcome opportunity for David to look his fill—to let his eyes adjust to the mellow light inside.

Instead of walking up to the counter straight away, Max hesitated. His dark beard was shaved very close to his skin today, which was a little unusual. When Max overcame whatever made him waver, the thin, dark shadow showed a red flush underneath. Just the cold, David figured.

“Morning David,” Max said. He cleared his throat. “How are you?”

“Good, you?” The familiar trigger of nervous anticipation ran deeper today, and without waiting for an answer, David went on. “Your usual?”

“Uh, sure.” Max glanced toward the wall with the beanies. “You make those yourself, don't you?”

Didn't David just. With an added pinch of spice. "Softest beanie you'll find." During the entire year Max had been coming into the shop, Max hadn't mentioned David's beanies once, but that was still no reason for his stomach to swoop like it anticipated a drop on a roller coaster.

"Right. Well, this might be a bit of an odd request, but—"

David had been reaching for the milk jug and dropped his hands on the counter instead. The flush on Max's cheeks deepened. God, the guy was so cute it was unreal.

"Go on," David said, when it didn't look as if Max would.

"I have this—" With an exasperated noise, Max yanked his messenger bag around, opened the flap, and pulled out a ball of yarn.

"Oh my God," David said, automatically reaching out. Max dropped the yarn in his hands and it felt exactly as soft as it looked. The blue was vibrant and dark, with little flecks of lighter shading speckled through, like moonlight reflecting off a dark, deep ocean. "This is beautiful."

"Yes, I thought so." Max looked away again.

"Where did you get it? I'd love to find some more of this kind of yarn." David let a loose thread slip through his fingers, and when he looked up, he caught Max staring at his hands.

"Oh. Um, my sister sent it to me. I told her about you. Your shop, I mean. And your beanies. She tried knitting a long time ago and had all this yarn, so she sent me some of it. When I saw this I immediately thought—" Max bit his lip and fell silent.

"You want me to knit you a hat from this?" David asked, his voice almost a whisper.

"Um... Yes. If it's not too much trouble. And I'll pay you, of course," he added in a hurry.

"You'll do no such thing," David said. Oh, he'd knit Max a hat all right. "And I'll make sure you get exactly what you wish for."

Famous last words.

It wasn't as if David had thought about the hat he'd made for Max at all, or often, or very often, in the weeks that followed. There might've been a strange predatory pride in seeing Max wearing the hat, but David didn't feel the need to examine that feeling. Very much. It was still a huge shock to the system when a month later, after three days of not seeing him at all, Max walked into Sable with a very small baby in his arms. There was no hesitating on the doorstep this time; with quiet but purposeful strides he crossed the floor and put a fist out clutching a very familiar-looking beanie. David hesitated in his knitting—whenever the shop was empty and he had time, he sat down to work on his hats—and gave Max a confused glance.

“You have some explaining to do,” Max said, when David apparently failed to react the way Max expected. Holding up the hat he hissed, “What kind of magic is this?”

Oh shit.

David's heart began to thud, slow and almost painful in his chest, and he bit his lip, letting the rickety-tick-tick of the knitting needles fill the space.

He had never talked about his... gift to anyone apart from his nana, but she'd had it too so that didn't count. By the way Max's dark eyes were blazing, David didn't think he'd have much choice this time. With an impatient huff, Max carefully sat down on the comfortable couch beside David. This was the closest they'd ever been without a counter between them.

“I wouldn't call it magic per se,” David began, trying to stall for time.

“Jesus Christ.” Max put an ungentle hand on the half-finished beanie David was working on, which only narrowly escaped losing a row of stitches.

“Hey,” David snapped, a little annoyed. “What—” Whatever else he was going to say died a silent death because Max was right in his space smelling every bit as good as David always imagined. That was probably a slightly inappropriate line of thought since those beautiful dark eyes were large and... was that anger? Yes, very likely, anger.

“I know there's something going on because ever since you—” Max gritted his teeth and lowered his voice when the wrapped up blanket-burrito stuffed in the crook of his arm squirmed. “Just explain to me why I suddenly smell of sour milk, dirty diapers, and no sleep.”

Oh, God. The baby was because of the hat? David started to feel a little faint. “Good thing it’s Christmas break then, I’m guessing?” David tried weakly.

Max did not look amused. “Tell me what’s going on.”

One last try. “Well you see, Max, when a man and a woman love each other very mmm—” Even one-handed, Max was pretty strong and agile. Not even bumping the baby, he hauled David in by the neck of his shirt.

“I’m gay,” Max hissed, making David’s heart leap. Part of David’s silent suffering had stemmed from his suspicions that Max wasn’t. “I’ve never in the entirety of my existence been near a vagina, so don’t even imply—”

“Technically when you were born—”

“Shut. Up.” That was one step too far by the look of things. The anger faded from Max’s face and suddenly he looked nothing but bone-weary. “I don’t have time for you to be an asshole. Does this have anything to do with you?”

David’s insides squeezed into a nauseating knot of tension. “Ah. Uh... Yeah, probably.”

“Explain. Succinctly,” Max hastened to add when David opened his mouth. “I have exactly half an hour before she wakes up and needs a bottle.”

“Okay. God, just don’t punch me. I have very delicate features.” For a split second Max tilted his head to the side as if he might agree and David ruthlessly squashed the solitary butterfly attempting to burst to life in his stomach. “I need you to suspend all disbelief for a sec—minute.”

“All right, disbelief suspended.” The baby squirmed a little and Max shifted her into a more comfortable position in his arms without taking his eyes off David. Damn it, that should not make the guy look more attractive.

The ocean-blue beanie hung limply over Max’s knee and David should really... yeah. He reached out and snatched the beanie away before Max could do so much as blink.

“Wh—”

“I can grant wishes,” David blurted out. Max’s mouth closed, opened,

closed again. David considered what he could add to that to make it sound less genie-in-a-bottle.

“I beg your pardon?” Max said quietly, and oh hello, there was that faint British lilt showing its rare cadence.

David sighed. There was no easy way of doing this. Either he was going to get punched in the face, or Max was going to think he was a lunatic, leave here, and never come back. Or both, and in that case David would just take the punch, thank you. Months upon months of unrequited lust would do that to a person. He looked down at the small baby’s rosy cheeks. She couldn’t be more than a week old, maybe two. What a mess. David owed Max the truth, and then it would be his to do with as he pleased. It had been Max’s wish, after all.

David took a deep breath and looked down at the beanie in his hands. His fists were clenched around the fabric and he forced himself to let go. “It’s something that runs in my family. Or ran, since I’m the last of the Cheverons. It’s been petering out anyway. Nana was a lot more talented than me. My moth—” Max looked impatient again, so David figured this wasn’t the time for family history. “Anyway. While knitting these beanies, I add a little bit of... power I guess, for lack of a better word, to the yarn. It’s nothing life-changing.” One of Max’s eyebrows rose pointedly and David looked down at the baby. “Or... Uh. It shouldn’t be, anyway. It’s not like suddenly someone can become President just because they want to while they’re wearing the hat. But, you know, a bit of luck here and there. Ten dollars in your wallet when you most need it, or a bus right on time to get to a job interview. That sort of thing. It only works once, and I have no control over why or where.” Ever since Nana died, he could see glimpses of those wishes, no more than a second or two, but he’d never had the chance to tell her about that. She’d died five years ago, when he was barely twenty. He’d been on his own since then.

Risking a careful glance at Max’s face, David saw him run his hand over his eyes and up through his black hair so it stuck up in little spikes. He looked like he dearly needed a good night’s sleep.

“Okay,” Max said wearily. “Not that this doesn’t sound all kinds of crazy, but I’ll go with it. If it’s supposed to be nothing life-changing, then how do you explain—” He looked down at the little baby girl but the “this” didn’t

come. Instead, he said, “You wouldn’t believe the things that have happened to me over the last month. I’ve won the lottery.”

“What?” David squeaked, and Max sent him a murderous look when the baby whined. A look that said you wake her, you take her. David kept very still.

“Not millions, mind. Twenty grand, which is about nineteen thousand, nine hundred and ninety-five dollars more than I’d ever won before. Especially since this time I hadn’t bought a lottery ticket.” Max closed his eyes and swayed a bit in his seat. It looked like he was about to topple over any minute. David thought about offering him coffee, but Max was already talking again. “That was the first one. I was at the checkout in the grocery store thinking, God I could do with a bit more cash this month. That’s when I pulled out this lottery ticket instead of my wallet. So what the hell, right? I cashed it in. Twenty thousand dollars, David. I tried to make them take it back but they wouldn’t.”

“That... shouldn’t have happened. I mean, it’s never happened like that before.” Not that David knew of anyway, and he guessed if people started winning the lottery after they’d been to his shop, sooner or later it would’ve reached his ears. Next to him the baby startled a little but Max bounced her lightly and she went back to sleep.

“Believe it or not, that was just the beginning. Three days later I had to get up really early for work, it’s ridiculously cold out, and I was vaguely wishing for spring—”

“Oh God,” David groaned, hiding his face in his hands.

“And when I come home there are tulips in front of my house. Tulips, Dave. In November.”

Dave. A shiver inappropriately ran down David’s back. “I’m, uh, sorry. About all of it.”

“Oh no, there’s more.” Max scrubbed a hand over the dark hair on his cheek. “Two weeks in, I slip down the steps at the university and my ankle hurts so badly I’m ffff—” Max glanced down at the baby, who was starting to stir. “Near tears. I limp to the nurse’s office to see if I need to go to a doctor.

I'm in so much pain I can barely breathe. I take off my shoes, and it's already swelling and turning purple. I'm convinced something's broken and I'm swearing because I have a 5K race I'm supposed to be running the next day. The thought has barely entered my brain when the swelling starts to shrink. I kid you not, it starts to disappear before my very eyes. I thought I was going insane, and of course by the time the nurse gets there the injury is completely gone. She didn't say anything, but I could see she was thinking I was just trying to get out of work or something."

As Max was talking, David's breathing became more and more labored. None of those things should've been possible. Even his grandmother had never been able—nor would she have ever wanted—to do something on that kind of scale.

"And that's just the big stuff." Max was becoming angry again. "At first I didn't notice, but I found myself saying, every single day over the space of a month, well wasn't that lucky. After the ankle thing, I began to wonder, when did this start? And you know what? It all leads back to the day I started wearing your hat."

"Look, I kn—" David began, holding out a hand palm up, but Max wasn't even looking at it. He was staring at the wall, his anger twisting into something darker, less pure, something mean that probably sprouted from the embarrassment over the tears that gathered in the rims of his eyelids.

"And then I woke up three days ago to this." Max held up the baby, and on cue she woke. The wail was harsh and loud—Jesus, who knew they could be so loud—and David flinched. Max rose to his feet, lifting her to his shoulder and bouncing her gently like he'd been doing it for months instead of days.

"I'm so sorry," David whispered. His heart hurt. He'd never meant for this to happen, but that was a meaningless sentiment and growing old fast. "It wasn't supposed to go like that. I... I admit I worked with a bit more purpose on your hat since you asked for it, and—" Hadn't he just. "I guess something made it more powerful. Maybe—"

"I don't care," Max yelled over the crying and the baby cried louder. Max's face flushed red. He leaned over David, consequently stopping him from getting up. "I don't care how sorry you are, how well you meant. I think

you're a creep for meddling with people's lives like that. It's unwanted and it's... it's disgusting, is what it is." Max snatched his beanie back from David's hand and held it up. "I want you to undo this."

"Undo," David repeated. He was reeling from Max's words, their hooks jabbing sharply into his lungs. "What do you mean?"

"You don't get it, do you?" Max said. "What if this is someone's baby, David? What if this is someone's baby and she's now with me. What if her mom and dad are out there and they're—" Max couldn't even finish the sentence, he seemed to choke on air, and buried his face in the little bundle of blankets.

Fuck. David rose to his feet, eased past him. "It won't be like that." He couldn't be sure though, could he? Not one hundred percent. But still, there was no way... "It doesn't work like that. The—the power doesn't take from someone else, it just... offers what's due. But I don't understand." David hesitated. The baby's cries had subsided into a miserable whine and Max was already easing toward the door. "You must've wanted... You must've wished for her."

"I had a vague thought right before I went to sleep that I wished my sister could finally get pregnant and stop with those IVF treatments. That's all. A baby for my sister, who lives six thousand miles away."

David felt awful and lightheaded as he clung to the back of one of the threadbare sofas. We offer free shipping probably wouldn't go down well and was most likely impending hysteria talking. "Burn the hat," he said. "But think carefully before you do, because it will undo everything."

Max was standing by the door, his face split between the dimmed glow inside the coffee shop and the bright winter sunlight outside. "I never wished for this," Max said, his bottom lip wobbling. "I never wanted anything like this." And with that he was gone, the silence ringing sharply as the door closed behind him. It was a shame knitting a hat for himself never worked, since David felt worse than he ever had in his entire life.

The lunchtime crowd wouldn't allow him to wallow. Endless cold weather brought with it the need for comfort drinks, and David spent a good two hours

pumping out everything from mint chocolate mochas to orange and ginger tea. A stream of people came and went, occupying his comfortable slouchy couches, and David felt a sick sort of relief that no one went near his display of beanies by the far wall.

Odd, how that worked. It must've been some vibe he was sending out because usually he sold one or two of them during lunch.

At last, the shop emptied enough for David to pick up the knitting he'd stuffed behind the counter after Max left. The half-finished beanie felt limp and brittle under his fingers, like he'd been clutching it for hours with sweaty palms. No good would come from this yarn now; it was ruined. With a sigh, he pulled the knitting needles free and dumped the yarn in the trash. A real pity, for the green color was dark and lush, and it would've made a lovely, warm hat. Before the yarn left his fingers, a scene flashed before his eyes like a daydream: an old lady calling for her cat to come inside. David blinked it away. He didn't want to know.

David's hands shook when he stuffed the needles in his knitting basket. What if Max's hat wasn't a one-off? What if it had happened before? Instead of helping people, what if he'd been ruining lives? He couldn't ask Nana, and his parents had died when he was five and were no more than an abstract memory. David was on his own in this as well as everything else.

In absentminded habit, David went about his afternoon routine of clearing tables, washing out the coffee machines, and moving secondhand books to their rightful places. He refused to believe he'd been doing something bad all along. If things had gone terribly wrong, he would've heard about it before. There was nothing like that in the family lore, either. Nana had always told him their gift was a harmless one, but that didn't matter: people would prosecute regardless. The memory of his six-year-old self on her lap came to mind, his chunky little hands warm under her dry ones as she guided his knitting needles. That's why you can never tell anyone, my dear, unless it's someone you love very much. Because, and she'd winked here. Because love is the most powerful magic of all. David had suspected for most of his life that she was a bit of a closet romantic

His fingers went lax and he dropped a mug into the sink. It bounced but didn't break. It hadn't even crossed his mind not to tell Max about his gift, but

what was more, the reason Max's hat acted so oddly must be because of David's long, inextinguishable crush.

David groaned and buried his face in his hands. Max had been coming into Sable before going to teach at the university for a whole year now, and David had lusted after him from day one. Every morning he showed up at seven apart from Fridays, when he'd come in for the afternoon to grade his papers. By the second week, David had memorized the lines of Max's back, the sweeping curve of his shoulder blades through his shirts, the way the sun would bring out a faint sheen of ginger in his otherwise dark hair. By the second month, he was hopelessly, terribly, lost. Quietly pining became his default setting as he made cappuccinos, sold threadbare Agatha Christies—or bought them back, often the same copies—and knitted beanies in his downtime.

Well, he made more than just beanies. David had a successful knitting blog on the side, after all, and without sounding bigheaded, some of his patterns were the most sought after online. But it was the beanies that held the power. David had tried with scarves and mittens but that never worked. Nana could pour her well-wishes into anything, but not so David. He figured since his gift was less than hers, it had something to do with the hat being closer to the brain where the wishes came from.

In the afternoon lull David opened his laptop and clicked on New Post. There was no sense in picking up his needles when he felt like this. With the way his luck was going, he'd probably send someone off with a hat that made a war break out, family lore or no. But even the words for a new blog post wouldn't come. David couldn't stop thinking about Max. Was he was burning the hat? And what would happen to the baby if he did? It made him feel like crying, so he couldn't imagine what it must be like for Max.

It wasn't as if he ended up waiting long to find out. Max stepped into Sable the next morning, looking so much worse than he did the day before that it took David a full ten seconds to work out he was on crutches. Max's hair stuck limply to his skull, his face awfully drawn. Those usually striking dark irises looked watery in their red confines, and a stab of heartrending concern made David move from behind the counter.

“My God,” he said, crossing the shop in three strides. “Come sit down.

What do you need? A doctor, a—” That was when he noticed the large cast extending from Max’s foot to just below his knee. “Wh—”

“I did it,” Max whispered, voice so faint David had to lean in to hear him as he sank down into the nearest chair, wobbling precariously on the two crutches before his ass landed in the seat. “I burned it.”

“Oh, honey.” The endearment was out before he could stop it, and while David wanted to put a hand over Max’s shoulders really badly, he feared those crutches. “I can’t—I can’t tell you how sorry I am.” There was no one else in the shop; the morning rush over and the lunchtime crowd hadn’t arrived yet, so David sat down kitty-corner from Max. “I wish I could do something to help you.”

“I don’t need more of your kind of help, do I?” Max grimaced when David sucked in a sharp breath and leaned away from him. Sighing deeply, Max rested his forehead in his hand. “Actually, I came here to apologize. I said some terrible things to you yesterday. It just all became too much, and then what you were saying sounded so crazy but there was no other explanation and—”

David heard him swallow and, screw the crutches, he deserved a good kick in the balls if he’d made Max look like that. While Max’s anger and his terrible words had hurt David yesterday, it was infinitely more painful to see him so defeated. David reached out and squeezed Max’s free hand that lay limply on the table. For a second Max froze and then he yanked his hand away. David tried not to feel the sting.

“So you burned the hat,” David coaxed. “Then what?”

“I... I did it late yesterday evening and then I... I held her really tight. All night, I held her tight, and when I woke up she was... she was—”

“Gone.”

Max nodded. “It’s for the best, obviously. I can’t care for a baby, and she was never mine to begin with, but that doesn’t mean—”

“That it doesn’t hurt.” Max nodded again.

“I woke up with my left foot in this damned cast. A dozen other things too, all stuff I hadn’t even realized. Blocked shower drain, dead car battery, and an

empty bank account, obviously. Times have been a bit rough, and—” Max let out a shuddering breath and hid his face behind his hands. “Apparently my roommate didn’t go on a long family visit. He moved out a month ago. I found two late payment notices on my kitchen table and a note to vacate the apartment by the end of the month if I can’t pay immediately.”

“Oh shit, Max, I’m—”

“Don’t say you’re sorry again. Just, don’t. I’m doing my best not to think this is your fault, but I’m not being very successful. If you hadn’t given me that hat, all of this would’ve happened anyway. But I would’ve been able to deal with it one thing at a time and now it all just—” Max heaved another great sigh, the way someone might do after a good cry, and reached for his crutches. “I don’t know why I’m even telling you all this. I’m still so furious with you.”

“Where are you going?” David demanded, rising to his feet as Max struggled to his. David’s fingers itched to reach out and help him, but he didn’t.

“Why do you care?” Max closed his eyes and visibly reined himself in. “To the bank. I’m going to ask them for a loan so I can pay my medical bills and extend my lease until—”

“Is it a nice place?” David interrupted. “The one you live in now, I mean.”

Max laughed, the sound a little harsh. “It’s a shithole. It’s one of the reasons why I couldn’t care for—” Max looked away again. The baby was going to be a sore spot for a while yet.

“Then give it up and come stay with me.”

Max whipped his head up and teetered on his crutches before he found his balance again. “What?”

“I—” Okay, maybe he hadn’t thought that through. “Well, it sort of makes sense? I mean, I have a house that’s way too big for just me. It’s been in my family for a long time and now I’m the only one living there. So, you could basically live there too without ever bumping into me.” Max wasn’t smiling but his scowl seemed marginally less intense. The dark scruff on his face was thicker than David had ever seen it and, God, he should not be thinking about

that right now. “What I mean to say is, I feel responsible, and I want to help. Even if it’s just until you’re back on your feet.” Max and David simultaneously looked down at the cast. “Literally.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know you teach,” David said softly. “I know you like your coffee sweet and milky apart from Fridays when you have to stay awake to slog your way through those essays or whatever the hell it is you’re always grading. I know you laugh at some of the things your students write. I know—” David stopped himself. It was likely Max already thought David was weird, no need to add fuel to the lunatic fire by showing his crush. “Here.” David moved to the counter and scribbled his address on the back of a business card. “Come by tonight and have a look. If you don’t like it, or if you take offense to bodies in the attic, you can always say no.”

Max didn’t say anything, but he accepted the card with a slight smile, and David watched him hobble off.

Max didn’t show up that night. Or the next one. In fact, he didn’t come into the coffee shop for the rest of the holiday break, and it wasn’t until David got all his regulars’ orders wrong that he knew he had to do something.

The office in the back held all his sales records for the store. There was a separate file for the knitted stuff. It didn’t take long at all to track down Max’s paperwork, and his last name.

David closed the shop after the lunch crowd left, got in his car, and drove to the university. Would they just tell him where Max was? Or was it confidential? But Max was a TA; it wasn’t like it could be a secret he worked there. Parking in the visitor’s parking lot, David left behind his tricolored hat, scarf, and gloves, zipped up his coat to hide the hoodie underneath, and quickly ran his fingers through his perpetually wispy pale hair. He checked the side mirror. It would have to do.

A quick search online had told him Max was into art history and archeology, so that was the building he approached. “Could you point me in the direction of Mr. Cotton’s office please?” he asked a student thundering down the stairs. David attempted to project I totally have a right to be here.

The girl frowned at him, but it was more a confused sort of frown so David stood his ground.

“Mr. Cotton?” she began and then her face cleared. “Oh, Max. I don’t know if he’s in. I haven’t seen him today, but I could check his office if you like.”

“No, that’s all right,” David quickly said. “It’s sort of an informal visit.” The girl’s eyes began to twinkle and David found himself blushing.

“Of course,” she said. “Up the stairs to the right, the office at the end of the corridor.”

“Thanks.” David tried to walk quickly rather than escape like the devil was on his heels.

The first knock had no effect and David felt his heart sink. If he wasn’t here, David could always come back some other time, but where was the line between concerned citizen and creepy stalker? It was entirely possible Max was absolutely fine and had decided to start drinking coffee elsewhere. It wasn’t like David could blame him if he had. As he turned away, David’s feet felt heavy with disappointment. This would be it. The end of something before it ever began, something he would never quite get over. One last try, he thought, and knocked again.

This time there was a scramble behind the door, a soft “fuck”, and a crash. David remembered Max’s crutches and all sorts of terrible scenarios filled his mind. Without thinking, he pushed open the door, ready to call an ambulance if he needed to, only to be faced with Max trying to rise to his feet from a clearly slept-on couch.

“Oh fuck, it’s you,” Max said, sinking back and covering his face. “You scared the life out of me.”

“Have you been... sleeping here?” David demanded. Max made a sharp cutting move with his hand, and David quickly shut the door behind him.

“What are you doing here, David?” Max asked. He sounded even more exhausted than he looked. There was a badly hidden suitcase under an old mahogany desk. The couch was one of those typical old leather things you saw in gentlemen’s libraries, with a stiff straight back and golden buttons. Most likely even more uncomfortable than it looked.

“I just... I was worried. I guess I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

Max laughed and spread his hands, indicating the old office, the books and papers, the boxes David hadn't noticed before. “I am the king of my castle.”

“Were you evicted?” David asked gently and Max's face twisted. “Then why didn't you—”

“Come and live with you? Because that wouldn't be weird at all. How did you find me?”

“Google. And Maxwell Cotton? Really? Could your name be more British? Never mind. Look, you can't stay here. If you won't take me up on the offer to stay with me, at least tell me how else I can h—”

“Don't even say it,” Max yelled, slapping his hand on the desk, sending a stack of papers flying. “You've fucking done enough!”

“All right,” David said, suddenly tired of the hostility. “Your life sucks, you're going through a hard time, I made it worse. I get it, okay? I'm trying to help now, that's all. So here it is again: you have my address if you need a place to stay, but if you want to lose your job as well as everything else, by all means, sleep in your office.” David turned on his heel and left, not even managing to feel a little satisfied by the look of shock on Max's face.

Living with Max turned out to be surprisingly easy. There was the odd occasion when David was so deliriously tired in the mornings that he forgot he no longer lived alone in the old Victorian, and Max found him wearing nothing but a pair of ratty boxers while staring at a dismally empty fridge. Apart from that, they rarely ran into each other, and when they did, it was friendly if a bit restrained. David was going to have to do something about that. After caffeine.

“You really can't survive on cereal alone, you know.” David jumped and turned—wearing pajama bottoms for once, thank goodness—as Max stepped into the kitchen, hands full of plastic bags. The cast on his foot had been replaced by one he could walk on, so he hobbled around without crutches these days.

Six a.m. on a weekday and the guy had gone grocery shopping. “Muh,” David said.

“The rent you’re charging me is ridiculously low,” Max replied as if a valid point had been made. He looked a little sheepish, which was strange. “I mean it barely covers electric and water use for a place like this I’m sure, so I thought this was the least I could do. And I know I’ve been an asshole to you in the last week.” He hadn’t been, really. David just hadn’t seen much of him, but maybe that avoidance had been deliberate on Max’s side.

Becoming more and more awake with every item Max unpacked, David gaped as the counter filled with eggs, bacon, milk, tomatoes, bread, and a bunch of fruit. “You really don’t have to,” he began even though his mouth watered and Max grinned like he recognized it for the blatant lie it was. This was such a turnabout from the slightly mean Max that David had been confronted with in the coffee shop and at the university that he felt completely and unfairly blindsided by the little dimple that appeared in Max’s right cheek. The urge to press his tongue into it couldn’t be normal. Who on earth wanted to lick someone’s face? But there it was, a deep pucker just above the scruff of Max’s beard, just begging for some attention.

“Well?” Max stared at him as if waiting for an answer. He rolled his eyes when David just blinked at him, and smiled. “I asked you how you like your eggs.” Jesus, that smile.

“Lovely. I mean, uh, sunny-side up. There’s really no need—”

“I know,” Max said, ducking away to grab a frying pan. “I want to, though.”

“Okay.” A little bewildered, David sat down on one of the barstools at the island and settled in to watch Max cook in his kitchen. It wouldn’t hurt to open the shop an hour late just this once.

Once two overly-full plates were put down on the island, Max sat down too. “So tell me more about these magic beanies of yours.”

David nearly choked on his fried tomato. “There’s not that much to tell, really,” he said when he recovered. “My family descends from a long line of Cheveron witches. There’s even a record of one being burned at the stake in Belgium centuries ago. I think that’s why they moved over here. The talent watered down over time until this convoluted way of fulfilling small wishes

was all that was left. Nana was good at it. My mom, I have no idea. Mom and Dad both died in a car crash when I was five. And I was an only child, so I guess the magic dies with me.”

“Oh my God.” Max leaned over and put his hand over David’s just like David had done in the coffee shop. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s, uh, okay. It was a long time ago and I loved living here with Nana.” David stared at their hands. Max’s was a point of dry warmth that centered all David’s attention. What on earth was going on? “What about you?”

“Nothing magical about me,” Max said. He was smiling again when David looked up, the little dimple just wanting to be kissed. I wouldn’t be so sure about that, David thought as he felt the warmth from that smile wash over him.

“I meant,” David said, cheeks flushing, “what about your parents? They still around?”

“Yes, both of them and my sister still live in England. I moved here to go to college and never went back, really.”

“Why’s that?”

Max looked away as he pulled his hand off David’s. “I lived with someone for a long time. Through college and then after. By the time we broke up I had a house and the TA position. I’m still working on my PhD and... Well, I decided to stay. Before you came along I had started to doubt the wisdom of that decision, though.”

David blinked at him, because what the hell. “So, you had a house together?”

Max shrugged. “The mortgage was in my name but until we broke up, we shared the cost. That’s why I pretty much lost everything when he moved out. I had to sell in a hurry and ended up trying to cover costs for a house that wasn’t mine anymore while paying rent for a shithole.”

“Well, that’s all behind you now. You can stay here for as long as you like, I mean it. It’s just me here anyway.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate it. I know I was horrible to you after the whole hat thing. I don’t even know why you’re being so nice.”

“You weren’t horrible for the entire year you’ve been coming into the shop.”

“So it’s my patronage that impresses you.”

“Well that too, I guess.” Damn it, when had David reverted to his sixteen-year-old self with all this blushing? “Anyway I can forgive any horribleness after that with the things you’ve been through. It was mostly my fault anyway.”

“No, it wasn’t. And don’t think I haven’t noticed you stopped knitting beanies. You should start again. You were doing a good thing.”

An unexpected thickness blocked David’s throat. He had stopped, and it was hurting him inside, but he felt he couldn’t risk knitting more wishing hats until he knew for certain what had gone wrong. He’d cast on stitches for a pretty pink hat a few days ago, but put it aside. Knitting beanies for himself never affected anything, but even the maroon brim he’d started for himself last night had freaked him out and he’d tucked it away half finished. “You think so?”

“I know so. In fact, I’m sure there’s a better way to get your beanies to the right people than selling them from your coffee shop.”

“There is?” David looked at Max with surprise. He hadn’t wanted to sell them online before because he liked knowing who they went to.

“Hmm,” Max said, eyes narrow as he stared at David. “Yes. Give me some time and I’ll think of something. Are you working late tonight?”

“No, I close up at seven on Mondays. Why?”

“Maybe we could watch a movie together.” There was an odd look on Max’s face as he added, “I’d like to get to know you better.”

David knew he was gaping wide-eyed at Max but he couldn’t help it. “Yeah,” he said. “Sure. We could. Do that.” He slid off his barstool. “I hate to dine and dash but I’ve got to go open the shop.”

“That’s fine, I’m not due at work until ten today. I’ll see you tonight, though.” Max grabbed their plates and stacked them on top of each other, gently touching David’s back as he squeezed past on his way to the dishwasher.

“Yeah,” David said, turning toward the stairs to go grab his shower, the touch zinging up his spine like an electric current. “Until tonight.”

The entire day, David felt the ghost of that touch. Hours upon hours he spent going over their morning in his mind. It even came as a complete surprise to find himself sitting in a comfy chair knitting away at the salmon pink beanie he’d put aside, during the afternoon lull.

Blinking like he’d woken up from a nap, he stared at the wool in his hands. The soft yarn in a simple knit stitch would make someone a lovely hat. Maybe he’d even put a pompom on top. Would he sell it, though? Look what happened last time he let his mind wander over Max while he knitted. He closed his eyes and fingered the yarn. A good quality Merino wool. A young woman finding her keys, a rush of relief, her being on time for... David blinked his eyes open and smiled. He kept on knitting. The hat would be safe with her.

There wasn’t time to finish the beanie, since David had to prepare for the monthly knitting club meeting that he was hosting in Sable the next evening, so he took the half-finished hat home with him.

Home, where Max was waiting in the living room, two candles burning on the coffee table. He sat cross-legged on the couch facing the television and patted the seat beside him.

“Have a good day?” he asked.

“Sure.” David eyed the space beside Max. “I’m just gonna wash off the coffee smell. I’ll be right back.”

“I like the coffee smell,” Max said, “but okay.”

The shower felt good but still left David unsettled. If he didn’t know any better, he’d think Max was trying to seduce him, and God, that thought turned his insides into something hot and liquid. It was unlikely though. Over the span of one year Max had never shown any interest. Maybe Max was just trying to make up for how angry he’d been when he’d found out about the wishing hats.

And yet. Max kept passing him food until David thought he’d explode if he ate any more. His glass never went empty, and there was far more accidental

touching going on than strictly necessary. About halfway through the movie, Max didn't even bother removing his thigh from where it pressed against David's.

It was almost a relief when the credits began to roll. David felt so strung out he feared he'd jump off the couch if their fingers accidentally brushed in the popcorn bowl one more time. Turning to say good night and thanks for the movie, he found himself nearly nose to nose with Max.

"You have really pretty eyes, you know that?" Max gazed at him.

"What?" David croaked, leaning back as far as the couch allowed him.

"Hmm, very pale blue. Very rare. I guess it's that light hair of yours. Look, I meant to ask you—" When Max reached out a hand, David squeaked and sprang to his feet. The back of his leg hit something and David turned around. It was his work bag, the salmon pink beanie's yarn spilling out.

The breakfast that morning, the unexpected friendliness, the small seemingly meaningless touches... oh God. Oh no. David turned away from Max and covered his face with his hands. "Fuck," he said very quietly, and then once more, with feeling, "Fuck." He didn't even have to be knitting specifically for Max anymore to affect him.

"Hey." David could hear Max rise to his feet. "What's wrong?" A soft hand landed on his shoulder and David startled, arranging his face in something neutral before turning. Max was standing very close.

"My contact lens got stuck," David lied. "It's fine now. What were you gonna ask?"

"I was just wondering if you'd let me take you to dinner tomorrow n—"

"I, uh, can't." David edged around the coffee table toward the kitchen. "I have the knitting meeting at the shop tomorrow."

"Oh." Max stared at David, his dark eyes unreadable. "Yeah, no problem. Some other time then."

David tried not to see the disappointment on Max's face as he turned and escaped up to his bedroom.

The next morning, David crept silently down the stairs thinking he'd skip the kitchen entirely, just collect his bag from the living room and go to the coffee shop. Half expecting Max to be waiting for him, David tiptoed into the living room. It was empty, all the remnants of their movie night tidied up. Part of him felt bad for sticking Max with the cleanup again, but he couldn't deal with thinking about any of that right then. It wasn't until he was pulling up the security gate in front of Sable that he recognized the niggling feeling in his gut as disappointment. As disconcerting as it was, the way Max had suddenly been acting toward him was... pretty amazing.

Luckily, the morning rush was so busy it blended neatly into the lunchtime crowd, and David didn't have a chance to worry about anything but ringing up books and making coffee until the afternoon. The pink beanie still sat in his bag, and, after he made sure he was all by himself, David pulled it out. Closing his eyes, he took a careful breath and waited.

The girl, her keys, her rush to an appointment. David couldn't see what it was for, and after that the girl faded away. He blinked, closed his eyes, tried again. The same thing happened. Sighing, he stuffed the half-knitted hat away and moved to the wall that held all the other ones. Every single one held nothing but a mundane wish, and only the one. Relieved, he reached to hang the last one back on the rack.

“What are you doing?”

David startled and dropped the hat. “Jesus,” he breathed, seeing it was Max. He picked the beanie back up and hung it away. “You scared the crap out of me.”

“You're the one sniffing knitted goods, not me,” Max said, but his eyes were smiling. “Listen, I wanted to clear up what happened last night. I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable, I just...” With a puff of breath, Max ran out of steam. Like a deflating balloon, David saw the confidence rush out of him and he had to stop himself from putting an arm around Max.

“It's, uh, okay,” David said awkwardly. “I had a good time. You want some coffee?”

“Yeah, to go though. I can't stay long. I have a class in forty-five minutes. I just wanted to make sure we're okay.”

“We’re okay,” David said. He hoped it was true.

“Good. Great.” Max didn’t look like he thought it was all that great but he took the coffee anyway.

“It’s on the house,” David said when Max reached for his wallet. Max laughed, but it sounded terribly sad.

“Yeah, no, I don’t think so. You’ve done enough for me already, just take the money.” Definitely not okay, then. Without another word, David accepted the cash and watched Max walk toward the door. As he turned on the step, half-in, half-out of shadow, David was reminded of Max standing there the last time with a baby on his arm. What had happened to that child? Was it like she had never been born to begin with?

“If you’re not too tired after your meeting tonight,” Max said, eyes fixed somewhere over David’s right shoulder. “I have an idea for your magic beanies.”

“Okay,” David croaked. “I’ll see you then.”

Max smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. “That hat,” he said so softly David had trouble making out the words. “It really did take all my wishes away when I burned it, didn’t it?”

Without waiting for an answer, Max turned and left, leaving the door to fall gently into its lock.

David’s entire body ached with tiredness after the knitting club, so he wasn’t entirely disappointed to find the living room and kitchen lights off when he arrived home. During the meeting, he’d cautiously finished his maroon beanie, clutching it every five minutes to check, but no wishes had filled his mind. It had seemed safe enough. Technically he should eat something; his stomach had passed complaining loudly and moved onto vague nausea hours before, but he couldn’t dredge up the energy to make and consume food. Instead, he dragged himself up the stairs toward his bedroom.

When Max moved in, David had given him the choice of any of the four remaining bedrooms in the house, and Max had chosen the one closest to the

stairs. It wasn't the biggest, but it did have its own bathroom and a cozy alcove with a padded bench that looked over the street from its bay windows.

Out of habit, David glanced inside and saw that was where Max currently sat, surrounded by books, laptop perched on his thighs. Their eyes caught as Max lifted his head, noticing the movement or maybe feeling David's stare.

"Uh, hi." David faltered in his steps, but went to move on. Part of him wanted to talk to Max. He knew they had to get past this awkwardness before it became a chasm they couldn't bridge, but the bigger part of him was a jumbled mess of confusion. Of embarrassment and attraction and hopeless, terrible guilt.

"David, wait." Out of the corner of his eye, David saw Max scramble to his feet ungracefully because of the walking cast. The laptop precariously teetered over his legs before he caught it and set it on the floor. One of the books tumbled down anyway, spewing papers everywhere, but Max paid it no heed. "I was—" He stopped in the doorway, opening it further and lifting his eyes to rest on David's face.

They were such pretty eyes. Lashes lush and long, the bottom ones such that they curled against the fragile skin underneath. They were almost enough to make David forget about that strong nose and that handsome, enticing scruff on his cheeks. You really couldn't go wrong looking at Max's face.

"I'm sorry," Max said. "Are you terribly tired? We don't have to talk now, if you don't mind."

I don't mind, David thought, but what he said was, "What did you want to talk about?" Max took his lip between his teeth, released it, and leaned against the doorframe.

"The idea I had. For your beanies. But another time is fine." He started to turn away, hand already on the doorknob. "Good n—"

"No, it's okay. You're right, I'm exhausted but talking to you would..." David swallowed and looked down when Max's eyes found his again. "I think it would be nice."

There was a slight pause, one with meaning even if David couldn't discern it. "All right." Max stepped aside, holding the door wider. "Come in."

That wasn't what David expected. He'd thought they'd go down to the kitchen maybe, where Max would keep his hands busy by making food. He always seemed to know when David hadn't eaten. Instead, the bedroom door closed behind him, wrapping the both of them in an atmosphere of companionable harmony. A soft, orange light, from a lamp that hadn't been there before, filled the room, and only then did David hear the gentle music coming from the laptop: mellow jazz tones that seemed to relax the tension in his head and neck.

"I have a spare sound system," David said. "If you want to hook up your laptop to that, you can. It'll do the music justice."

Max was leaning against the wall by the door, arms crossed. He shrugged one shoulder. "I never play it loudly. It's mostly to drown out other distracting noises while I'm working on my dissertation."

David glanced down. A bunch of complicated looking titles adorned the books spread all over, words like *Elite Mastaba* and *Dendrochronology* jumping out and meaning absolutely nothing to him. David blanched a little, wondering how he could've imagined being anywhere near this guy's league. "You're busy," he began, but Max shook his head.

"Have a seat. I can do with a break."

David wondered where to sit. The alcove was covered with papers and books, as was the desk chair, which only left the bed. It felt awkward but David decided to pretend it wasn't and perched down on the edge of the mattress.

"One of my professors is very involved in charity," Max began. "She said something the other day that got me thinking. Have you ever tried selling your beanies on a bigger scale?"

"No, never. I like to see people come in and buy them. I have a website with other knitted goods. It does pretty well, but it's mostly the patterns I design that sell on it. It's not to make money, it's just something I love doing."

"Yes." Max pushed away from the wall and strode over to the alcove, shifting stuff around until he could sit again. "I can see that. And it's just the hats that carry your, uh, gift?"

“Yes. I can’t attach it to anything else.” David had an idea what was coming, and he felt the last of his energy drain out of him. “Look,” he said, but Max didn’t. He was tapping away at his laptop. Before David could say anything else, he rose to his feet with it, limped over, and sat down beside David on the bed.

“This is what my professor was talking about.”

On the screen a page opened, a big header on top with a whole row of charities underneath, but the biggest space was taken up by the words Knit-A-Wish. David’s eyes opened wide. He was suddenly painfully awake.

“Did you tell her about my beanies?”

“No, of course not,” Max snapped. He sighed and checked his temper. David wondered about that, about why Max was obviously trying to do something for him while the tension between them felt so sharp. It wasn’t thick like it could be cut by a knife so much that it teetered on the edge of it, and at any moment it could either tip into irreversible hostility, casting them back into the waters of strangers, or it could turn into something else entirely, something just as dangerous but infinitely more exciting.

“Okay,” David lowered his voice, aiming for soothing rather than antagonizing, willing to straddle the balance a while longer. “Then what is this?”

“Every winter hundreds of kids go cold because they don’t have scarves or hats or sweaters to keep them warm. My professor is looking for volunteers to donate handmade knitted goods, anything at all but of good quality, and then she will be distributing them to the children most in need. Wouldn’t that be perfect? Imagine the difference one small wish could make to these kids.”

The idea warmed David from the inside out, but... “I don’t know,” he softly said.

“You’re worried about the effect.” Max sighed and closed the laptop, setting it on the carpet by his feet. He turned to David. “What happened to me was a fluke. You can’t give up your gift because of that. It wasn’t your fault, and if anything, a child’s wish is going to be much more innocent than a grown-up’s, I should think.”

“I don’t know about that,” David said dubiously, and to his surprise Max laughed. A deep throaty sound like he was beyond tired, too.

“What’s the worst that could happen? They’ll suddenly find a pair of tickets to Disneyland in their lunchbox?” Max waited to go on for so long that David looked up. His eyes were soft and seemed to linger on David’s mouth. “Or maybe they’ll find an actual lunch in their lunchbox.”

“Okay,” David breathed, feeling something give way inside him. “I’ll think about it. I’ll definitely donate scarves and mittens and anything else you think would be good, but I’ll have to think about the beanies.”

“That’s all I ask.” When David stood to leave, Max followed. “David?”

“Yes?” He hesitated with one hand on the doorknob, startling a little to find Max standing very close behind him. Max’s hand came to rest on his shoulder, breath tantalizingly hot against David’s neck before he turned him around.

“I just... I really want to kiss you. Do you mind?” Max stepped into his space, and before David could do anything, Max threaded his fingers through David’s hair, fingertips meeting at the back of his skull.

The kiss was hard, but gentled immediately when David didn’t pull away. Impossible warmth pooled in his belly, an irresistible urge to wrap his arms around Max making him do just that. It felt so good he began to tremble, a fine tremor that shook his hands and Max’s shirt clenched in them.

“Shh,” Max breathed sweetly against his lips. “Please don’t be upset. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—” He closed his eyes and sighed, a watery smile curling the edges of his mouth. “Please don’t punch me. I have very delicate features.” Max looked terribly sad despite the smile when he moved away, but David yanked him back and held him tight.

“It’s not you,” David said, eyes prickling dangerously, because fuck, this was exactly what he feared all along. One minute, he begged silently. Just hold it together one minute and then you can go fall apart in your own room. “It’s not your fault. It’s not you. I’m doing this. I want you so badly—I’ve been wishing for you so badly—that I’m doing this to you.”

“What?” Max gently untangled from David’s grip but held him at arm’s length, hands wrapped tightly around David’s biceps. His voice was tight, like

he was trying to keep his frustration at bay. “What are you talking about? If you want this so badly, then why do you keep pushing me away?”

David’s lips still tingled from their kiss. He pressed his fingertips to his mouth and closed his eyes. This was going to hurt. “Because I don’t know how far this—this power reaches, all right? I just don’t know anymore.” Everything was out of whack. Did it now affect Max just from being near David? His gift had never been particularly strong, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t change. With age for instance, or with... attraction. Love, a small voice whispered, but he blocked it out. He couldn’t think of this as love, because surely to lose a love before you had the chance to truly find it was the cruelest thing of all. “It’s not supposed to work on myself, but I made a hat for me tonight and it—” He broke off, unable to finish the thought, a deep, nauseating sense of shame churning in his empty stomach.

The hats had never worked for David before, but maybe he had just never wanted anything badly enough until now. “I don’t know how much of this is you, or how much of this is me pouring something more than just a little wishful thinking into a ball of yarn. There’s no way to know for sure that you aren’t feeling like this because I want you to.”

“Oh.” David opened his eyes in time to witness the moment of comprehension as his words sank in. Max’s eyes blinked away and a second later his hands fell off David’s arms.

“Yeah. Oh.” It was hard to swallow and David’s chest burned as he took a step away. One more step out of this room, five steps to his own bedroom. Just hold on. “So now you know why.”

“I’m s—” Max began but he still wasn’t looking at David. There was an awful noise, something between a choked cry and a sob, and David realized it came out of his own mouth.

“Don’t you dare.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Don’t you dare apologize to me. This is all my doing, it’s not on you.”

“You don’t know that. You can’t know that.” When David opened his eyes it was to Max staring at him with an oddly intense look. David wanted so badly to reach for him, to rub the palm of his hand against the grain of that lovely dark scruff. In his mind, he’d traced the lines of Max’s face so often

that it felt like his fingers already knew the pattern of his cheekbones, his jaw, his mouth. A phantom touch.

The sigh that escaped him shuddered with regret. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? I can’t know that it’s not, either.”

Life settled a little, after that. David destroyed the maroon hat in the backyard on the day Max was out to have his cast removed, but he didn’t feel any relief. It took David a week to stop avoiding Max in the kitchen in the mornings, and while Max appeared guarded sometimes, it seemed to be because of lingering embarrassment rather than fear that David might turn him into a toad or something. They still didn’t fit back into their former pattern, nervous energy grating like a wrongly placed needle on a record, and David lacked the courage to right it.

In the end, Max—waiting in the kitchen one morning when he should’ve left for work already, damn it—cornered David by the coffee machine. He hijacked David’s mug and made him sit on a barstool by the island, taking a seat beside him.

“We’re going to talk about this,” he said, sliding the coffee out of reach when David grabbed for it. “Tell me the real reason behind your fears.” This was it. Nowhere to go from here.

“Talk?” David laughed hollowly. Never mind talk, he hadn’t allowed himself to think about this in over four years. “I don’t know if I can.”

“Try,” Max said, voice low. He reached for David’s hand on the counter but stopped short by two inches. “Please, I think I need you to try.”

David believed him. Max had the right to understand, to come to terms with what had happened. David owed him more than once over, since he’d still stayed after... everything.

“Okay.” David scrubbed his palms over his face and then dropped them back on the counter. Keeping his eyes cast down he began to talk. “Five years ago I dated a guy, Joey. He was very much in the closet and—” David swallowed, closing his eyes. God, this hurt. “It wasn’t... I wasn’t in love with him, but I did like him a lot. I never told him about the beanies, but—Joey

struggled. With who he was. It made him nasty at times and it all came to a head one day. He told me, he told me—oh God.”

David’s hands shook and Max did cover them then. Like he knew what was coming, he squeezed David’s fingers and said, “It wasn’t your fault.”

“That’s what I thought at the time, but now I’m not so sure. I mean, I wasn’t in love with him, I know that, but what if—” David took a deep breath. “He said it was me. He said I made him want... unnatural things. That he didn’t want to do those things with anyone else. That it was me. He said other terrible things too. He—” Of its own accord, David’s hand lifted to his cheek where a dark bruise had once sat for nearly two weeks. He aborted the move but—judging by the way Max’s eyes darkened—not in time to hide the implication. “We broke up after that, obviously. Right after Nana died, too. That’s when I opened Sable and... stopped dating.”

“Oh, Dave.” Max sighed, and then, “What does it mean? Why did you call it Sable?”

“Stash Acquired Beyond Life Expectancy. It’s a knitting thing.”

“That’s... rather heartbreaking, actually.”

David laughed softly. “You haven’t seen my yarn stash.” He sobered up, his stomach aching. It had been years, but David knew, even then, the idea had taken root, like a poisonous vine, shutting him off from anyone who showed the least bit of interest in him. It was why he never approached Max, never bothered to find out if he was gay or not, in the entire year he’d been coming into the coffee shop. “I was so mad at Joey at the time, but what if he was right?” The air in David’s lungs seemed to thin and he gasped. “Oh, my God. Max. What if... what if it was me. What if I’m a—”

“You’re not,” Max said fiercely, squeezing David’s hand so hard it ached. He didn’t care, it was something he could blame the tears on. “You’re not a monster. This guy was deeply troubled, and no matter how bad he felt about himself, he had no right to take it out on you like that. You didn’t do anything to him, Dave. Just like you didn’t do anything to me.”

“We still don’t know that.”

“I do.” Max gave David’s hands a rough shake to make him look up. “I do,” he said, quiet and sincere, like he really believed it. “You didn’t do

anything to me.” The corner of his mouth quirked and that little dimple made an appearance. “In fact, I’d argue you didn’t do nearly enough to me, but I really have to go to work now. Just, promise me you’ll think about it. Think about all the—” Here Max blushed furiously, an entrancing sight David hadn’t witnessed before. “All the crushes you’ve ever had, and if any of your beanies ever affected those. And if they haven’t, think about what the difference was between the ones you made for those people, and the one... the one you made for me.”

Love, David thought and he blinked in surprise. He opened his mouth, but Max was already on his feet, grabbing his bag, and muttering about how late he was. They stared at each other awkwardly for a second, and then Max was gone.

The monthly Tuesday knitting club meeting went well. David managed to get everyone out of Sable before eleven and had a list of names in his back pocket of those who’d donate knitted goods to Knit-A-Wish. Even though he was hungry, David was more than a little tired so he made his way straight home.

The light was still on in the kitchen, and that’s where David went. On the island lay an open box with an untouched cold and congealed pizza, and Max was sitting behind it on a barstool, staring at his hands.

“What’s the matter?” David asked, dropping his bag and walking around the island separating them. “Did something happen? Are you okay?”

Max lifted his head and blinked, looking a little dazed but not upset, and David relaxed. He was about to take a step back, but Max reached out and grabbed his hand before he could make it very far.

“I’m fine,” Max said, smiling. “My sister called. She’s pregnant.” He rubbed his thumb over the palm of David’s hand, then let it go.

“Okay,” David said slowly, flexing his fingers by his side. “That’s great but—” He glanced at the forgotten pizza. “Why are you sitting here half in shock like it’s your—” And then it dawned on him. “You think it’s her.”

The smile on Max’s face became beatific. “Yes,” he whispered. “I think I got a little future glimpse of my niece. A fluke, thanks to your hat.”

“I don’t know if that has anything to do with it, Max,” David said gently. He knew how much the disappearance of that baby had weighed on Max, but it wouldn’t be right to let him think this way. If it turned out to be a boy, he’d be devastated. “I mean, when you burned it, all the wishes were undone.”

“No, I think you’re wrong. Burning the hat set everything to rights. It undid all the wishes I shouldn’t have had in the first place and it straightened out the faulty baby wish. I know my sister’s pregnancy isn’t due to your gift, I’m not saying that, but I do think it will be the same girl. It makes sense since I was thinking of my sister and the baby girl somehow ended up with me.” Max smiled up at David. “You’ll see. It will be her. And you know what else? Burning the hat may have undone the extra stuff, but it never undid my original wish.”

“Which was what?” David asked. He could see the logic of it, sort of. Or maybe that was just—hah—wishful thinking.

“When I stepped out of Sable and put that beanie on my head for the first time, I thought, I wish I could get to know him better. You, I mean. And I did, didn’t I? Just in a bit of a roundabout way. There’s no magical hold over either of us, Dave. I liked you before you gave me the beanie, and I think—” Max swallowed and looked away, his gaze falling on the pizza. “Oh. I completely forgot about that. I ordered you a pizza because I figured you’d be hungry and I forgot to close the lid when Lizzie called. I’m sorry, it’s all ruined now.”

“Who cares about the pizza,” David bit out, frustrated, because he’d really liked the direction Max’s thought process had been taking. “You were saying that you liked me before the beanie.”

A mischievous glint appeared in Max’s eyes. “Did I say that? Gosh, I can’t remember.”

“You asshole,” David breathed, but it came out on a huffed laugh. Dizzy relief made his entire body heat up. “I’ve liked you for a whole fucking year, did you know that? For an entire year I pined after you.”

“And in that year you never once knitted a beanie for yourself?” Max was looking at him shrewdly.

“Well of course I did, but—”

“And not once did I suddenly fall at your feet under some kind of spell, did I?”

“Uh, no. Obviously not.”

“Even though you liked me so very much.” Max’s eyes twinkled, the infuriating dimple just asking for a kiss, and David suspected he was going red to the roots of his hair. Damned complexion.

“Clearly my mistake in judgment, because did I mention you’re an asshole?” God, who was he kidding. David had never been this in love with anyone in his life and he doubted very much that he ever would be again, gift or no gift.

“I don’t think you mean that.” Max rose to his feet and stepped into David’s space, backing him into the counter without touching him. “I think your judgment is rather good.” He tilted his head to the side, narrowing his eyes as he considered David. “A bit paranoid maybe, at times. And an awful cook. Have I mentioned that? It’s a good thing you make a mean coffee because—”

“Oh my God,” David said, trying to push past Max. “I’m going to bed.” He didn’t mean it, he felt giddy with where this was going, but at the same time something had to give. Either he was going to leave now and jerk off until his palms grew blisters or—

“Mm.” Max stepped in front of David again and put both his hands on the kitchen cabinets behind him, boxing David in. “That’s a good idea. I’m right behind you, but first—” The kiss wasn’t unexpected, but it still came as a surprise. Max’s lips were a soft contrast to the bristle on his cheeks, his tongue a wet heat that entered David’s mouth and shot straight toward his gut. It was an instantly deep kiss, no exploring necessary, and when Max put his hands on David’s thighs, he aided the lift onto the counter with a little hop.

“Jesus Christ,” he moaned when they broke for air. David had his legs wrapped right around Max, and he could feel how hard they both were through their jeans.

“Too fast?” Max asked, his dark eyes huge and dilated.

“Mm-mm.” David shook his head and rubbed his hands over Max’s biceps. Something occurred to David then. “I can see them, you know. The wishes, I

mean. Flashes and images, very briefly. With the one I made for you I couldn't see a damn thing. I figured it was because you gave me the yarn, but that wasn't it, of course."

"It wasn't?"

"No." Warmth flooded his cheeks and David looked down to where Max's hands still rested on his thighs. Loose, now, relaxed, no longer gripping. And nice hands they were: blunt fingernails, lovely, long fingers, and broad strong palms. "It was because your wish involved me."

"Is that so," Max's voice lowered, a seductive prowl from his mouth to David's ear. "I can think of a wish or two right now."

"Oh, God, me too," David said hoarsely, flushing red for a whole other reason.

"Bedroom, then?" Max asked softly.

"Fuck yes." David hopped back off the counter, because, while mmm-hot, right now he wanted to be on a soft surface and as prone as possible. "But shower first."

"Okay," Max said and David didn't imagine the pout, did he?

"Join me?" he asked and Max began to grin.

David felt more aroused than he'd ever thought possible. The strain in his groin was almost painful. With a fleeting thought, he hoped his sheets were able to stand up to the assault of his fists clutching and tearing at them. Screw his powers, if there was anything gifted in this room it was Max's mouth. Unaware—or more likely rudely uncaring—of the delicious agony he was putting David through, Max dragged his lips over David's nipples.

They'd passed that way ten minutes before already, and David had been quite ready at that point for it to be a good-bye kiss, a so long, on to better pastures. Excruciatingly slowly, Max's mouth had mapped all of him, from his nipples to his hips, to his knees to his toes, until David's skin felt stretched taut, until he felt so hot he felt fevered. And when finally, finally, the tip of Max's tongue had dipped into the slit of his precome-leaking cock, David had sobbed with relief. Embarrassing as the sound had been, he'd not been able to

help it. Apparently Max was into torture rather than deliverance of pleasure, because that one excruciating touch of tongue was all David had been given.

Unhurried, Max had begun his upward trail, tonguing the skin around David's belly button, kissing the rise and fall of his rib cage. With no concern for David's raggedly uneven breathing, he'd leisurely kissed his way back up, sucking hello again to the tight nubs on David's damp chest.

David strained against Max's mouth, words piling up but dissolving in the heat there before he made them clear. A good thing surely, since David vaguely suspected they'd be no more than pathetic pleas.

It wasn't as if anything was stopping him from guiding Max where he wanted him. His hands were unbound, his arms were free, and yet he writhed against the bed like he'd been chained there. It made no difference. When Max lifted his head and those dark eyes fell on David, the hurricane hunger in them pinning him down, he may as well have been. He wouldn't make Max do anything he didn't want. He wouldn't rush him, he would never. He'd take what was offered, and he'd be painfully, pathetically grateful for it.

"Are you okay?" Max asked, and it took a moment for the question to realign into something that made sense. David's brain was sluggish with lust.

"No," he said. "Yes. I don't know."

Max's dark eyes softened and he reached to stroke the hair from David's forehead. It was sticking against his skin, and God, how long had they been doing this? "I'll make it okay," Max whispered. A promise. "I'll make it good."

"I know you will, I know. Max." Suddenly the words wouldn't be held back anymore; they burst from David's mouth, his back arching off the bed, his hands coming up to frame Max's face. "Please." He wanted to feel Max against him, the weight of him, the reassurance that he was really there. "Please."

"I'm here," Max said, lowering himself down, skin to slick skin, hot breaths mingling as his mouth closed in on David's. They kissed, open-mouthed and famished for it, until Max wrenched away, gasping. Just like that the weight of him was gone again, and David's eyes flew open because he couldn't stand it. Not teasing again. He needed. He needed more.

Max was braced over David on his hands and knees. He looked down between them, their stiff cocks touching politely like two foils before a fencing match. “No need to warn me,” Max said, and David blinked at him, stupid with desire. Before he could ask, Max clarified, “Just come in my mouth.” David groaned, head falling back limply into the lush pillow beneath his head. There was no teasing now, no more roads being kissed into his skin. Max’s mouth closed on David’s cock like an overheated, wet fist, only better, infinitely, excruciatingly better. David shouted out at the sudden assault of feeling after being deprived for so long. His thighs trembled against Max’s shoulders until he gave up the fight against gravity and let them fall open.

It didn’t take long at all after that, since Max’s nose buried itself in the light curls hugging the root of David’s cock on the second pass down as if he was already familiar with the length and thickness of it. The buildup started in David’s toes—or not started, since it felt like something had been building for weeks now—and they curled like his feet were being tickled. Then his knees locked up so his legs stretched out, the quads on his thighs bunching thickly.

Max must’ve felt it was coming because he wrapped a fist around the base of David’s cock and started to jack him off wetly, sucking hard on just the tip. The sensation doubled, tripled, and overloaded. The muscles of David’s ass clenched, and, warning needed or not, David couldn’t have stopped the, “Now, now, oh God, Max, now,” that ripped from his mouth. He lurched upright and held onto Max’s head, not to force him deeper or away, but just because he needed to hold on to something before he flopped back onto the bed. Max sucked him through it, not stopping until David’s right leg spasmed. Pressing his forehead against David’s thigh, Max caught his breath for a second and then kissed his way up again. Oral fixation, David dimly thought, but that was all his brain was capable of.

“It was a tough decision,” Max murmured, his wet mouth dragging over David’s exposed throat. David accommodated limply, spent, rolling his head to the side so Max could work his way up all the way to David’s ear. With a breath that shuddered just a little too much to be completely controlled, Max settled over David’s outstretched body, his hard cock sliding nicely into the groove of David’s hip.

“What was?” David finally managed, and Max’s chuckle was a husky vibration around his earlobe.

“Whether I wanted to suck you off or have you fuck me.” Max laughed gently when David groaned at the thought, his flushed but wrung-out cock twitching feebly against his thigh. It was mostly the unexpectedness of it, since David hadn’t thought Max would want it that way. Not that he would’ve objected one bit, but this... To have Max spread out beneath him, opening up and taking him in, just like his mouth had done, but tighter, hotter, sweeter...

The thought sent a frisson of excitement through David’s entire body, stomach curling again with want. He thought of the slow, almost unendurable detour Max had taken to get him off.

Pulling himself free from the soporific post-orgasm clutches, David pushed at Max’s shoulders, who rolled over willingly. “In how much of a hurry are you?” he asked.

Max’s mouth tasted of David’s come, tongue still slick with it, and David had just about forgotten what his question had been when Max said, “Sometime tonight, that’s all I’m asking.”

“Hm.” David sat up, straddling Max’s hips, and smiled. It had the desired effect because Max’s pupils dilated, his hands clutched David’s hips, and his breathing became shallow and fast. “Roll over.”

Max’s eyebrow showed the unspoken already? but he obeyed without a word. The nape of Max’s neck was still wet from the shower, releasing the sharp mint tang of the by-now-familiar shampoo. Once Max was lying on his front, David took a seat on the back of his thighs. Bracing one hand on the mattress, he lifted his cock—not hard yet, but already showing signs of renewed interest—and nestled it between the globes of Max’s ass cheeks before leaning forward and kissing the back of Max’s neck.

“I’m going to kiss you all the way down,” David said in Max’s ear. “I’m going to work some of that tension out of your shoulders, and then, if you’ve no objections, I’m going to rim you.” Max turned his face into the pillow and made a noise that didn’t sound much like objection. “That’ll have me hard in no time, and then I’ll fuck you any way you like.”

“My God, love. I didn’t peg you for a dirty talker.”

David blinked. “I wasn’t,” he said, a bit astonished. “I was just telling you what I was thinking.”

“You have no idea, do you? What you do to me.” Max stuffed his arms under the pillow and hugged it to his face. His voice came muffled, but amused, when he said, “Go on then. What are you waiting for, a permission slip?”

“Do I need one?” David straightened, caressing Max’s shoulders, feeling out the muscles and where they were the tightest.

“No,” Max said, and it came out with a shudder that David could feel in his fingertips. “You have carte blanche.”

And wasn’t that something? To have come so far, from barely acquaintances to almost enemies to friends to this. With all the issues in between, they’d arrived at implicit trust. David had to press his open mouth against Max’s shoulder blade and breathe through an admission that was not only too soon but too serious to spill on a hormonal high. Since his mouth was tasting impossibly smooth skin, David figured he may as well keep going. He traced the jut of the blade with his tongue, he kissed every protruding vertebrae lightly, he tongued the slight sheen of sweat out of the dip of Max’s lower back.

There was a very quiet but elongated moan that spilled from Max when David put his hands on Max’s ass and spread it. The muscles clenched tightly beneath his fingers. With both hands, David levered Max up until he was on his knees, face still pressed into his precious pillow—although now he was gripping it in a stranglehold rather than hugging it close—and then David sat back to admire the view.

“Dave,” Max pleaded, his voice high, and while he’d rather have looked a little longer, David leaned in and pressed his tongue to the very end of Max’s tailbone. The breath shuddered out of both of them, David the first to recover. He put one arm over Max’s back to steady him, and used his free hand to spread him wide. Without wasting any more time, David licked him—slowly, because David hadn’t forgotten his teasing just yet—from his balls all the way to the top of his tailbone.

When he passed over Max’s entrance, the shout was abrupt and strangled, like it had startled Max, and David pressed a grin into the swell of Max’s ass cheek.

“Don’t laugh at me,” Max growled, although it sounded more breathless than angry.

“I’m not laughing, honey. I wouldn’t do that. I’m just thinking how good this is gonna be.”

“You know you don’t have to, right?” Max looked over his shoulder. His cheekbones were bright red, and already his forehead shimmered with sweat. “It’s only our first time together, you know.”

“Oh, I know. And I’ll stop if you tell me to, but trust me,” David rubbed his palm over Max’s ass, the globe hard under his hand, “this isn’t a hardship for me.”

Max turned away again. “Okay.”

David waited but Max said nothing else. “You want me to stop?” Max shook his head into the pillow. “Say it.”

“Put your mouth on me,” Max ordered hoarsely, and David did as he was told.

For the first thirty seconds David took it easy, giving Max as well as himself a chance to adjust to this peculiar intimacy. When Max began to rock gently back and forth, seeking friction on his cock that just wasn’t there, David hooked his thumb into Max’s hole and licked around it. Gently twisting, he worked the muscle, and small, gasping noises began spilling from Max’s throat. These little involuntary sounds were what made the blood rush painfully fast to David’s groin, and he cursed himself for not thinking ahead.

“I’ll be right back,” he murmured, the breath of sound tickling Max’s ass, causing Max to shiver, full-bodied and convulsively.

The lube was in the bedside table, but David kept his condoms in the bathroom. Catching sight of himself in the mirror above the sink, he almost laughed. Wrecked he looked, with his hair a mess, his mouth red and spit-wet, and his eyes sparkling like blazing sunlight on a lake. It wasn’t a bad look.

The image of his own flushed face fled his mind when he stepped back into the bedroom. Max had shifted onto his back and was lazily fisting his own cock. “Anyway I liked, isn’t that what you said?”

David nodded, couldn’t do more than that, transfixed with the beautiful and obscene sight of Max’s cock appearing and disappearing between his own

fingers, and Max grinned like he knew it. “Well then, come over here,” he said and lifted his knees to his chest.

David knee-walked onto the mattress, throwing all inhibition to the wind. Max had nice calves, thin at the ankles but quickly widening with the thick bulge of muscle. It’s where he put his hands to push Max’s legs up further, and spread them wider so he could kneel in between, the inside of his thighs pressed to the outside of Max’s hips.

“It’s been a while since I’ve done this, so you’ll have to tell me how I’m doing.” David leaned forward and kissed his way up Max’s chest, their cocks brushing.

“I’m sure you’ll be great,” Max said and David grinned at how breathless he sounded, how affected.

“At least I’ve come already,” he murmured, mouthing along the scruff on Max’s jaw. He lifted his head and stared into Max’s eyes. From this close, he could see specks of green and turquoise in those black irises. “So I can make it last as long as you need me to.”

“Jesus Christ.” Max surged up and gripped the back of David’s skull, kissing him fiercely. “Stop talking and start doing.”

“As you wish,” David whispered, and sat back. Making quick work of the condom and lube, David pushed his forefinger into Max’s ass without warning. Max threw his head back and moaned, the long line of his throat a beautiful extension from this angle, an arrow pointing upward between the two dark circles of his nipples. David rubbed a hand over Max’s belly, the coarse hairs below his navel tickling his palm. “You ready, honey? Or do you need more?”

“I’m ready,” Max said, reaching between his knees and pulling David forward so he could hook his legs over David’s shoulders. David lined up, held his breath, eased against the resistance until it gave, and let the breath out as the swollen crown of his cock breached Max’s body.

“Oh love, that’s good.” Max clutched at David’s shoulders. “Oh, more, come on.” David wouldn’t be rushed; there would, after all, only be one first time. The hand bearing his weight into the mattress shook, but the one holding his cock as he eased into Max was steady.

David took in Max's face, his slightly parted mouth, his flickering eyelids—like he wanted to keep them open but they wouldn't cooperate—the way he clung to David like he was a lifeline. It made him feel momentarily overwhelmed, like it was all too much in one go, like Max had been right and they should've stuck to hand jobs for their first time in bed together rather than plunge into this abyss of contrasting feelings. Hot flesh and cold sweat, sweet breaths and salty lips, hard muscle under velvet skin.

Only then, David sank in all the way and everything aligned. David's balls rested satisfyingly against Max's backside, his shoulders fit neatly in the crook of Max's knees, his cock throbbed as deep as it would go inside the tight confines of Max's body. Max's eyes flew open like he felt it too, like he'd given up on his final struggles as well. Impossibly, David sank deeper. Max reached up for him and David maneuvered Max's thighs around his waist so he could be held close.

Max clutched at the back of David's head and pressed their stubbled cheeks together so they rasped. "This is so much," Max whispered as his thighs tightened around David's waist. "There is so much I want to say to you."

"I know," David said, his heart beating adrenaline around his body so he felt high. "I know, honey."

"I can't stop thinking about you. When I dream about you it's the best, and when I have nightmares about you they are the worst... But this isn't the time." Max yanked at David's hair, forcing him up far enough so he could kiss him. Just as abruptly he broke away. "So fuck me, Dave. Fuck me like you promised."

David did, slow and languid, hard and fast, but for a long, long time, because promises were things that should be kept.

THE END

Author Bio

In 2008 Indra Vaughn packed up everything but the kitchen sink... no, that's a lie. She left everything behind apart from her books and moved from Belgium to Michigan.

She now lives in the suburbs of Detroit with her dog who thinks he's a toddler. Indra's professional background is in Nursing and Chinese Medicine, but she prefers to spend time making up stories about mysterious men and their unrequited love.

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BAITED

By Tami Veldura

Photo Description

A man reclined and driving his truck. It's an older vehicle, well used. He has tattoos on both arms and a quiet, intent expression on the road.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've been driving for the last three days. I was living in Philly and I couldn't take it anymore. I had to get back to the first man I ever loved, my best friend. We spent our nights all through high school fooling around, but when we turned eighteen and I wanted to come out to my family, he pushed me away and said he couldn't be open about himself. So I ran. I went to college as far away as I could and got a job in Philly. I worked hard every day and became successful. But I was never happy. I missed my first love. My mom called four days ago and told me that his mom died. So I quit my job, filled my truck with what it could hold, and started driving. This time I won't run from his fear.

No paranormal please, and a HEA or HFN as well.

Sincerely,

Amanda

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: small town, bigotry, coming out, long lost love, men with pets

Word count: 19,694

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BAITED

By Tami Veldura

It had been way too long. And maybe not long enough. Zach's truck growled past the city limit sign, *Edenburg, Pop: 763*, and he caught a hint of those butterflies he'd been expecting for the past three days. He sighed. It was a complicated sound of relief, trepidation, and regret. Both soothing and bracing.

In the passenger seat, Jasper lifted her mottled head to blink at him. She knew that sound was different somehow. Zach scratched her jaw. "We're home, girl. Let's hope we're welcome."

She purred.

Zach pulled off the highway and instantly recognized the curves of almost-germinated dirt that guided visitors into Edenburg. Keshel's farmland, a mixed bag of grains, stretched for a mile.

Motel 8. It was the only place for someone *not from 'round here* to crash for the night. There were only four rooms and as far as Zach knew, they'd never been occupied all at once. His truck crackled over loose stone. Jasper jumped to the dashboard and flicked her ears around.

The motel wasn't anything to write home about. Generally, Edenburg was the home people were writing to. It still could use a coat of paint around the gutters but it stood. Zach tapped the window at the front desk and waited.

Mrs. Amelia shuffled out of the back, smacking a piece of gum like she was still sixteen. She approached the dusty window and blew a bubble. "Lo there, son. Where are you headed?"

Zach smiled a little. He honestly thought she'd be gone. "Right here, Mrs. A. Thought I'd retrace some old ground."

At the first sound of his voice, Mrs. Amelia squinted at the glass like she could shoot lasers. "Zachariah?"

"Yes'm."

"Well, I'll be." She shuffled back away from the glass. It took a few seconds but she popped the side door open and stepped into the sunlight. She

held onto the doorknob. “Zachariah Benjamin Andrews, I never. You’re quite a sight.”

“It’s great to see you,” Zach agreed. “I can’t believe you’re still running this place.”

“Keeps me from sleeping in. It’s not good for you.” She waved him closer, “What are you—no, it’s Mason, isn’t it?”

“I got a call. His mother died?”

“Bless her. Owen’s doing his best to help. Mason didn’t tell us you were coming.”

And that was the crux of it really. He hadn’t even spoken to the man for nearly as long as he’d been gone. “He doesn’t know.”

“Foolish. And you think you’re sleeping here. Where’s your head? Back at university?” She pried the keys from his hand with more strength than he expected and made for the driver side door with deliberate steps.

“Wait, Mrs. A, I can’t just show up on his doorstep and expect he’ll put me up.”

“Course not.” She got the door open without appearing to need any help at all. “That’d be rude. You’re coming with me, boy.” She slammed the door closed, greeted his cat like they’d known each other for years, and started his truck. “You riding with me or walkin’ home?”

Zach started for his own passenger door. “Going where?” he muttered.

Jasper jumped to his lap. Mrs. A threw rocks around the parking lot and handled his stick shift like a pro. Zach couldn’t remember if she’d ever owned a car.

“You did all right at that big school, didn’t you?”

“Yes’m. Degreed in business and another in accounting later on.”

“And why aren’t you coming back with a lady on your arm?”

Zach sucked his teeth. Not a lot seemed to have changed out here. Had people’s opinions? “I’m not into women, Mrs. A.”

She clucked. “That’s right, I forgot. Why haven’t you got a man, then?”

“I haven’t managed to catch the right one.” Wasn’t that the understatement of his life?

Mrs. Amelia pulled neatly into her driveway and tossed the keys back to Zach. “Help me outta this bus you call a truck.”

It really wasn’t that big, but next to the oldest woman in town it was downright massive. Zach offered his extended arm to Jasper, who walked up to his shoulders. He helped Mrs. Amelia down to the ground. “I really didn’t want to impose on—”

“Stop it. You can’t stay at the motel. There’s no one there to check you in.” She propped the screen door open with a potted fern. “Now pull out some of those bags and take the blue room. I’ll get you some sheets.”

Zach’s phone buzzed. He saw a text from Baliey.

Condo sale is final. Just traded paperwork. You’ll see the deposit when the bank clears it in about a week.

Jasper jumped to the ground and trotted through Mrs. Amelia’s open front door. That was that, he supposed. He didn’t have a home to go back to. No turning around, now. Zach really hoped he wouldn’t need the bridge he’d just burned.

He texted Baliey.

Thanks, just reached town. Here goes nothin’.

Zach’s truck was packed with less than he had expected to take. He left his library of hardbacks to Baliey and sold just about everything else with the condo. He had almost two weeks’ worth of clothes, a few mementoes, and Jasper’s things. It all fit into two bags and a crate. The sum total of his life for the past twenty years.

He carted his things into the blue room as directed. A fresh set of sheets was folded on the corner chair. He found Jasper inspecting every corner of the kitchen while Amelia prepared something on the stove. “I’ll have supper up in a minute. You moved in?”

“Well enough.” Zach set up Jasper’s litter pan next to the trash and wrangled her off the dining room table. He dropped her in the pan. She kicked litter off her paws and went back to inspecting kitchen corners.

“She looks like a little leopard.”

“Her name is Jasper. She’ll answer to it if you don’t try it too often. Very smart.”

“How did you get her?”

“She found me at a cafe corner. She stole half my tuna sandwich. I gave her the rest.”

“You couldn’t find anyone to take her while you visited?”

“I wasn’t sure how long I’d be out here.”

Amelia hummed and stirred her skillet.

Zach took a seat at the table. Jasper jumped up on the table and tasted the decorative palm frond in the center vase. She rolled her orange eyes at Zach. “It’s not supposed to taste good. It’s fake.” Jasper abandoned the table. Zach asked Amelia, “Where is Mason living, now?”

“Same property. He’s done a lot of good work with it.”

“I wanted to drive by and see him tonight.”

“You can. He might be out hunting, though. He is most afternoons. Here, eat up.”

Zach racked his brain over dinner for what he should say, but after three days he still had nothing. What does one say to a man he hasn’t seen in twenty years? A man he still loved more than life beyond this small town?

It was dusk by the time Zach drove past the familiar two and a half acres Mason grew up on. Nothing seemed different. The house still sat, squat, on the edge of the road, was still that strange not-green shade Mason’s mother liked. One of the pines was missing along the border, barely even a divot in the land to indicate one had been there.

The house lights were dark. Zach knocked on the door anyway. The only answer he got was the distant cry of a hawk. He headed back to Amelia’s a bit frustrated. He still didn’t know what to say, and now he had another night to lose sleep over it.

Back at Mrs. Amelia's, he found Jasper curled up in her lap, listening while she read her book aloud. The cat had no interest in heading to bed with him so he settled down alone. This wasn't the greatest start, but he at least had a roof overhead. That was a sudden concern he wasn't used to. Until now, this had all seemed like a dramatic but well-intentioned life choice. Mason would be surprised to see him, welcome him in for drinks, maybe laugh about how they'd fooled around at The Ridge. Then... what? Settle down for happily ever after.

Zach grabbed his phone from the nightstand and texted Baliey.

This may have been a bad idea.

What happened?

Nothing, yet. I haven't seen him.

This is why you made me sell the condo. No turning back.

That's what I'm worried about. How desperate can I get?

Shut up. You haven't even talked to him, yet.

But what if he doesn't want to see me?

Can you live with yourself if you never try?

...

You wouldn't have made it out this far if you weren't serious about him, Zach. It's just jitters. Get some sleep. Text me when you talk to him.

That was what he really needed. A good kick in the ass. He smiled at the phone.

Thanks, B.

Hey, what are best friends for? Night.

Night.

Zach knocked on Mason's front door. Had it always been so quiet here? He heard crickets and the wind through grasses. Mason's mother's flowerbeds had gone to seed. Random spots of color were scattered in the yard. There was no

answer at the door. He heard a small falcon chitter in the distance. Songbirds paused.

Zach felt like his life was on pause. Where was Mason? Hunting again? Zach hadn't ever seen the appeal, being more drawn to people than wildlife; technology rather than nature.

When the songbirds sprang back into chorus, Zach turned away from the door. He'd try again after lunch.

He drove through the middle of town and parked at the market. He had no direction, no plan B. He thought he'd at least have seen Mason by now. He didn't know how to fill a day in a small town, anymore.

He could at least fill Mrs. Amelia's refrigerator.

Zach was picking over the bell peppers when someone recognized him. He selected a red one and heard, "Zach? Z-man? For real?"

Owen. Zach smiled at the bell pepper and relished his memory—stick-in-the-mud Owen always following the rules, always getting sucked into Zach and Mason's chaos despite himself, utter loyalty even when they were all caught. "Do you remember that afternoon when we ransacked Howard's fresh hay bales and planted potatoes in the middle of them?"

"He never lets me forget."

Zach put the pepper in his basket and turned. He was a cop now, tanned and with a thumb in his belt and a smirk on his lips. Military buzz cut. Ring on his finger. Zach grinned. "I still laugh when I order a baked potato."

Owen's smirk folded into a truly happy smile. "It's been a long time, Z-man." He extended his hand.

Zach took it, pulled him closer for a proper hug. "Don't I know it?" He pressed his thumb against the ring on Owen's finger. "You finally ask Jenny?"

A flash of sadness crossed Owen's eyes. He shook his head. "She went to school on the west coast. Writes every now and then."

"Then who's the lucky girl?"

"Stacy Porter. We have a girl, Kelly."

"No shit?" Zach squeezed Owen's shoulder. "Congrats! I'm sorry I missed it."

“What have you been up to?”

Zach shrugged and continued shopping. “Graduated up in Philly. Started a little business. It’s going well—”

“What do you do?”

“Event planning. Concerts, triathlons, the kind of stuff that needs a big venue and a lot of organized people.”

“Doesn’t sound small at all.”

“Just me and Baliey.” Now just Baliey but Zach didn’t feel like advertising that too widely yet. “Not surprised where you ended up, though.” Zach nodded at Owen’s uniform.

“Really? I always thought I’d be a lawyer or something...” Owen laughed at himself.

“And leave this place? Not on your life. You practically had roots here before we graduated high school.”

“You couldn’t wait to get out.”

“It was a good move for me.” Zach piled his groceries at the checkout.

“But you’re back? How long?”

“I don’t know yet. I heard about Mason. Wanted to check in on him.”

“He hasn’t talked much. Spends all his time out hunting. Maybe you’ll get through to him, though. You were closer than I was...”

Owen had no idea how much he understated the situation. Zach was more than closer, he’d never gotten his heart back.

The clerk rang up his groceries. “That’ll be a hundred even.”

Zach balked, a hundred for a few veggies and a chicken. “What...?”

Owen scowled. “Peter, that’s robbery. I’m standing right here.”

Peter Bench. Zach hadn’t recognized him. An additional hundred and fifty pounds could do that to a person. He had glasses now and a missing eyetooth. He sucked on a lollypop.

Peter turned the register sign and tapped it. “Says a hundred, Owen. Don’t know what you want me to do about it.”

“You never did like Zach.”

Zach swiped his credit card. “I’m not here to cause any trouble.” He’d have to cut Mrs. Amelia a check instead if his money was going to go any distance.

Peter sucked his lollypop. “I remember the kind of trouble you dragged the boys around here into up on The Ridge. Some people might still have a grudge about that.”

“Some people not as forgiving as you.”

“That’s right.”

Zach bagged his own groceries. “Have a good one, Peter.”

“Later.”

Owen scowled as they walked out, “I’ll talk to him—”

“Don’t get riled up. It was bound to happen at some point.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s right.”

“No, but I’m not here to make a scene, dude. Just want to say hi to some old friends. See if there’s anything I can do for Mason.” Lay his heart down at his feet and pray it doesn’t get trampled on.

“You should come over for breakfast tomorrow morning. I head out at seven. You can meet the family.”

Zach grunted. “Sally Porter. She’s Keshel’s daughter. The butcher?” Zach dropped the groceries in the passenger seat through the open window. “Didn’t she tag along with us to the carnival?” He snapped his fingers, “That’s right. I caught you two making out in the back during the elephant show.”

Owen crossed his arms. “We were sharing a churro.”

“Sure.” Zach laughed. “Yeah, I’ll come by tomorrow. Six-ish?”

“Sounds good.” They shook hands. “Good to see you, Z-man.”

“You, too, Owen. Say hi to Sally for me.” Zach laughed to himself and waved as Owen drove out of the parking lot, blipping the siren twice.

Zach walked around his truck and saw Mason leaning into the backseat of a shiny four-door Jeep. He was exactly the same. And so different. Brown hair spiked up, tan, perfectly sure of every movement. Mason smiled at something,

he still had that dimple on the right. A small terrier jumped at the window. Mason stepped out of the Jeep to let the dog out. Two. He retrieved a bag and turned toward the grocer.

He was taller. Filled out in a way a man used to hard outdoor labor is. Zach's mouth went dry. He was beautiful. Everything and more than he remembered. He didn't remember walking, didn't remember stepping in Mason's path. But when Mason's dark blue eyes flicked up to meet his, the way they went wide—Zach remembered how they faded to grey when Mason was aroused, how he never closed his eyes when they were so close together.

“Zach?” Just a whisper.

“Mason.”

“Holy shit.” Mason blinked. Looked him up and down. Took a step back. “Oh my god, it *is* you. Holy shit. What are you doing here? Are you in town long? Where are you staying? Why didn't you call me?” The two terriers picked up his excitement and barked. They danced around Zach's feet. Mason looked down. “Gossip. Redd. Heel.” The older obeyed. The younger yapped and needed a nudge from Mason's boot.

“Drove out here as soon as I heard, man. I'm sorry.” Zach put a hand on Mason's wide shoulder and squeezed it. “I'm here for anything you need, just say the word.”

“We haven't talked in *years*.” Mason laughed. “Where do I start?”

“I'm staying at Mrs. Amelia's for now. Why don't you come by?”

Mason shook his head, “She's allergic to the dogs. Let me offload this pheasant with Keshel. Meet you at my place?”

“Done.”

“Good...” But Mason didn't move toward the grocer. “Dude, it is *good* to see you.”

Some of the tension holding Zach's heart captive released. “You too.” They grinned at each other. Just like before. Like nothing had come between them.

Like Zach had never left.

It took him longer than he thought to drop the groceries at Mrs. Amelia's and drive back out to Mason's. By the time he arrived Mason was pointing his little terriers into the back of the Jeep. Zach parked the truck. "Headed somewhere?"

"Yeah, hop in! I've packed some beer."

"Sounds good." Zach climbed into the Jeep and was immediately greeted by two wet noses. The older, more white than her original tan, sniffed at him from the back seat. The younger, a mix of bronzes, barked.

"Redd, shut up." Mason sighed and climbed in. "The other one's Gossip. They flush for me. Redd's still learning."

"Nice." Zach turned his attention forward. The Jeep was clean—not shiny like it was brand new, but well cared for. Mason turned them onto the road out of town. Toward The Ridge. "I didn't think you'd get into hunting," Zach said. "I never really got it, myself."

Mason smiled. "It pays. Nothing big like deer, but the farms around here need mice or gopher control. Sometimes rabbits. I haven't needed to buy meat at the market except fish or beef."

"That's neat. Amelia said you go out every night?"

"Most afternoons and most mornings. I have a rotation around town." Mason shifted his elbow up against Zach. He blocked Redd from making it up to the front. "Get back on the seat. Stay." Redd reluctantly settled down next to Gossip. "When did you get in?"

"Last night. Pulled up to the Motel 8 around seven."

"You should have called, you know I've got room."

"It's been a long time, Mason." *You might have moved on.* "And running down here was sudden, I didn't want to just show up on your doorstep. Amelia has me covered." Zach smiled to the side. "Besides, this way you can kick me out when you get tired of me."

"Very likely," Mason agreed.

"So what's been going on for... ever?"

"Dude. Everything. Did you know Owen married Sally Porter?"

“I saw him today. We’re supposed to do breakfast tomorrow. What a trip.”

“Remember catching them at the carnival?”

“He insists they were eating a churro.”

“Yeah, and I’m the Easter Bunny.” Mason pulled off the road. His Jeep handled the dirt and divots far more smoothly than the old pickup Zach had back in the day. There was a low wooden fence along the drop off that hadn’t been there twenty years ago. Mason parked under the pine. That pine had seen a lot of things.

Mason popped his door open and let the dogs out. They sniffed around the car, marked the pine, and tangled around Zach’s feet until they were satisfied with chin scratches.

“Here...” Mason sat on the wooden log of the fence and leaned up against the front of his Jeep. He held out a beer. “Tell me about you. Graduated?”

“Thanks. Yeah, in business. Met Baliey while we were going through school and started a company with her in senior year. Figured out really quick that we needed an accountant, so I stayed at school and got a second degree. Seemed easier than finding someone else.”

“What do you do?”

“Event planning. Get venues sorted for concerts and triathlons, organize volunteers, organize supplies and catering. Security.”

“Sounds big.”

“We re-use a lot of our vendors so it goes pretty smoothly, now. A lot of email and phone calls, though.” Zach stretched his feet out. His thigh pressed against Mason’s. “It’s fun. Great to see it all come together on the big day. Baliey’s good at handling the little fires that crop up at the last minute.”

“She sounds great.”

“Yeah, she needs to find a man and get laid, though. Sometimes she stresses.”

Mason laughed.

“You find anyone?”

“Naw.” Mason took a drink and shifted his leg away from Zach’s. “No, it’s just me, the dogs, and the birds. I like it, though. Peaceful. Owen’s got enough crazy with his wife and kid. I don’t need any of that.”

Zach hid his frown with a swig of beer. A wife and kids had never been on either of their plates. “Yeah, I hear he’s got a daughter?”

“And a handful. Didn’t get any of Owen’s follow-the-rules genes.”

“You’re not turning into an old man on me, are you?” Zach felt the mood turn serious in a heartbeat.

Mason sighed. “Maybe I am,” He said. “Mom and Dad are both gone, now. There isn’t a whole lot of young left in me.” Mason sat forward and put his elbows on his knees. He dangled the beer. “She stroked two weeks ago. We brought her to the hospital but it was downhill fast. She passed in her sleep. Owen and I were there. The heart monitor woke me up. Her hand was still warm.” Mason stared out over the edge of the drop off, over the small stretch of town in the valley. “I remember thinking the monitor had to be wrong. Someone can’t be dead if they’re still warm.”

Zach grabbed Mason’s shoulder and squeezed. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there, too.”

“Better you weren’t, probably. It... I got ugly for a few days. Spent a lot of time locked in her room. The past week has been better.” Mason sighed and sat back against the Jeep.

Zach moved his hand from shoulder to knee. Pulled Mason’s thigh back against his. “Still. I’m here now, so anything you need me to take care of...”

“Cremation is day after tomorrow. I probably shouldn’t go to that alone.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Owen is executor of her will, so he’s taking care of a lot of details for me.”

“Good. He’ll make sure it’s done right.” Zach’s phone beeped. Text message. He ignored it.

But Mason didn’t have anything else to say and after a minute Zach was unwilling to break the silence. They sat for a few more heartbeats, finishing

their beer. Mason moved away first. He pointed the dogs back into the Jeep. Zach climbed into the car and they rode home in somewhat comfortable silence. Zach tried not to feel discouraged by Mason's lack of response to his hands. The man was grieving, for goodness sake.

Still. That comment about not wanting a wife and kids stuck with him. Of the three of them, Owen was the only straight one. Last Zach checked, anyway. But Mason hadn't been able to come out with Zach after high school. What had happened in the past twenty years? Was the Mason he knew still here?

Zach kept his silence and tried to find encouragement in the fact that Mason wasn't seeing anyone. Male or female. There wasn't a big selection to choose from out here. The wife and kids line was probably just the familiar excuse he offered to the gossip mill that was a small town.

"Hey, I'm glad you're here, Zach. Thanks," Mason said as he pulled up to his house. "Call me next time, you idiot. I'll put you up."

Zach smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I'll be free around noon, lunch at Joe's? You get the beer."

"Deal." Zach laughed and it put his worries at ease. He gave each of the dogs a chin scratch and waved.

Zach checked his phone. The text was from Baliey.

Landed a new project this afternoon. Obstacle course/run. Have a drink with me!

Attached was a photo of a shot glass full of amber. He smiled and sent her a photo of his empty beer bottle.

He heard Jasper's irritated meow before he ever got the door open. Amelia's voice snapped right back, "Don't you get fussy with me, little lady. You eat your dinner first or you won't see a lick of this."

Zach stepped inside and found Amelia holding a sandwich high overhead. Jasper stood on the dining table, dancing on back legs. "Meaaaaaow."

Amelia scowled, "I don't really care either way. It's dinner or nothing."

“What is going on in here?”

“She tried to get a jump on my tuna sandwich.”

“Mrrerrrow.” Jasper sat and licked one paw, feigning disinterest.

“Oh, I’m not falling for that one. Now get going.” Amelia pointed at the fresh pile of food in Jasper’s bowl.

Zach grinned, “She won’t give up, you may as well give her some.”

“Not on your life. She lives in this house, she plays by my rules. No dessert before dinner.”

Zach picked Jasper up off the table and she hung like dead weight in his hands, passively protesting the manhandling. He dropped her in front of the food dish. She complained loudly.

“AH!” Amelia warned. She pointed a stern finger at the cat.

Jasper flattened her ears. She stuck one paw in the bowl, worming wet food between her toes. She slapped it into her water dish, splashing everywhere. With obvious discontent, she licked the meal from the webbing of her paw, audibly protesting each bite.

Zach couldn’t stifle his chuckles. “It’s like you fed her dog food or something.”

“Hardly. Picked up a fancy canned food on my way home today. See if I ever treat her again.” Amelia took a bite of her tuna sandwich, maintaining the standoff in her own kitchen.

“Well don’t let her rile you up. Just lock her in my room.”

“I can handle one cat, Zachariah. Did you meet up with Mason?”

“Yeah, we had a good chat. Saw Owen, too. I’ll be up early to do breakfast with the family.”

“That’s good. Say hello to Sally for me.”

“Mrrrrrrr.”

Amelia pointed. “I’m on to you, Cat.”

Six AM sharp, Zach knocked on Owen's door. A young lady around seventeen answered, way too cheerful for such an early hour. "Hi! You're Zach?" She stuck out her hand. "Kelly."

He shook it, "That's right. Nice to meet you."

"Ditto. Breakfast is this way." Her ponytail bobbed as she turned. "DAAAAAD! Zach is here!"

A woman snapped, "Don't yell!"

"You're yelling," Kelly observed.

Zach followed Kelly into the kitchen and found Sally at the stove rolling her eyes to the roof. "God, give me patience."

From the back of the house, Owen's voice popped out of a room. "Take a seat, Z-man. Be right with you."

"Dad's yelling," Kelly said.

"Just set the table," Sally sighed. "Hello, Zach." She slid another pancake onto an already large pile. "It's been a long time."

"Morning, Sally. How are things with you?" Zach saw Kelly balancing dishes and beckoned to her. She shoved a handful of plates at him.

"Oh you know, the days go by." She poured a new pancake. "I've got plenty to keep me busy."

Zach circled the small wooden table. Kelly followed him with napkins and silverware. "That's good. Nice place you have here."

"I'll give you a tour after we eat, there's a nice garden in the b—KELLY! You don't make a guest set the damn table, have you lost—"

"Whoa, Sally. It's okay, I volunteered. I promise." Zach held up his hands to accept the plate of flapjacks before they ended up on a wall or the floor. "You've a garden?" He tried to deflect.

Kelly scooted out of her mother's line-of-sight to fetch syrup and other details.

Sally hurrumped, but let it go. "Yes, in the back on the south hill. There's a nice draining slope and Mason keeps the worst of the rabbits out."

Owen stepped in wearing a pair of boxers as he dried his hair. “Oooh, pancakes.”

“Honestly, Owen. You couldn’t get dressed for company?”

“Company? Zach?” He forked a stack of pancakes onto Kelly’s plate and went around the table. “We and Mason compared wieners in second grade. This is downright modest.”

Zach was proud of himself for not smiling. He didn’t think it would go over well.

Kelly coughed and looked interested in her milk.

Sally rolled her eyes and Owen smiled at Zach. “Come on, sit down, honey. Breakfast is no good if you don’t join us.”

Sally sat and made a show of laying her napkin on her lap. “So, Zach,” she said. “I hear you own a business.”

Zach regaled them with a tale of a concert gone wrong to get some smiles around the circle. Owen was just like he remembered, quick to critique but quick to laugh. Kelly was easy to entertain. Sally was harder to crack; she persisted in smiling mildly, an expression Zach suspected was her polite-but-I’m-not-interested face.

Owen’s watch beeped as they were polishing off the last flapjack. “Mmm. Time to go.” He tossed back his milk and gave Zach a high five over the table. “Lemme get dressed, I’ll walk you out.”

Sally looked up at Kelly. “You, too.”

Kelly sighed but dragged herself away from the table.

“How long are you in town, Zach?” Sally started picking up plates and turned on the water in the sink.

Zach was quick to help her bus the table. “I don’t know. The whole trip was a little sudden when I heard about Mason’s mom. We’ll see what he needs.”

“Well I think that’s very generous of you. It sounds like you’ve outgrown that tendency to cause a ruckus.”

“We were boys, Sally. Boys make messes,” Zach said, a little guarded.

“I know,” she sighed. “It’s just you would drag them up there to The Ridge and put crazy thoughts in their heads. Get folks in trouble.”

Zach’s goodwill died. “Folks like Mason.”

Sally passed her sponge over a dish. “You leave that man to his business.”

Zach frowned and crossed his arms. “Would you rather I go after the fairer sex? Women?”

“Well it would certainly be more proper,” Sally agreed primly. She settled the dish in the dryer and picked a new one.

“Women like your daughter.”

She fired her stare at him in a flash. “You leave my daughter alone.”

Zach put up his hands. That was a button he shouldn’t have pressed. He backed out of the kitchen.

Owen returned. “What’s this about now?” His smiles were gone.

“I’m sorry,” Zach said. “I didn’t come here for an argument.” But he wasn’t going to stand here and listen to this either. He made for the door.

From the kitchen Zach heard, “Sally? What’s going on?”

“That man better shape up before he gets what’s coming to him.”

“And what *exactly* is coming to him? Zach! Just a second!”

It was probably cowardly but Zach wasn’t inclined to stay involved. He closed the door firmly behind him and walked out on the road toward town. Amelia’s place wasn’t far from Owen’s and now that his blood was up Zach was glad he’d walked. The air was still chilled. Owen didn’t run after him—he had work. The police cruiser rumbled by a few moments later, and Owen flashed his lights but didn’t stop. Acknowledgement and apology. Zach waved him down the road. They’d talk later.

It took the entire hour walk into town, but Zach cooled by the time he strode past the high school. He shouldn’t have riled Sally like that. There were better ways to handle her opinions than push buttons. Sometimes it just felt better to start an argument, though.

He heard Kelly call his name and looked up. She waved at him from the high school yard and jogged to the low shrub border. Zach didn't see Sally anywhere.

"Hey," he said, gut knotted with sudden guilt. Kelly had probably heard their entire exchange. He really was a dick.

"You know," Kelly said, "she's just trying to look out for people she cares for."

"She's wrong." Zack clenched his jaw. Maybe he wasn't as cool as he thought.

"She may be wrong, but she's still my mom. If you could not bait her, that'd be great." Kelly crossed her arms. Her expression was something between truly annoyed and still trying to be friendly about it.

Zach gave himself a mental kick. "You're right. And I'm sorry." He met her eyes sincerely. "I handled the whole thing poorly."

Kelly uncrossed her arms. "Don't stress it too much. I argue with her all the time." She smiled a little and shrugged at him. "Just remember not *everyone* around here thinks you're awful. You're helping Mason and I think that's cool. He's a good friend of Dad's. I like him."

"I like him, too. Us three go way back."

"Do you like-like him?"

Zach pulled his brows together, "How is that different fr..." She was smiling at him, a full grin. He clicked his tongue. "Don't you have a class to be in?"

"Not until the bell." The bell rang. She muttered, "Dammit." A girl called her name and Kelly waved behind her. "You'll be in town later?"

"Probably."

"Cool, we should hang out!"

"Don't let your mother catch you." Zack smiled. "Get."

She ran. "Bye!"

Zach held the door for Mason as they walked out the back of Joe's, guiding him with a hand on his back. Mason didn't react.

He'd been not reacting the same damn way for the last three hours they chatted at the table. A touch of fingers: Mason would pick up his drink. Foot against foot under the table: Mason just twitched away. At first, Zach didn't want to pry too hard but Mason didn't even glance at him with that knowing slant to his eyes. Just carried on the conversation as if nothing at all was happening.

More than infuriating, it was downright confusing. Why wouldn't he even acknowledge it?

"So you had a good breakfast with Owen, then?" Mason asked.

"Yeah, up until I screwed up with Sally." Joe's back parking lot was deserted, Mason's Jeep the only spot of color.

"What do you mean?"

"I argued with her about being gay." Zach was far more interested in the way Mason's expression shut down than detailing the story. "I left shortly afterward."

"I caught a few gophers this morning while hunting. Redd is getting better at flushing."

Zach scowled. Something was up. A total evasion was not what he expected at all. Zach leaned on the Jeep's driver door and pulled Mason around by the shoulder. "What's going on?"

Mason's back hit the Jeep. "What?"

Zach kissed him and lost his breath. For a stunning second it was exactly how it should have been—sparking hot between them, an indrawn breath of surprise, wide lips against his—then Mason shoved him back. "Stop. I'm not like that."

Zach caught himself in two steps. "Not like—are you kidding me?"

"I'm not going to argue about it." Mason looked serious.

Zach goggled at him. "What, have these people talked you out of being gay? Talked you into liking women?"

"I like women just fine."

That sounded so defensive, Zach choked on a laugh. “Fucked any lately?”

Mason crossed his arms. “More than you.”

“No kidding, I’m not hiding.” Zach had the sudden, deep urge to erase all signs of another body against Mason’s.

“You don’t know—”

“What it’s like?” Zach scowled, “Don’t give me that shit, Mason. I grew up with you here. I know exactly what it’s like.”

“You left me here.” Mason pointed his finger into Zach’s chest and swung it out. “You ran away to Philly. I was left to deal with it alone.”

“You were supposed to come with me.” Zach couldn’t decide between fury and pleading.

“Sure, and leave Mom alone. What was I going to do out there? Push papers? Accounting for your little enterprise?”

That hurt. Zack tipped to anger. “You could do whatever you want. Be yourself.”

“I am myself.”

“Bullshit.” Zach pushed past Mason’s wandering arm and stilled his head with both hands. He pressed their lips together. Chests. Bellies, groins, knees together, their feet tangled. Zach breathed the wild scent of his old friend and fell in love again. He let their kiss part gently. Mason’s chest heaved against Zach’s. “You want me. I can feel it.”

Mason lifted his chin. “What my dick likes and what my heart wants are not the same.” He pushed Zach clear of the Jeep’s driver door. “I need to go hunt Helena.”

Zach was certain the drop in his gut was his heart. “Who’s Helena?”

“See... You can’t come back here after twenty years and expect everything to be like it was. This town to be like it was. You don’t know me anymore, Zach.” Mason started the Jeep. He didn’t wave goodbye.

Zach watched him go, wondering what on earth he was supposed to do now.

This was such a bad idea.

He texted Baliey. Eat At Joe's back parking lot remained empty except for Zach. He sat on one of the parking curbs with his head in his hands. Somewhere along the way he'd convinced himself that Mason was just waiting here for him. Waiting for the love of his life to come galloping back in his off-white truck and sweep him off like a fairy tale. How had he talked himself into this?

He hadn't even fucking called the guy in twenty years. No "happy birthday", no "how's it going", nothing! He was a first-class moron.

His phone buzzed:

On location, can't call you. Tell me everything.

So, he did. Writing it out line by line, he gave Baliey a novel of his screw-ups from day one, landing on (he checked the time) an hour ago, the kiss-and-run that sealed it all up.

I don't know what to do. He's right, I don't know who he is anymore.

Baliey texted,

Maybe it's time to stop trying to find what you left there.

I sold my condo for this. I was so sure... I can't just walk away.

Zach, you're dense. It's been so long since you've interacted. You're a different person. He's a different person. You don't know how to be with each other anymore.

So, I should put on my big boy panties and get over it.

He guessed she was right. It didn't make it hurt any less.

Moron. You need to woo him back.

He blinked at the phone.

I'm sorry, did you say woo him?

Yes. Woo. Seduce, if you prefer. Otherwise, re-engage as a NEW couple. Don't rely on what you remember. Learn who he's become.

No, hold on. I'm still stuck on woo. We're talking medieval thou and hither right? Chivalry?

:P Yes, Zach. Prove to me that chivalry is not dead. You'll get your man.

He laughed, a single, huffed, sound. Baliey never let him down.

Thanks, B.

Anytime.

Zach walked the hour and a half back to Amelia and Jasper lighter than the morning had brought him into town. And in the end, that was something to be thankful for.

Zach sat in his truck the next morning sucking his teeth as he watched folks shop at the grocery. Amelia had asked him to pick up a chicken for the Crock-pot, so here he was. Once parked, he'd remembered how much a chicken cost for a gay man in a straight grocery. He wasn't really thrilled with dropping another buck on a damn chicken. It wasn't *that* good.

Mason exited the grocery, game bag in hand still full. Gossip trailed at his heel. He didn't look happy.

Zach jumped out of the truck, "Maso—"

"Not now." Mason stiff-armed Zach in the chest and kept going. Striding toward the Jeep.

Zach knew he'd screwed up, but this was different. "What's wrong?"

"Keshel won't take my rabbits." Mason yanked the back door open and snapped his terrier into the seat. She went without a fuss.

"That's silly, I'll go talk to—"

"No, you've been enough help *already*," Mason sneered.

That didn't sound good at all. "I need to throw something into Amelia's Crock-pot. How much for both?"

Mason turned to him. His face was ugly. "Normally? Twenty a pop. For you? Thirty."

Zach winced. He deserved that. Still, sixty bucks was better than a hundred. He counted the bills without complaint and handed them over. Mason jerked the game bag at him and heaved his driver's side door open with more force than necessary.

“Is there any shot or something I need to clean out?”

“No.” He shoved the Jeep in gear and leaned out the window to back up.

“Well, what'd you hunt it with, an arrow?”

“My hawk.” Mason gunned the truck, sending rock everywhere.

Zach stood with the game bag, left in the parking lot for a second time in as many days. “Your hawk?” he asked quietly, looking at the bag. “Is that code or something?”

“Hey, Amelia...” Zach opened the screen door, still reflecting on the contents of the game bag. “Do you know anything abo—” He stopped in the entry. Amelia stood on her living room coffee table with the bristle end of a broom in one hand and a sandwich in the other. She was defending against Jasper who prowled like a lion around the table. Magazines and coasters littered the floor. “Amelia, just give her some tuna. She'll let you have the rest of the sandwich.”

“Do you feed the dogs before yourself?”

“Generally, yes. Isn't there something in the Bible about serving those less fortunate first?”

Amelia shuffled around the table in a small circle. “The Lord and I have an understanding—oh no you don't.”

Jasper got a paw on the end of the broom and yanked it down to the floor. Amelia let it drop. She was an old woman, not a javelin thrower. Jasper jumped to the table. Amelia hobbled down off the furniture and made for the kitchen. Jasper crouched.

“Um.” Zach pointed.

Jasper leapt. She caught her claws in Amelia's blouse and scrambled up to her hunched shoulders. “No, Cat! BAD CAT!” Amelia yelled. She held her sandwich out as far as she could. “Zach! Do something!”

“Give her the sandwich, Mrs. A.”

“It’s my sandwich!” Amelia stood in the hall with her hands out before her, Jasper sitting on her shoulder.

The cat’s tail twitched gently over her arm. “Mrrow?”

“What is she doing?”

“She’s waiting.” Zach smiled.

“For what?”

“Well you can try to eat, but she can reach now, so you’ll just be giving her what she wants.”

“No!”

“Or you can try and put it down, at which point she’ll jump down and get some anyway.”

Amelia made an annoyed face. “You’ve probably ruined my blouse, Cat. I’ll have you know it’s older than you are.”

“I’ll take you shopping for a new one,” Zach said. He left the game bag in the kitchen sink. “I bought two rabbits off of Mason for the pot.”

Amelia stomped into the kitchen. She slapped the tuna sandwich down on her plate. “There. Fine. Happy?”

Jasper jumped to the table and sniffed around the corners of the sandwich. She flipped the top bread over with her nose and picked over the contents. She selected a single chunk of tuna, dragged it off the sandwich, and settled in for her meal.

“Honestly,” Amelia sighed. She disappeared into her room for a moment and returned wearing a new blouse. She held the assaulted one up for inspection. “Your feline has no manners whatsoever.”

Jasper finished her single tuna selection, assessed the remainder of the sandwich, and found nothing more that interested her. She hopped down to the floor and pawed at her water.

“Are you serious, Cat? You’re not even going to eat it?” Amelia threw the old shirt in the trash. She turned on Zach. “I was going to eat that sandwich.”

“Oh, are you done? I can finish it.” Zach grinned. He ducked Amelia’s cooking spoon. It clattered against the cabinets. “Is that a yes?”

“Get out of my kitchen!”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

When Zach pulled up to the funeral director’s office, Mason’s Jeep was already there. He almost forgot the daisies on his way in. Owen’s cop car pulled in beside him when he turned back to fetch them.

Denied former relationship in one hand, awkward fight with the wife of a friend on the other. Today was shaping up to be an excellent one.

Owen stepped out of the car and looked as unready for this as Zach felt. Zach jumped before the silence could get weird. “I’m sorry, dude. I was out of line.”

Owen held up a hand, “Hold on. I’m not sure that’s true. I haven’t had a chance to talk to Sally yet—”

“Doesn’t matter.” Zach said. “I was a guest in her home and I knew I was pushing buttons before I went there. So, I’m sorry.”

Owen smiled a bit. “Feel better? Got it off your chest?”

“Heh. Yeah, a little bit.”

“I’ll talk to Sally when I get home today and figure out what was going on in her head. I don’t think there will be any problems.”

“Still, let her know? Kelly, too. I wasn’t thinking.”

Owen frowned at that. “Her, I’ll sit down separately.”

“She already gave me a talking to at school.” Zach smirked. “She’s got a good head on her shoulders.”

“Did she now?” Owen smiled again. “She didn’t get it from me.”

“Yeah, right.” Zach held the office door open and nodded at the funeral director.

Mason threw a “Hey,” over his shoulder. He was understandably glum.

The funeral director was a balding man in his late seventies. “We’re just about done here. Just need paperwork signed with Owen as executor.”

Zach took a wall seat with his flowers while the three reviewed cremation procedure and interpreted the details of the will. With everything in order, they signed.

The director accepted Mason's check. "You're welcome to add something to the fire if you like. A photo or some memento?"

Mason's frown took on a deeper crease. "I don't have... my watch, maybe? She gave it to me—"

The funeral director shook his head. "Sorry. It has to be organic or paper, something that won't melt up in the oven."

Zach leaned forward. "I have daisies?"

Mason turned to face him, expression a complex mix of grief, annoyance, relief, and discomfort. "Why?"

"They were her favorite." Zach shrugged. "I thought I'd put them wherever she's going to be... interred?" He flicked his eyes to the funeral director, was that the right word?

Mason nodded, "They're okay?"

"Yes. We can do that."

Zach handed them over. Mason held the bundle for a second, touching the petals and breathing their light fragrance. Owen busied himself with one of the pens until the moment passed.

Mason held the flowers out to the funeral director. "Can I see her... before...?"

"I'm sorry, son."

"But I just—"

Zach interrupted. "Hey, Mason. Remember that summer when it was so hot we couldn't even walk out to the lake?"

Owen caught on. "Yeah, we just lay out on your front yard like we were going to die even though the bugs were all over your mom's wildflowers."

"She ambushed us with super soakers," Zach reflected. "And kept the biggest one for herself."

Owen smiled down at the pen. "So we all ganged up on her."

Mason stared back at them, exhausted, upset. "We called a truce over the ice cream truck from Joe's," he said quietly.

"That's right." Owen nodded.

Zach addressed the funeral director. "If we're done here, sir?"

"Yes. There's nothing else we need to cover. Owen, I'll contact you regarding funeral arrangements if I may?"

"Please."

Zach stood, "Come on. Let's get us some ice cream." He held the door. Mason shuffled out. Owen followed him.

"Hey, Z-man. You're helping out with the sale tomorrow, right? I could use a hand with the heavy stuff." Owen jingled his keys. "And maybe your truck if people want to take some things home."

"Of course."

"See you at Joe's!" Owen waved.

"I think I'll pass on the ice cream." Mason stuck his hands in his pockets.

Zach paused at Mason's Jeep. "That's not fun."

"I'm not really feeling... fun." Mason said. He climbed into the Jeep.

"See you tomorrow, then."

"Later."

The weather was warming. It was a good day for an estate sale. Not so great a day for heavy labor. And there was labor to be had. Zach and Owen hauled couches, armchairs, armoires, side tables, benches, all sorts of parts and pieces that had once belonged to Mason's mother. They lined them up on the front lawn. Mirrors, collectible trinkets, whole sets of china.

It seemed like the entire town was there haggling with Mason and Kelly on prices. *Another twenty dollars and I'll give you another place setting. Knock that price in half. This shouldn't even sell for five dollars. Those match my bed-set, how much for the pair?*

Approaching noon, Zach stripped off his T-shirt and brought two large pitchers of lemonade out for everyone to enjoy. The chaos of the morning settled down a bit after that.

And Mason looked at him.

They were little sideways glances. Nothing that made eye contact, certainly nothing notable between friends who'd grown up together, but it was the first sign of interest Zach had seen since showing up three days ago. He was making it a big deal and really didn't care.

Zach caught him looking while they haggled different ladies out of their forty dollars. He flexed. Mason looked away and didn't look back. Zach couldn't help but smile. Baliey had said to woo his friend back. Zach could play that game.

He deliberately brushed past Mason whenever he could. He flexed his biceps, his pecs, his back whenever he caught Mason's gaze passing in his direction. Zach avoided eye contact but otherwise inserted himself deliberately into Mason's path at every opportunity.

Zach wasn't entirely sure if it was working, but Mason kept looking. He had to know Zach was baiting him. He kept biting anyway.

The day waned with most of the clothing and small trinkets gone. The smaller bits of furniture like side tables and single chairs were in new homes, but most of the larger pieces hadn't been claimed. Zach and Owen hauled the leftover bits back indoors while Mason and Kelly compared the day's take.

Zach fetched three beers and a lemonade. The four of them sat around the kitchen table. Zach lifted his glass. They all clinked. "So what's the damage?" he asked.

Kelly closed her shoebox till. "The total is just over a thousand."

Probably because the big furniture hadn't moved. "Is that going to cover expenses?"

"Not all of them." Owen shook his head. "But that puts a good bite in it."

"We can sell more things online," Kelly suggested.

Mason nodded. "Tomorrow." He swirled his beer. "We've had a long day today."

“Can I go see Helen?” she asked.

“You remember the rules.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go ahead. Don’t be surprised if she yells at you. She took two rabbits this morning.”

Rabbits Zach had put into Amelia’s Crock-pot that morning. Mason said Hawk had taken the game. Did he have another dog? Two? He counted on his fingers. Gossip, Redd, Hawk, Helen—

Owen laughed, “Oh, boy. Zack have you gone lightweight on us? You’re counting your fingers already. You’ve got ten, I promise.”

Zach scowled, “Just because you fall over at the sight of tequila doesn’t mean the rest of us are so easily swayed.”

“Hey,” Owen grinned at him, “That is entirely out of context. We had at least two cases of beer before the she-devil made an appearance.”

Mason laughed despite himself. It came out like a strangled snort. “Four beers is still enough to knock you over, Owen.”

“Four beers is a perfectly respectable number.”

Zach tilted his head. “For a lightweight.”

“Two against one is hardly a fair fight so I’ll spare you both the indignity of failure.” Owen stood from the table. “I have a perfectly respectable dinner waiting for me with my perfectly respectable wife.”

Zach flinched.

Would you like me to go after the fairer sex? Women?

It would certainly be more respectable.

The others didn’t seem to notice his social tic. Mason got up to walk Owen to the door and wave him out. Zach followed. How much of a disruption was he, coming back here? He didn’t think it would be this... tangled.

Lost in his thoughts, Zach didn’t move when Mason closed his door and turned. “Oh.”

Zach grunted to himself and blinked at Mason. They were close enough to feel each other’s breath, to see Mason’s pupils dilate at Zach’s proximity. Zach

wanted to kiss him. He really wanted to press their bodies against the door and re-learn the old angles he could still sense like a phantom limb.

“You have tattoos now.”

He *had* been looking. Zach turned his hands out and spread his arms a bit to show them off.

Mason lifted his hand. He put it down without touching. “Why?”

“They’re each for something different.”

This time when Mason brought his hand up, his fingers came to rest against the tattoo on Zach’s left arm. His thumb brushed the black ink lines. “Scales?”

“A reminder that justice is blind. Color or creed are irrelevant, it’s the equality that matters.”

“It’s upside down, though.”

“Just a matter of perspective. I had the ink done before I walked in a protest. With my arm up, they’re right side up.”

“Protest against what?”

“An anti-gay marriage proposition going through Philly.”

Mason let him go fast. That hurt. Zach crowded closer with a frown. He saw Mason’s breath catch. The pulse in his throat fluttered. Mason whispered, “Stop.”

Like hell. “Deny it.” Mason wanted him, all the signs were there. Zach couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t let things be like they were before.

“I don’t want you.”

But Mason’s eyes flicked down. He backed against the door and held his breath. Zach stepped into Mason’s space. “You’re a liar.” Zach braced his left hand on the door. Mason looked at the scales and avoided Zach’s eyes. “You’re attracted—”

“What do you want to hear, Zach?” Mason met his eyes with an intent look of his own. It was Zach’s turn to catch his breath. The Mason he remembered was in there—buried and locked behind doors, but there. He spoke in that

challenging tone, tilted his head in that are-you-sure-you-can-keep-up angle. Mason's voice dropped. "How about, 'You make me hot'?"

"Tell me what you actually want," Zach whispered. He felt his blood rush. "Not the excuses these people have you stuck hiding behind."

"I should say, 'Fuck me now,' and that'll make it all better?"

"It would be a nice start." Zach stared him down, daring him to back out of it all again. Mason's blue eyes melted into grey and Zach knew he'd been right. The Mason he had fallen in love with, the one that dared him at every step, stared back at him unflinchingly. Zach's breath came hard. He had forgotten how powerful Mason's full attention could be. It made his blood scream and his chest throb. His lips ached for contact. He licked them and waited.

Mason grabbed Zach's hip and pulled him in close. This was what had been missing in the back of Joe's parking lot. The unwavering sureness. Zach had pushed until he got a kiss but that was all backwards. The real Mason had always pulled him along, daring him to keep pace. Zach's lips hovered over Mason's. His whole body buzzed. He wanted with an ache that consumed him.

Mason said, "Kiss me."

It wasn't a request. That was the Mason, Zach remembered. Quiet and friendly in public, but when it came to getting what he wanted there was no room for discussion. Zach let their lips come together, gentle pressure, and move against each other. He made a tight sound in his throat. There was so much they had missed out on, so many things Zach wanted to share, so much he wanted to convey in this simple contact.

Mason's hand stroked down Zach's right arm, bringing his palm to Mason's jeans. Permission. Zach pressed him against the door with more hunger. He groaned at the full contact.

Mason gasped like he'd forgotten what it was like. "Strip. Now."

Zach lost his clothes. He was faster than Mason who struggled to unbutton his jeans. Zach helped, dragging his fingers over new/familiar skin. He squeezed Mason's ass and had to brace his head on the door to catch his breath. "I want you." He wasn't above begging.

“Take me.” Mason went to his knees before Zach could even process it. Mason’s fingers traced his cock and balls. His tongue slicked the way. His mouth closed. Zach dug his fingers into the door and shook. This was no sensual wooing like Baliey had suggested. Mason drove himself down on Zach’s shaft and rolled his tongue against the underside.

Zach aborted a jerking thrust and had to pull himself back. “Bad plan.”

Mason slid himself back to his feet. “Right here. Fuck me on the door.”

Like Zach could possibly go anywhere at this point. He pulled a just-in-case condom and travel lube out of his crumpled jeans. Mason braced his back on the door. Zach pulled his ass up and flexed to hold him there. It wasn’t for show this time. Mason was enough man by himself—Zach was very happy his job kept him active and fit.

Zach pulled Mason’s cheeks apart and found that spot between. Mason was tight. Zach went slow. It took everything he had not to thrust himself home. Mason squeezed his own cock through it all, moaning with every small retreat Zach made. He was hot. Zach had never felt a man so tight in his life.

Tight like Mason hadn’t had a single man take him in twenty years.

Zach gasped. He looked up and found Mason’s ice-grey eyes staring him down. Zach forgot how to breathe. This was exactly it. Everything perfect, as he’d imagined and better. He didn’t even know how to express the way his heart was racing, how strongly his blood surged, how awesome it was to re-establish that old connection.

Mason said, “Make me yours.”

He was not going to survive this. Zach drank Mason’s stare with his own. He let those grey eyes drill down into his soul and see everything. The pain of leaving, the loneliness, the impossible search for a replacement—as if anything could replace that predatory intent, the hopeless truth that Zach was so far in love he didn’t know how to go on without Mason.

Mason’s grey eyes saw it all and offered nothing back. No comfort, no pity. It had always been that way—Zach needed to be strong enough on his own to love Mason so deeply, he was worth nothing less.

Mason pushed a hand against Zach’s shoulder to brace himself more firmly on the door. “Yes, Zach.”

“Fuck,” Zach grunted, far less eloquently than the whole experience felt. His hands hot on Mason’s ass, his cock deep. He placed open-mouthed kisses to whatever skin he could reach. Mason’s T-shirt got in the way.

Mason groaned deeply. His climax rolled through him in a series of jerks that squeezed Zach hard. Zach saw white and lost his legs. It was a barely controlled fall to his knees. Mason slid down the door—his shirt riding up under his arms. Zach held Mason close and cried his name. His climax was long, as if in waiting for twenty years and only now could he really let it go.

He gasped against Mason, spent and so impossibly happy he couldn’t express it properly. He kept stroking Mason’s leg and tried to catch his breath.

Mason twisted. He rummaged in his jeans for something and pressed paper into Zach’s hand. “Here.”

Zach held it up. Twenties, three of them. “What’s this?” For the rabbits?

“Come back tomorrow.”

“What for?” Not that he didn’t want to come back, but what did that have to do with the cash?

“I feel like being nailed in my kitchen.”

Zach sat up enough to blink at him.

“You’re good for it, right?” Mason wasn’t laughing.

Zach shoved him against the door as he stood and threw the cash at him. “The fuck is this?”

“You’ll make a poor whore if you give your services away for free.”

Zach clenched his fists, “I’m not giving you my dick, you fucker. I’m giving you my heart!” He bent and grabbed his pants.

Mason exploded to his feet, “I don’t want it! You took mine when you left and you never brought it back.”

“I wanted you with me.”

“You were selfish!” Mason yanked his shirt over his head and threw it at his feet, beautiful and terrible in his rage. He pointed into Zach’s chest. “It was either you or Mom and that’s not a choice. I had to stay here and you went

anyway. Off to your high-rise condo. Well, I learned my lesson. I don't need you. I don't need anyone. I've made my own way. Maybe I don't have a damn Mercedes but I took care of Mom and me."

This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Mason wasn't supposed to be angry and resentful at him for leaving. How did it ever get like this? "Mason—"

"Don't you dare say you're sorry."

"I didn't want to leave you here but I had to get out. These people can't see past their own noses, we couldn't be together here."

"Then why are you back? Nothing is different here."

"I am. I'm not afraid of them."

"You were willing to shout about us before, so what? I built something here, Zach."

"I'm not leaving again without you." He couldn't handle it—not a second time. Not after risking everything to come back.

"Get comfortable on the couch." Mason slid past him and walked up the stairs. He left his clothes at the door.

Zach watched him go, too stunned and feeling awful to even appreciate the view. How had this gone so horribly wrong? He felt disgusting. He heard Mason close his bedroom door. When he didn't come back out after several minutes, Zach started a shower in the lower bathroom. He spent a half hour trying to scrub away the weird feeling that he'd just been assaulted.

Zach woke up on the couch. He hadn't intended to take Mason at his word, not at first. Baliey had a point that they didn't know how to be a couple together anymore. She was right—they were both different people. But a wooing wasn't what Mason was looking for. At least, not a wooing from one Zachariah Andrews, he who left Mason broken-hearted in a small town that couldn't ever know him like Zach knew him.

He'd made a mistake, but that mistake had been twenty years ago when he walked away from the one thing he knew he wanted. He wasn't going to make the same mistake a second time.

So he'd showered and got comfortable on the couch they hadn't managed to sell yesterday, without so much as a pillow. He had a blanket now. It was just pushing seven in the morning. Zach's back was tight from the workout the day before and a poor sleep on top of it. He didn't remember Mason coming back down last night nor had he heard him this morning. His Jeep was gone from the front, though.

And Zach had a blanket.

He hadn't gone to sleep with a blanket which meant Mason had put one over him this morning on his way out. Zach folded it neatly over the arm of the couch and smiled at himself. He'd yelled yesterday that he wasn't leaving again without Mason, but maybe that was only half true. Maybe he just wasn't leaving at all.

Amelia didn't ask questions when he showed up to pack his few bags and Jasper into the truck. She didn't complain that he hardly gave her any notice or criticise his timing. She simply packed him a lunch and waved him off her property with the promise he'd come back and visit.

He called Owen on the road. "Hey, you free for a few hours?"

"Not 'til tonight. What'd ya need?"

"Mason's out, and I wanted to get a chunk of the items left from yesterday up on the internet. Could use another hand for photos and such."

"Sounds dull. Swing by the house and grab Kelly, she works for food."

In the background, he heard, "Hey!"

Owen laughed. "See you in five?"

"On my way."

Despite her protest, Owen's daughter was waiting at the end of the drive when he swung by. She and Jasper became immediate friends.

Kelly helped him lug his few suitcases into the entry and set Jasper up with her food dishes in the kitchen. “I brought my laptop,” she said. “And my phone takes decent photos.”

“I’ve got a good camera on mine—between us we should be able to knock this out.”

“Oh—where’s the cabinet with all the—here.” Kelly opened the bottom doors of a china cabinet. “Dad says we’re not supposed to sell this stuff down here. It’s being given in the will later.”

“What about the cabinet?”

“I think that’s safe—he didn’t mention it. Just the china.”

“Do you know where Mason keeps his toolbox?”

“Should be one in the shed.”

“Grab it, please?”

Kelly jogged out the back door of the kitchen. Jasper ran to keep up.

It took nearly three hours, but they photographed and listed every piece of furniture they hadn’t been able to sell the day before. Even Jasper helped; walking all over the keyboard when their descriptions were boring—or she was hungry.

Kelly stuck her tongue out. “I know Dad said you would feed me but I need to go. I’m supposed to meet my friends at the movies.”

“Do you need a lift?”

“Not if I get going.”

“Here.” Zach dug in his wallet for cash. “Get yourself some real lunch before the film. Don’t fill up on popcorn.”

Kelly rolled her eyes as she took the money. “Yes, Mom.”

“Hey, you can eat whatever you want. I get to tell Owen I told you to eat real food and I even paid for it.”

Kelly laughed and waved her way out. Zach tidied up the clutter of tape measures and non-saleable items while Jasper complained about how empty her food bowl was. He hefted the toolbox. “I’ll get to you, just sit tight.”

She didn't sit tight. Zach headed out the back to put the toolbox away and Jasper followed right at his heels. She meowed at him.

Across the yard, a falcon screeched back. Zach stopped. There was a wood structure across the yard that looked weathered but hadn't been there twenty years ago. Another screech issued from the coop-like building. Something winged moved across a chicken-wire window.

Zach dropped the toolbox just inside the shed and picked up Jasper, just in case. She squirmed, uninterested in being manhandled. They both stopped at the little chicken-wire window. Jasper's ears flicked forward. Zach watched a very small falcon preen its wing on a perch in the back.

"It's a kestrel."

Zach jumped. Jasper complained. Mason was some twenty feet away and closing. His left hand was gloved in dark, worn leather. Gripping his wrist was a hawk with talons the length of his fingers, and a beak curved like a scythe. The bird hunched and flicked its wings around its feet where a fuzzy chunk of rabbit had already been shredded. Zach heard a bone break. The bird gulped meat down.

Zach didn't know what to say. He pointed at Mason. "That's a hawk."

"I told you I hunted with one."

What did you hunt it with?

My hawk.

Zach nodded. "I thought you were talking about another dog."

"Why would I name a dog Hawk?"

"I don't know. You named your first one Gossip." The kestrel twittered to their right. Jasper tried to pull herself out of Zach's grip and get closer. He held tight. "You actually hunt with it?"

"Yes." Mason gave Zach a wide berth and opened a door on the coop-like building. The hawk on his hand hopped obediently to a perch and continued tearing apart the rabbit leg. It plucked fur from the skin and flicked the clumps in every direction. Mason undid a connection on his glove, did some sort of clinical check of his bird, and backed out of the cage. "I'm a Master Class

Falconer. I hunt every day with Helen. Sometimes twice if we don't have any luck in the morning or I have something scheduled."

Zach adjusted Jasper in his arms. She was very interested in the small falcon. She wasn't going to get anywhere near it. "Scheduled?"

"I hunt for most of the farms and gardens around here. Keeps the rodents in check." Mason continued what appeared to be a regular routine of checking equipment, the coop-building, and cleaning things.

Zach didn't know the first thing about it all. "The bigger stuff goes to Keshel at the grocery."

"Yeah. Rabbits and pheasant, mostly. The smaller mice and gophers aren't worth selling. We avoid the squirrels altogether, too risky for the birds."

"What about the little one?" The kestrel Jasper desperately wanted to get her paws on.

"His name is Arrow. He's an imprint so he can't be released. We hunt dragonflies out on the lake sometimes, but he's mostly in retirement.

Imprint, retirement—it was all so different. Zach wasn't sure where to start, but he wanted to know everything. When had Mason started all this? How did it start? Where had the hawks come from? How did he hunt with them? On a leash? How else do you keep a bird from flying away?

He started with: "Can I make you some lunch?"

Mason looked up from the coop-building's redundant latches. "That would be nice." He whistled to the dogs. "Give me ten minutes to finish up here."

"I'll get started," Zach said, more absently than anything. They stood looking at each other for a long moment—a mutual realization that there were additional depths to each other. That maybe what they both knew from the past was only a part of what made them each whole now. In that moment, Zach realized that as much as he wanted his lover back, what he really needed was his friend. It made him smile and Mason smiled back.

Jasper was quite used to being queen of her house so there was an uneasy truce between the cat and Gossip. So far, Jasper took her frustrations out on

Redd. She currently lay on Redd's back even though the terrier was barely large enough to fit her. He was tough: all muscle and activity from the constant hunting, but his personality bent easily to Jasper's and he sighed, carrying her from room to room as her will dictated.

Baliey called while they sat on the still-unsold couch quietly enjoying each other's company and the antics of the animals. Mason barely glanced up from his book. Zach answered the call. "Hey Bee. How's life?"

"Oh. My. God. This customer. These people, they're driving me up the wall. Zach, they want a fifty meter mud crawl—our venue is barely sixty meters long."

"What's wrong with a forty meter crawl? That's a long crawl, anyway."

"I know! But forty is bad luck. So is a right-hand turn. I'm not even sure how these people drive in traffic."

Zach laughed, "Well three lefts make a right... eventually."

"Have you ever tried to take three lefts downtown? Actually, don't answer that—"

"Baliey, relax. If they're so crazy why not cancel?"

"It's a charity project, we're not even getting paid for it. I thought it would be good karma or something but, damn. And now I've got a box full of handwritten cards from cancer kids telling me how much they're looking forward to an obstacle course with swing ropes over a live alligator pit."

"Ah, the cancer kid bit—can't say no to cancer kids."

"Zach!"

"Sorry. But I'm serious. Call up James for the legal paperwork and issue a cancellation."

"Shouldn't I tell them first? 'Hey stop being crazy or we'll back out'?"

"No, you don't want to make it something us versus them. That's definitely not good karma. James can handle the legal but you're the PR girl, spin it with something like 'we're not equipped to handle their specific needs'. Give them Jennifer's number—maybe she'll take over."

“Oh, good thought. We owe her from the big Lancing job she passed to us.”

“Try not to stress over the cancer kid box. Sometimes you just have to say no to a job—that’s the way it goes.”

“Still, I feel bad about it.”

“It happens with charity things more than I’d like. Next time try to get the details hashed out in contract.”

“It just takes so long to get things moving that way.”

“I know, but it saves you the guilt of saying no to cancer kids.”

“Right. Point taken.” She sighed into the phone and Zach heard her typing. “How are things with you—oh, is this even a good time to talk?”

Zach flashed his eyes up, Mason was still in his book. “It’s fine. Nothing much going on at the moment. We had some lunch. Just hanging for now.”

“He’s in the room, isn’t he? Your tone got careful.”

“Yes.” And he smiled into the word. Trust Baliey to know more than he ever meant to say. She really was dangerous in person.

“So on a scale of one to marriage, how are things?”

Zach laughed once—a bark of sound. “You should look into getting a cat from the shelter. Something shorthair or you’ll never keep the computers running.”

Baliey was silent on the other end. Her typing stopped briefly. “Jasper’s not coming—? No, wait. *You’re* not coming back, are you?” She was quick.

“Hopefully not.”

“Gay man in a small town. How’s that working out for you?” She was honestly worried.

Zach was, too. “There are a lot of kinks to work out still.”

She snorted.

Zach rolled his eyes at the ceiling even though she couldn’t see it.

“You really okay with that? Staying out there? You left for a good reason.”

“I have a lot more to learn.”

“Good,” she said, as if Zach hadn’t just altered an entire year’s worth of plans in one afternoon. He owed her a better explanation. “If that’s the case, you get to brainstorm a better way to fix this charity cause. I want to do it—and not just because of the cancer kids box—I just need some logistical help.”

“Fair enough. Start with the contract. Did they sign the standard?”

“That’s probably the only thing that’s gone right…”

Zach got comfortable on the couch and talked Baliey through the details of her customer’s crazy requests for nearly two hours. They parsed the contract line-by-line, conference called Jason from legal for several questions, and established a plan of attack.

“Bee, don’t forget you still have Jennifer up your sleeve. Since it’s charity work anyway I think you should call her and her team up. She has different contacts than we do and a good portion of our support can’t afford to do the work for free. She can boost your on-site numbers.”

“And maybe help keep me sane.”

“That too.” Zach smiled.

“Okay. I can work with this—thanks Zach. I might text you later in a panic.”

“I live to serve.”

“Later.”

“Bye.” Zach smiled at his phone for a second. Talking with Baliey never failed to cheer him up, even when things were already going well. She was the best kind of friend one could have as a business partner.

“Sounds like she really needs your help.” Mason said, half-involved with his book.

“She’ll work through it. It’s her first project without me there to oversee the details so she’s just second guessing. She’s been there from the beginning. Probably just misses Jasper.”

Mason set his book down. “Why *did* you bring your cat?”

“I wasn’t sure how long I’d be here and there wasn’t much notice when I hopped in the car. I couldn’t just drop her on someone. ‘Hey I might be gone for two months but I really don’t know, here’s a cat.’” Zach smirked, “And Jasper would never forgive me. She likes going where I go.”

“You’re prepared to be here for a while.”

“As long as you need me.”

Mason hummed and went back to his book.

Mason’s cell rang as he was collecting his things for an evening of hunting with Helen. He tossed it to Zach. “Answer that, it’s Owen.”

Zach answered it. “Yo.”

“Z-man?”

“Mason’s got his hands full. What’s up?”

“Canceled plans, that’s what! Peter’s first calf of the year just dropped. All the wives are getting a barbeque going.”

“Is that a thing now?”

“Makes it easy for people to take shifts overnight if they’re already there.”

Mason asked, “Is what a thing?”

“Barbeque for the first calf of the year?”

Mason pressed his lips together. “We’ll take Arrow. Helen’s off the hook. I’m sure Keshel will be there, I can reschedule the hunt when we see him.”

Zach asked Owen, “Keshel will be there?”

“Dude, everyone goes. Are you in the car yet?”

“We’re going. Chill-pill. See you in twenty.”

“Later.”

Zach tried to stuff the phone in one of pouches Mason had slung around his hips but Mason swiveled, “Not that one, it’s got raw meat in it. Put it in my jeans. Front.”

Mason probably didn't mean for his hip thrust to be overtly sexual but Zach took in the full view. He stilled Mason's hips with his free hand and slid the phone in with one finger. He licked his lips. Looked up. He caught Mason looking away. Zach didn't push it. "The birds travel in boxes, right?"

"Yeah they're both set up in the back of the Jeep."

"Can I carry Arrow?"

"Well, technically no. But..."

"Technically?"

Mason shook his head and led the way out the back kitchen door. "It's all government oversight and federal this or jail time that. If I keep too many feathers they can take the birds away. Technically. But a lot of it is honor system, and I wouldn't have started this if Jake hadn't let me exercise his bird before I was licensed. So, yeah, you can walk Arrow to the car."

Zach was a lot more excited about this than he expected. "What do I do?"

"Not much, really. Here, put this on your left hand."

Zach accepted the well-worn leather glove, distantly similar to a work glove, with a bigger sleeve and a latch. Thicker, too. "It's stiff."

"It's just meant to be a perch. Trust me, you don't want those talons getting anywhere near your skin."

"Even Arrow's?"

"Your eyeballs will make a fine snack."

"Eew." The wooden structure in the backyard that functioned as a holding pen was called a mews, Zach learned. He squeezed into Arrow's smaller half behind Mason, shut the door, and accepted a small piece of meat.

"Just pinch that in your glove there so he can see it. Hold it out—just like that." Mason put a small brass whistle to his lips and let out a sharp chirp. Arrow twitched around on his perch. He spotted Mason. Zach. The meat. He flew down to the glove, the leather jesses on his legs tinkling with tiny, tiny bells.

"Wow... I can't even tell he's sitting there, he's so light."

“I had to get a special scale to weigh him, four decimal points, to make sure he was at the right weight for flying.”

“I thought he couldn’t go free.”

“He can’t be released.” Mason nodded. “Into the wild. He’ll just follow people around and starve when they don’t feed him. He thinks people are family. But he can still fly and he’ll catch little bugs. Sometimes.” Mason manipulated Zach’s fingers so that Arrow’s leather jesses crossed between his fingers and lay across his palm. He tied a lead and hooked that onto the sleeve of the glove. “Just hold that still with your last two fingers.”

Zach carefully closed half a fist. Arrow rocked on the glove. “He doesn’t look stable.”

“The glove is a lot bigger than his little feet. Just keep an eye on him. He might put his wings out for balance. You keep your hand closed on his jesses so if he thinks about flying away you’ve got him, ok?”

“Yeah, sure.” Zach nodded. The little falcon on his hand nodded at him. “Hey, that’s cute.” Zach pointed with his right hand and got a beak in his finger for his trouble. “Ow!”

“You deserved that.”

“That wasn’t cute.”

“Let’s go.” Mason laughed. “Remember, keep your fist closed. Just walk slow.”

They exited the mews. Mason locked it behind him and checked on Helen. Together they paced slowly to the Jeep. Arrow rocked a little on the glove and Zach was still amazed that he couldn’t feel his weight at all. The kestrel was smaller than his cell phone, and all feathers. Arrow peeped and twitched his head around.

“Is he afraid?” Zach asked.

“Just cautious. He’s smaller than everything else out in the world. It pays to have your eyes on everything.”

“This is so cool.”

Mason laughed. They reached the Jeep. Mason popped the back door. “Wait there for a second, let’s see if he’ll accept his hood.” Mason retrieved a small leather helmet-shaped item from one of the tall white boxes. He let Arrow look at it, then slowly fit it over his beak and head. It tightened in the back. The bird appeared unruffled.

“Now reach your hand into the box and let the perch touch the back of his feet.”

Zach leaned in and did as he was told, letting the cross bar on the perch bump the small falcon. Arrow hopped onto the perch. “Ha. Look at that.”

“Use your other hand and unlatch the line from the glove. You’ll see a ring attached to the base of the perch- clip it there.”

Zach transferred the tether. “I can let go of the strings?”

“That’s it.” Mason took the leather glove and closed up the white box. Arrow peeped. His bells tinkled.

It didn’t take even ten minutes to drive out to the ranch. A bonfire was already lit and a long iron grill stretched over the flames. It seemed like the whole town turned out for the party. Cars lined the road on both sides. A steady stream of people headed out toward the pasture to get a look at the new calf.

Mason took the entire bird box out of the Jeep and divided his supplies between himself and Zach. Together they approached the bonfire. Mason’s white bird box was immediately the center of attention for children and adults. They peered into the air holes, trying to catch a glimpse. “Arrow doesn’t mind the attention?” Zach asked.

“He can’t see it. The hood does a lot to keep him calm.”

“Hi, Mason! Zach!” Kelly waved from the grill line. “We’re sitting over there.”

They followed her pointing finger and found room at a picnic blanket. The collection of kids followed, a few adults trailed along. They set everything down and Mason appointed one of the older boys to watch the bird. They

joined Owen and his daughter at the grill. It smelled delightful—all roasted meats and barbeque sauce.

Kelly grinned, “Did you bring Helen?”

“No, Arrow.” Mason said. “He hasn’t flown for dragonflies in a while. I thought we’d go out to the creek.”

“Yes!” Kelly threw her hands up and spilled her Coke. “Oops.”

They reached the grill and asked for ribs, sausage, chicken, or steak. Peter himself doled out the meat while his wife manned the grill. “Ribs, I think.” Zach said. “They look delicious.”

“Sorry, all outta ribs.” Peter said, his tongs hovering over half a rack.

Zach frowned. In front of him, Owen paused. “What was that, Peter?”

“Said we’re all out of ribs. These ones are no good. I don’t give out food that’s no good.”

Sure, he didn’t.

“That’s okay.” Peter’s wife turned from the grill, “I just finished this batch,” she said, oblivious to the tension. She added another pile of ribs to the table. With his wife and Owen both looking on, Peter silently served Zach his requested ribs. They moved on to the salads and drinks without thanking him. Mason was served his sausage and chicken with a dark eye.

Zach saw the tension ratcheting up Owen’s shoulders and put a hand on him. “Chill. It’s not worth it.” But he appreciated the quick defense.

“It’s just so stupid.”

“Are you going to arrest him for stupidity?”

“I can hold him for forty-eight hours,” Owen said brightly.

Zach laughed. “Let’s eat.”

They all clustered on the blanket and watched Mason put Arrow out on a lawn perch for everyone to see. He answered questions between bites of food, most of them correcting the kid’s ideas of having a “pet bird”.

“This bird bites,” Zach interjected. He held up his finger to prove it. “So don’t get too close.”

Only when they were mostly done with their meals did Mason give in to the demands to see Arrow in flight. He organized a walk over to the spring-flush creek on Peter’s property and directed everyone to sit down and be quiet.

Zach sat next to Kelly on a rock jutting over the creek bed. “Have you seen Arrow fly?”

“Oh, yeah, lots of times. It’s still fun, though. He’s really fast.”

“He would have to be to catch dragonflies.”

“Sometimes lightning bugs, too,” Kelly said. “They like the meadow behind our house and sometimes Mason will bring Arrow when he comes for dinner.”

“That so...?” It was ridiculous that he hadn’t stayed in touch with his two best friends to know these things. It hadn’t seemed like such a big deal when he was away in Philly, building a career and a life beyond all of this. Now he wasn’t even sure he knew how to relate to a small town anymore. They didn’t even have a Starbucks.

Mason commanded the side of the creek, showing off Arrow’s small feathers and explaining the hood and how he couldn’t go back to the wild. He was utterly comfortable out here in the forest with a raptor on his fist. Zach snapped a photo on his cellphone and sent it to Baliey.

This is the new Mason Foster.

She texted him back.

Nice ass.

Then Arrow was in the air and Zach didn’t care about a witty comeback. The little falcon flapped up to a branch along the edge of the water and looked around. He had no string attaching him to Mason, nothing to prevent him from simply flying away. Yet he stayed and scanned the water and reeds. He tipped forward off the branch and dove almost too fast to see. He skimmed the reeds and flashed sideways. Arrow banked down toward the closest spot of solid

ground—the rock outcropping that Zach and Kelly had claimed. He flapped up to land and Zach saw that he had a dragonfly gripped in one foot.

Then Mason was there with his glove, kneeling between Zach and Kelly, and gave a short whistle burst. Arrow considered the dragonfly. He nipped at the wings and flicked one away into the water. It glittered as it fell. His head twitched to watch it. Mason added a bit of meat to his glove, just a small pinch for a small bird, and blew his whistle again. Arrow abandoned the dragonfly and hopped to the glove for his prize.

Kelly picked up the dragonfly and jogged down the bank to one of the younger boys, “Here, what is it?”

The boy cradled the dead bug and turned it over with one finger. The kids around him leaned in. “It’s a green darner,” he said.

“But it’s brown.”

“It’s a girl. The boys are green and blue.”

“She’s got some purple on her, look.”

“Will you keep it?”

“No, I’ve got one already.”

They passed the dragonfly around and looked back to Mason, who smiled. “Ready for another one?”

Zach watched Arrow and Mason catch dragonflies for an hour. Sometimes he caught one, sometimes he didn’t, but the whole spectacle was awesome to watch. In the end, it was Arrow who decided dragonfly catching was done.

“Why won’t he fly?” one of the kids asked.

“He’s full. I tempt him away from the dragonflies with a little piece of meat, and a hawk only hunts when he’s hungry.” Mason gestured everyone up. “Come on, let’s get back to the party. People are missing us.” He fit the hood back over Arrow’s head and led the way back to the bonfire.

“Hey, let’s check out this new calf we’re partying for.”

“Sure, yeah,” Mason said, “Let me put Arrow back in the Jeep for the night. It’s getting dark.”

Kelly jumped to help, so Zach fetched the three of them dessert, root beer floats in mason jars. He bent the straw on his to sip while he walked and found them both at the car.

“Ohhh, floats!” Kelly said. “Hey! Why do you two get bendy straws and I don’t?”

Mason reached for her straw. He flipped it upside down. The other end was bent.

“Oh.” Kelly sucked on her float. “Well that’s more like it, anyway.”

Zach laughed all the way to the barn. Near the middle, the warmest spot, a small cluster of people tried to lean over the stall half-door and get a look. They didn’t even see the hay in the stall when Sally’s bright voice barked from the barn door. “KELLY!”

Everyone jumped. Kelly whipped her head around. “What’d I do?”

“Don’t get smart with me.”

“Mom, I’m serious. I’ve been here the whole time.”

“You’ve been with him.” Sally’s finger landed directly on Zach’s chest. “I told you to stay away from my daughter.”

Zach put up both hands, “I was invited to a party, Sally, that’s it.”

“Him?” Kelly said, clearly confused. “What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s tainting you, you shouldn’t hang out with people like him. I’ve taught you better than that.”

Kelly sipped on her root beer and got sarcastic in a blink. “What exactly is he, Mom? A nice guy helping his friend out?”

Sally grabbed her daughter’s free hand and almost spat, “He’s a *homosexual*.” She said the word like she was afraid it would come alive and bite her. She spun and dragged Kelly out of the barn. Kelly saluted with her root beer and jogged to keep up.

Zach rolled his eyes and turned to see the calf in the stall. The six or so people that had been straining over the half door stood watching them, flicking their eyes from Zach to Mason and back. Zach crossed his arms. “What?”

One of the women said, “So, who wants a root beer?”

“Me!”

“Yes.”

“Good idea, Molly.”

The group left in a hurry. Zach just shook his head and leaned on the half door. The calf in the stall stood on wobbly legs and blinked huge black eyes up at Zach. He dangled his arm in the stall and let it nibble his fingers. Mason sighed deeply.

Zach said, “I don’t know how you deal with this all the time.”

“For the most part, I don’t.”

“That’s right, I forgot. You’re not gay.”

Mason set his jar of root beer down heavily on the stall door. “You dealt with it by leaving, I deal with it by keeping it out of sight of those who don’t care for it. Don’t judge my solution when yours is no better.”

Zach pulled a hand down his face, chastised. “You’re right. Sorry. Shit.”

“Let’s go,” Mason said.

“Yeah.”

Amelia caught them on the way out the barn door. They slowed to match her speed with the cane. “You still owe me a blouse, Zachariah.”

Mason shot him a confused look.

“Jasper,” Zach said by way of explanation. “I haven’t forgotten. Would you like to go tomorrow?”

“No, no. I’ll wait for the sale in the paper. Just making sure you’re not running out of town any time soon.”

Mason said, “He’s staying with me for now.”

“Yes, that’s good. It’s about time you two got together.” She pinched Zach’s arm, “And here you got me thinking you were just back for a couple weeks.”

Mason frowned. “Mrs. Amelia, we’re not toge—”

“It’s really not a good time for this, Mrs. A.” Zach spoke right over him.

“A good time?” Amelia’s voice dropped and she stopped walking. She rested her hand on her hip. “Is that what you’re waiting for? A time that works better for you?” She didn’t wait for an answer. Amelia turned and shouted toward the bonfire, “HEY! Zach and Mason are gay and have been in love with each other for the past thirty years. What are you going to do about it?”

The party at the bonfire ground to a halt. Mason put a hand to his mouth. Zach choked. How many times had he wanted to do just that? How many times had he swallowed those words before moving to Philadelphia? Peter threw his grilling tongs on the rack over the fire and marched in their direction.

Amelia turned back to Zach and Mason unperturbed. “You don’t find a good time to live what you believe in, Zachariah. You don’t hold it in reserve until there’s a day more convenient. You either own it every day or you betray it.”

Before Peter reached them, Amelia swung her cane up and smacked him solidly in his overweight stomach. “Peter Bench, if you don’t have anything congratulatory to say you will keep your big trap shut.”

Peter lifted a finger and swallowed his words. He pointed at Zach and then to the Jeep. He leveled a heavy glare at Mason. He tried to move Amelia’s cane out of his gut but she appeared no less stable with it off the ground and the struggle made him look foolish.

Zach reached for Mason’s hand and was quietly thrilled when the man didn’t pull away. “Thank you, Amelia. Good night.”

“You too, Peter,” Mason said. They loaded themselves into the Jeep and drove home in silence.

Parked in the driveway, they looked at each other. Zach felt the corner of his lips turn up. Mason didn’t look amused. Zach took a breath to speak and Mason put a finger up on his lips. Zach stilled.

“Just kiss me,” Mason said.

So he did.

Mason's bed was infinitely more comfortable than the couch, not the least because Mason was in it. When Zach woke he was hugging a pillow, though, not the man he was expecting. All his plans for early morning apology-slash-reunion (for real this time) sex went out the window.

He revised plan B while he showered and headed downstairs. At least Mason could come home from hunting to a hearty breakfast.

The front door was open. Mason sat on the porch step beside a large basket of peaches. The first batch of peaches from Kale's trees were always the sweetest. Zach remembered talking Owen and Mason into the orchard in the middle of the night to raid those big juicy fruits. Kale didn't give them away lightly.

Zach saved plan B for a later day. He stepped out onto the porch. "Not hunting this morning?"

"Keshel and Franklin both called and canceled my services."

"Oh, did they reschedule?"

"No."

Oh. Zach sank down on the step beside Mason but didn't touch. He was turning a large jar of honey over in his hands. Also from Kale's property. Peach blossom honey. The most expensive item here in town. "Did you go to the grocery?"

"No, they were here when I opened the door."

Zach winced. He was single-handedly dividing a small town in two, all because he couldn't get over a love he wasn't entirely sure wanted him back. "I'm sorry, Mason. I've really screwed up a lot for you by coming back here."

"Yeah," Mason said without any accusation in his voice. "You have." He left the honey on the step and stood up.

"I never meant for this to happen. Any of this."

Mason paused on the porch. "What did you expect, exactly?" His voice was still low, like he'd given up.

What had he expected? White knights, shining armor. A fairy tale. He was too damn romantic for his own good. That kind of thing didn't happen in real life. People were too complicated for that. "I don't know," Zach admitted. "I just... I couldn't stay away without trying one more time. But nothing is like it was."

"Why me?"

Zach jerked to his feet. "Mason, it's only ever been you."

And then Mason's face twisted, a disappointed distrustful look. "Don't give me that. Our moms called each other every week. Mom told me every time you started dating someone new. What, seven guys? Eight?"

"Did she tell you they were all built like you? Brown hair and blue eyes like yours?" Zach stepped up to the porch, his hands open. "Did she tell you every time I held them I dreamed of you? How I kicked one out of my bed because he wouldn't stare me down while I fucked him." Zach stopped a breath from Mason. "I let one of them move in with me, I let him into my life. Almost two years."

Resentful. "So why aren't you with him?"

"Because no matter how many times we had sex his eyes never turned grey like a storm rolling in, and every single time I thought about how he wasn't you." Zach shook his head. "I found every look-alike in Philadelphia and none of them were you. None of them laughed at potatoes or shared a look with me over an upside-down bendy straw. None of them were my best friend since I could crawl. None of them have my heart."

Still, Mason just stood there, looking abandoned.

"Please. Mason. We had something once. You can't tell me you're not gay, don't insult me like that." Zach clenched his fists. "But if you're not into me anymore then just tell me. Just say it so I can pack. Say it to my face so I can move on—"

"Don't—" Mason put up both hands and looked down, shaking his head. "Don't go just yet." His voice shuddered and he fisted his hands. Let them come down gently on Zach's chest. "Owen reads the will tomorrow and the

funeral is the day after that. Just stay until then... Please.” He wouldn’t meet Zach’s eyes as he walked back into the house.

Zach stood on the porch staring at the peaches until Jasper came to check on him. She repeatedly bumped her nose into his calf until he gave in and tracked down her feathers-on-a-string toy.

There were more people at the reading than Zach expected. He’d never been to one before, but certainly half the town wasn’t necessary? The turnout was almost as good at the town hall during a debate. It was about as boring, too. Legal paperwork was dense at best; Zach was not envious that Owen had to wade through it all.

He tried not to slouch in his chair as Owen droned on into a microphone reading the will from top to bottom. Owen was seated behind a small desk facing rows of foldout chairs. Zach sat next to Mason directly across from their best friend. It felt like being in a fishbowl with everyone else waiting for a trick. Except for Owen’s steady voice, the room was silent.

Zach’s phone buzzed against his thigh. He started into better posture. It was Baliey.

How’s things?

Dull. Never knew this read the will stuff could take so long.

Usually doesn’t for personal stuff. How long have you been there?

An hour at least.

That’s odd.

It’s all legal, I can’t make heads or tails of it. What’s up with you?

Working with Jennifer like you suggested. She’s been a great help. Better at the PR stuff than I am. So far so good.

No cancer kid guilt?

Haha. No. :P

She said.

Any progress with you and your man?

It's complicated. He's been keeping the fact that he's gay under the radar. My showing up really screwed up that plan.

Oh, no.

It's not all bad, but it's not all good either. People are taking sides. There's been some backlash. He's lost some income with the work he does. I want him back but every time I push a bit something else goes wrong for him. It's not worth ruining the life he's built here.

Has he thought about coming up to Philly with you?

I haven't even brought it up. He asked me to stick around at least until the funeral tomorrow. We'll see what happens after that.

“Possessions.” Owen said from the desk up front. Tension in the room crystallized and Zach felt every hair on his neck rise. He glanced around. Everyone sat up straight and silent. Holding their breath. What was going on?

“All of my earnings, every dollar and object to my name, every asset under my legal control is hereby left to my son, Mason Thomas Gilbert.”

The quiet was crisp. Then Peter Bench yelled, “WHAT?”

Owen continued, “There were several verbal agreements made between the citizens of Edenburg and myself. This will supersede all such agreements.”

A woman in the crowd scowled. “That can't be right.”

Owen's face was neutral but Zach saw a crease forming between his eyebrows. He knew what was coming and he didn't like it. Zach glanced at Mason and whispered, “Do you know what this is about?”

Mason shook his head. “Mom left her will with Owen months ago, I never thought to look at it.”

Owen continued. “To address a few of those verbal agreements, and in the likely event of dissent in the execution of this document, I present the following comments:

“Molly Fields, though you are often silent in public, you are a wretched gossip in private and homophobic. I promised you several dresses and a pair of shoes. These things I suggest my son instead gift to your daughter. By the way, she asked me to tell you that she’s a lesbian.”

Every head turned to Molly, sitting to the left of center. Zach recognized her from the barn when Sally had stormed in to collect her daughter. Molly’s head turned very slowly to the back corner of the room where a young woman stood quietly but proudly holding the hand of another woman.

“Peter Bench,” Owen said into the dead silence. All heads swiveled back to him. “You are two-faced and actively afraid that ‘the gay’ will rub off on you. I’m sorry that you’re so insecure in your gender that you feel even being in the presence of a respectful man like my son causes you convulsions.”

“This is outrageous.” Peter stood, scratching his chair back loudly.

Keshel said from the back, “We didn’t come here to listen to a list of insults from a dead woman.”

Zach twisted around, eyes wide. He saw Mason’s expression shutter coldly. Owen lifted his attention from the will. “No, you came here to take a dead woman’s possessions and that woman is now putting you all in your place.”

Peter knocked his chair over trying to get out of the aisle. “I don’t have to stay here and take this.”

“Yes, you do,” Owen said mildly. “Richard, if you could bar the door, please.” A uniformed officer Zach didn’t know closed the doors in the back of the room and locked them. “And Peter, please return to your seat so I can finish this.”

“This is bullshit.”

“Phillip, please assist Mr. Bench to his seat. Richard, if you would.” Owen glanced at Peter and the two officers grabbed him on either side. “Peter, you can sit or they can make you sit.”

“This is harassment. Police brutality. I’ll call your district.”

Owen looked back down at the paper. “Go right ahead. Just as soon as we’re done here. Where was I... Keshel...”

Zach whispered, “Oh my god,” as name after name came off the list and outlined their worse offenses. People whispered at each other. Murmured. A fight broke out between two men against a woman. Molly’s daughter and her partner joined sides to outnumber the men. It went downhill after that. Fists flew, insults crashed across the room followed by chairs. Zach grabbed Mason by the hand and dragged him up to the front with Owen. “Holy crap, Owen.”

The man pulled a whistle from his belt. Zach covered his ears. It pierced through anyway. When the ringing stopped there was only silence, all eyes on the front. Owen tucked his whistle back in his belt. “Richard if you could unlock the door, please. Go home, everybody. This isn’t worth someone dying over and I can’t stick you all in jail, it’s not big enough.”

“You’re not welcome in my field.” Keshel pointed his calloused finger in Mason’s direction.

“You already canceled my services, Keshel. Good riddance.”

From a corner, out of the brawl Amelia said, “You’ll regret that when the mice move into your grain in two days. You’ll have no crop this year.”

Owen held up his hand, “Enough! Start walking out of this building. All of you.”

A few people darted out the door, no doubt to spread the word around town. The exit was more-or-less orderly with both Richard and Philip there to keep things calm. Molly’s daughter approached the front instead, her partner behind her.

Owen sighed, “I’m sorry June—”

“No, I asked her to do it, I was ready for it. Although... I’m not entirely sure I have a home to go to.”

“You can stay at my place until something works out. Both of you.” Owen put a hand on June’s shoulder and led them out at the end of the line.

Zach turned the will. There were at least twenty people on this list. They hadn’t even gone through half. He flipped the page. Had Owen read through

this before coming today? Zach hoped so. He tucked the paperwork in his jeans and followed Mason to the truck.

Sally, take a lesson in friendship from your husband and daughter. They are excellent role models.

“Don’t go home,” Mason said from the passenger side of his Jeep.

Zach turned at the fork and headed up to The Ridge without question. He wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to be in town after that spectacle, anyway. He missed Philadelphia. He missed Bailey. Zach glanced at his best friend. He missed their youth, when things weren’t so complex. He backed into their spot under the tree.

Mason got out and stood looking over the town, hands in his pockets. Zach opened the back of the Jeep so they could sit, but Mason didn’t seem to notice. Zach touched his shoulder. Mason was shaking. It was a small tremor, but it felt like his whole body was vibrating. Zach hugged him from behind and watched the town below.

They stood like that until the sun stepped below the horizon. They watched house lights wink on and cars lazily trail around town. The wind picked up.

Zach said, “Let’s sit in the Jeep.” So they moved. Zach sat against the back seats and Mason lay between his legs against his chest. Zach stroked Mason’s chest and they saw the first stars shine against the darkness. There were no streetlights up here. No bustling city or mansion homes. The dark was deep and the stars took Zach’s breath away. “I forgot how beautiful the sky was out here.”

Mason trailed his hand down Zach’s thigh. “I remember coming up here, sneaking out of our houses. We’d push your truck for a half mile so your mom wouldn’t hear it start up.”

Zach ran his thumb down Mason’s jaw. “I remember lying under this tree in the bed for hours. We’d lose track of time.”

“Help me lose track again.”

Zach turned Mason's head up. They kissed slowly, full of breath. The hum of tension in Mason's body sighed out of him. Zach pulled Mason's shirt out of his jeans and pressed his hand across the skin there.

Mason threaded his fingers in Zach's hair and pulled him closer, tightening their kiss. He popped the buttons on his jeans.

Zach helped him push them down. He stroked Mason's rising cock and felt his own flex tight in his jeans. "I want you," he whispered.

Mason twisted to face him and undid Zach's jeans. Zach flexed up to slide them and his boxers off. His cock pulsed against his thigh. Mason breathed hot air down the length of it. He swirled his tongue around the head.

"Please, Mason. Don't tease me."

Mason's bright blue eyes flicked up to meet his, full of mischief, and Zach knew his plea would go unheeded. Mason took his time slicking the length of Zach's cock. He curled his tongue, dragged it over veins, flicked it across the tip. When Mason finally closed his mouth over the end and sucked, Zach cried out. Mason swallowed him down to the end, all hot and slick. Zach had to pull him up or be lost. His fingers wouldn't work on the condom. Mason had to tear open the lube.

Mason straddled him and together they guided Zach's hard cock through that tight ring. Mason slid up and back down further, up and down again. Each time Zach pushed deeper and they gasped. Zach palmed Mason's ass and guided him down all the way. Then the stroke was easy. Mason flexed as he balanced, and all his muscles squeezed Zach in all the right places.

Zach dropped his head back on the wrong side of the headrest and panted. "I've always loved you, Mason."

Mason's hands gripped the roll bar of the Jeep overhead. "I never doubted you. You've always been steady. I can rely on you."

Zach lifted his head to watch Mason's strong body flex over his. "Please—" Mason's blue eyes caught his and the words stuck in his throat. *Please let me love you, please don't make me leave, please, I want so much with you.*

“Zach, I—” Mason’s eyes greyed. They stared at each other and the rhythm of their bodies hardened.

“Please.”

Mason whispered, “Don’t leave me.”

“I’m right here,” Zach said quietly.

“Swear it, like you swore you would love me.”

And he dragged words from the past into the present, “Mason Gilbert, I don’t have a ring to prove it or a priest to confirm it, but I swear I will always love you with everything I am and I will never leave you.” Mason’s body shook over him. “Will you do the same?”

Mason whispered, “Yes.”

“Will you have me?”

“Yes.”

They surged against each other, just gasps and whispers. When Mason came, arched back and bathed in starlight, he cried Zach’s name. It was the most perfect moment Zach had ever known—better than the kiss behind Joe’s, better than any memory he kept dragging around like a silver lining around storm clouds.

Mason unbent and slid himself gently up and down Zach’s still-hard cock. He met Zach’s eyes and said, “I love you.”

Zach flexed his arms and moved Mason more quickly up and down. “Tell me again.”

“I love you.” Mason arched and tightened every muscle around Zach. “I love you,” he said. “I love you, I love you—”

Zach reached his climax with those words in his ears and Mason’s grey eyes fixed on his.

The Jeep wasn't a comfortable place to sleep when it wasn't planned for. Zach couldn't feel his left leg. Mason lay on top of him, curled and asleep. Zach could handle a dead limb to keep that vision forever.

Mason's phone rang. Both of them jerked. Mason rubbed his eyes and fumbled in his jeans for the device. "Lo?" A pause. "Yeah, dude, we're fine. Up at The Ridge. No, we didn't go home last night. I wanted to stay away for a little bit." Mason rolled off Zach. "Yeah." Zach kicked his dead leg and hissed as the needles moved up to his hip.

Mason said, "I'm not interested." A pause. "No, I'm serious. Cancel it. You have the urn? Bring it up to The Ridge, no just you." Pause. "I'm sure, we'll see you in ten? Okay, bye."

"Owen?" Zach asked.

"Yeah, he's on his way up with Mom's ashes. I want to spread them here."

"No funeral?"

"Funerals were never really my thing. Owen thinks we should have one but it'll be for the benefit of the town more than anything and... well."

"They're not too deserving right now."

"Yeah. Something like that."

They dressed. Zach was standing out at the edge of the ridge trying to banish the last pins and needles when Owen's cop car turned over the gravel. He parked beside them and produced the urn from his side seat.

Mason took the jar and turned it over in his hands. It was smaller than Zach expected and unornamented. Mason walked to the edge of the ridge.

"Shouldn't we say something?" Owen asked. Zach put a hand on his shoulder.

Mason stood at the edge for a moment. With a sudden movement, he broke the urn's seal and swept his arm wide. Ashes spread on the wind and blew down the side of the cliff. They swirled out in space over the morning light. "Zach."

Zach stepped up next to him and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Yeah?"

“There were no women, that was a lie.” Mason glanced at him. “There’s been no one else since you.” He looked down at the town. “But I can’t leave. My birds... there’s nothing for them up in the city.”

“I’ll stay.” Zach said without hesitation.

“But your business?”

“Baliey owns it outright. I’m just a consultant.”

Mason turned. “The condo?”

“Sold it the day I came down here. I don’t need it.”

“You really won’t go back, then?”

Zach reached for Mason’s hand and kissed his knuckles. He answered the real question. “I’m not leaving you ever again.”

Mason smiled at him; a little sad around the edges, but a full, bright smile that left Zach’s heart beating fast.

“So,” Owen said slowly. “Are congratulations in order?”

The sad edges broke into laughter. Owen joined them at the edge of the ridge and wrapped an arm around either of their necks. Behind his back Zach held Mason’s hand. As they took in the view, Zach realized why Mason’s hawks didn’t fly away when he let them off the glove. Being with him, experiencing life at his side, was far more fulfilling than life on your own. Zach was happy to have been baited and caught.

THE END

Author Bio

Tami Veldura is a writer, reader, lover, artist, and the product of a childhood with no puppies. She currently resides in sunny California. Her current writing interests include fantasy and science fiction of every kind as well as gay erotic romance and the occasional nonfiction memoir piece.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#)

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HEART IN HAND

By L.T. Ville

Photo Description

Two buff, naked boxers stand face to face in a deep, open-mouthed kiss. Both hold their hands behind their backs, except for one boxer whose hand wraps around both their hard cocks.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

They have been boxing against each other for years, using their sexual energy to build a strong rivalry instead of acting on their feelings. But things can only build so far before they reach the pressure point.

Sincerely,

Shannon

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: athlete, non-explicit, alpha males, enemies to lovers, sweet no sex, open relationships, love triangles, age gap

Word count: 5,886

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HEART IN HAND

By L.T. Ville

Trenton Grant was jumping rope. Drops of sweat were beginning to form on his forehead, and the little hair that he did have was plastered down like baby hairs. His eyes drifted towards the door. He took a deep breath then looked away because he was determined to stay focused. He knew he was lucky to work out with Gordon Barnes and he wanted to impress him. Mr. Barnes only worked with the best. Gordon was a connoisseur of potential. All he needed was ten minutes with a boxer and he could determine if the guy had the goods. Trent knew he had what it took to be a great boxer but he wasn't sure how Gordon could tell that from a brief workout. He assumed there would be a surprise sparring match to see if he was ready.

Thinking about the match pulled Trent's eyes away from the door. Trent looked around the gym and tried to guess who Gordon was going to pair him with. He ruled out two of the bodybuilders because they were too big to be competitive in the ring, but the third guy was average size. Trent dismissed the third guy as a wannabe bodybuilder and moved on around the room. Trent only saw one guy who looked like he might be able to handle sparring with him.

The door to the gym opened and a lanky teenager walked in. His eyes immediately found Trent's. Trenton sized up the skinny kid. The boy had dirty-blond hair that kissed his ears and startling green eyes that were so full of color they were easy to see from across the gym. Trent noticed a hole on the sleeve of the boy's black T-shirt and the boy's shorts looked dirty. Trent assumed the kid got beat up a lot and he took the boy's clothes and general disheveled appearance as an indication that one of those beatings was recent.

Christian Baker noticed the dark-haired boy staring at him across the gym but he pretended to be oblivious to Trent's careful inspection. Chris looked for his father. He didn't see him so he walked to one of the back rooms. Gordon Barnes was leaned back in his office chair having a private conversation with his latest mistress.

“Excuse me Gordon, but have you seen my dad?” Chris asked.

Gordon waved his free hand and mumbled, “He went for a walk. He’ll be back.”

Chris walked back to the gym and looked around for something to keep him busy while he waited. He saw the dark-haired kid was done jumping rope and had moved on to the pull-up bar. Chris positioned himself directly in front of the kid and smiled.

Trent didn’t feel comfortable doing pull ups with a stranger so close to his crotch so he let go of the bar and dropped to his feet. He held out his hand and smiled. “I’m Trent.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “Good for you.” He ignored Trent’s hand. “How old are you?”

Trent slowly lowered his hand to his side. “I’m nineteen.”

“You’re new here. Did Gordon invite you?”

“Yeah. I’m supposed to work out today and—”

Chris interrupted him, “I didn’t ask for the details.” Trent smiled, thinking Chris was an asshole who probably had earned whatever beating he received. Chris asked, “Why are you smiling?”

“I’m just being polite.”

“You don’t have to smile to do that. In fact, I’d prefer if you didn’t smile at all.”

Trent wasn’t sure how to take Chris’s comments. Chris looked like a punk and his words had a definite edge to them but Trent couldn’t tell if Chris was threatening him or testing him. Trent took a step back and asked, “Who are you?”

Chris looked Trent over from head to toe. “Someone who belongs here.”

Trent watched Gordon walk up behind Chris. Gordon put his arm around Chris’s shoulder and said, “Today’s his first day. Back off.” Chris shrugged, then grunted and walked away. Gordon shook his head, “Don’t worry about Chris. He’ll warm up to you after a few weeks.”

Trent noted that the boy's name was Chris and he noted something else. "A few weeks? Does that mean you'll coach me?"

Gordon said, "I promised your mother I would teach you everything I know and that's what I'm going to do."

"My mother?" Trent knew his mother had recently met a new mark, but he never dreamed it was Gordon Barnes. Trent wondered what she had on a guy like Gordon. His mother was good at digging up dirt on people, then bleeding them until she was bored and ready to move on to new prey.

"Yeah. She didn't tell you?" Gordon thought the surprised look on Trent's face was genuine. He was glad Trent didn't seem aware of how his mother had schemed and blackmailed Gordon.

"No."

"I'm taking you on as a personal favor to her. I'm going to train you, and if I think you have what it takes I'll set up a few fights for you and we'll go from there."

Trent's lips stretched in to a smile. It was all he could do to keep from grabbing Gordon and hugging him. "Yes, sir."

"None of that. It's Gordon or Gordy."

"Yes, Gordon."

"Fast learner. I like it. You do whatever you want today and I'll work you out tomorrow."

"Okay." Gordon went across the gym.

Trent was excited. On his nineteenth birthday, he told his mother he wanted to be a boxer and five months later she had gotten him the best trainer in the city. She had been a miracle worker all of his life. He hated her methods but sometimes even he sat back and enjoyed the rewards. He wanted to ask her what she had dug up on Gordon. He thought he could use it to his advantage and get Gordon to pay extra attention to him.

Trent was so lost in thought he didn't realize he was standing there with a

dumb smile on his face until Chris stood in front of him and asked, “What did I tell you about smiling?”

Gordon saw Chris walk over to Trent and he watched as the smile on Trent’s face vanished. Gordon yelled across the gym, “Chris get your ass over here!”

Chris smirked, then walked away. Trent didn’t understand why Chris was such a jerk. He could bench press Chris without breaking a sweat. Trent was intrigued by the venom that Chris spewed in his direction, and he planned to find out all that he could about the skinny guy who seemed to have taken a personal interest in him.

Chris stayed out of Trent’s way the rest of the afternoon. Before Trent left the gym, he asked a few of the guys about Chris. They told him Chris’s father co-owned the gym and Chris was always there. He asked how old Chris was and they told him Chris was twenty. Chris looked younger than twenty. The guys seemed to like Chris, which made Trent wonder if Chris’s crappy attitude was just for him. He mentioned to one guy that Chris was a jerk and the guy laughed and said Chris was always bitchy with guys his age, but he was a good kid.

Trent showered at the gym, then went to his evening real estate classes at the community college. His thoughts repeatedly drifted to the way Chris looked when he came in the gym. Chris had looked so sweet and vulnerable before he opened his mouth and revealed he wasn’t so sweet. Trent was kind of turned on by the way Chris’s appearance and personality clashed.

Trent’s mother was sitting on the sofa watching television when he arrived at home. She had a beer in her left hand and she was talking on her phone. She hung up when she saw him.

She asked, “How was boxing?”

Trent sat next to her. “What do you have on Gordon Barnes?”

She was disappointed Trent knew she was blackmailing Gordon. She wanted Trent to think he had gotten the call because of his talent and not because she was up to her usual schemes. Trent’s face lit up when Gordon called him and told him he had seen his last fight and he wanted him to stop by

his gym for a workout. Trent was the independent type. He knew she could move mountains but he rarely asked her to move anything. He usually hated when she interfered so she tried to limit the things she did for him. It was hard not to constantly help him. He was her baby and she loved him.

He put his head on her shoulder. She was only fourteen years older than him but she felt so much older. Her first few years with him had been hell but once she stumbled into a good con, it was easy to keep scheming. Her skills only improved with age. Her latest scheme had delivered her son's dream to him on a silver platter.

Trent asked, "What do you have on him?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because he's the best coach around and he's going to train me without actually knowing me. Whatever you have, I know it's big. So what is it?"

She sighed. She had to break in to a few places and plant cameras in order to get the goods on Gordon. She caught him with a few of his mistresses, but she knew that wasn't blackmail worthy because the whole town, including his wife, knew he dicked around. It took three months before she caught Gordon on camera with his pants down. She was sitting on a secret that would end Gordon's career and maybe his life if the wrong person got their hands on the evidence.

She whispered, "He's cheating on his wife."

Trent laughed. "Everyone knows that."

"I wasn't done." She paused for effect. "He's cheating on his wife with his best friend's twenty-year-old son."

"He's gay?"

"Yeah. He's messing around with a twink."

Trent smiled. "Twink? Mom lay off my gay porn."

"Twinks are hot."

Trent moved his head off of his mother's shoulder. "No they're not. I like boys with muscles. If I wanted skin and bones I'd date a girl."

His mother hit his arm. "I'm not skin and bones."

“You’re my mother. Why would I want a girl who looks like you?”

She hit his arm harder. “You don’t want girls in the first place.”

“But if I did—”

“If you did, you would have gotten one of them pregnant by now with the way you love to fuck.”

Trent stood and teased, “I get it from you.”

His mother slapped him on his ass. “You get that from your father. He’s the one who’s trying to populate the world. How many brothers and sisters do you have? Eight?”

“Good night Mom.” Trent stopped and turned around. “And thank you.”

She took another swallow of her beer. She knew she wasn’t a perfect mother, but everything she did, she did for Trent. She had given him the kind of life she had only dreamed of as a child. The only thing he went without was a father figure in the house and that was because his father was a worthless piece of shit and she couldn’t stomach having that asshole living with her.

Trent sprawled across his bed and called his boyfriend. He and Phen had been together for nine months. Phen was going to college across the country but they had a good relationship. They spoke almost every night and they were planning their summer as if it was guaranteed that Phen would be back in town. Neither wanted to consider the very real possibility that the only internship Phen would receive might be thousands of miles away.

They had an open relationship. It was Trent’s idea, but Phen was all for it. Trent craved sex. He needed it on a regular basis or he started to feel fidgety and strange. His countless hookups fulfilled his physical needs until Phen was in town, but it was always Phen he wanted, everyone else was just a warm hole to satisfy his needs. He loved when Phen came home to visit for the holidays because their sex marathons left him satiated for a few weeks before the urge to fuck some nameless stranger took over.

Trent talked to Phen for close to an hour until Phen said he needed to go write a paper. Trent said goodnight then masturbated to thoughts of fucking

Phen—a gym rat with a buff physique and a gentle heart. Trent wasn't usually attracted to Asian guys but he wanted Phen the second he saw him. He was sexy and beefy and stacked in all the places Trent liked.

The next day the gym was packed. Gordon focused his attention on Trent. He pushed Trent as hard as he could just to see if the kid would break, but Trent didn't complain or ask to stop. Trent did everything Gordon told him to do. Chris watched the workout from a distance. He didn't like sharing Gordon's attention with anyone and especially not an attractive teenager. Chris was so focused on Gordon and Trent that he didn't notice his father standing next to him.

Mike saw that Chris was staring at Gordon and Trent but he misunderstood why Chris was staring. He thought his son wanted to be a boxer. He said, "This is why your mother didn't want me to bring you here."

Chris jumped. He looked at his father. "Huh?"

"I see the way you're watching them. You want to box, don't you?" His heart filled with pride. The son who he had dismissed as soft was showing signs of having an edge. He wanted to do all he could to encourage his son. He knew his wife would be pissed because she hated boxing, but he didn't care. His wife had coddled and sheltered Chris for most of his life. When Chris started winning swimming races, Mike thought Stephanie had won and Chris would never share his love of boxing, but things were changing. When Chris turned nineteen, he suddenly wanted to come to the gym and he had been hanging around for a full year. He sometimes worked out, but he rarely paid attention to the boxers. He spent a lot of time in Gordon's office helping him file videos or study various fights.

Chris was a different kid when he was around Gordon. Gordon brought out Chris's tough kid persona and Mike liked seeing his son in a new light. If he had known there was a tough kid hiding inside Chris, he would have taken Gordon up on his partnership offer years before. He had waited until Chris was moving to the city for college in order to join Gordon, but in retrospect, he could have been closer to Chris if he had moved the family sooner.

Chris knew his father loved boxing so he wasn't surprised by the smile on his father's face. Chris smiled, "Do you think Gordon will train me?"

Mike laughed, "He'll train you for fun in his spare time, but I don't think he'll put too much time in to you unless he sees promise." Chris's hope of spending more time with Gordon faded. Mike added, "I can train you."

Chris's hope came back. "Do you think I could ever get a body like that kid over there?" Chris nodded toward Trent.

"Some boxers have body types that allow them to be good swimmers. That guy ain't one of them. You can't be a competitive swimmer and have a body like his."

Chris watched Gordon put his hand on Trent's lower back. "I guess I'm done with swimming then."

Mike tried not to smile. "That's up to you."

Chris envisioned himself in the ring knocking out Trent. "When can we start training?"

"We can start now if you want."

Chris looked at Trent. He wanted to beat him and he needed training in order to do that. Guys as cute as Trent were a threat to Chris's relationship with Gordon and Chris wanted to keep a close eye on everything that happened between Trent and Gordon without making it obvious he was spying on them. Chris stood up straight, "What do you want me to do first?"

Trent had been secretly watching Chris. He was surprised when he looked up and saw Chris was no longer staring at him. He watched Chris practicing his stance with a middle-aged guy. Chris didn't appear to have much boxing experience. Trent laughed a few times and Gordon followed Trent's gaze.

Gordon whispered, "Well I'll be damned." Gordon instantly knew what Chris was doing. He thought it was cute and he wondered how far Chris was going to take it.

A year later, Gordon received his answer. Chris was going to take it all the way. Chris had added twenty pounds of muscle and won a few boxing matches

and he was begging Gordon to let him fight Trent. Gordon knew it was personal so he kept saying no, but there was beginning to be chatter in the gym that Gordon wouldn't let Trent and Chris meet in the ring because Gordon was afraid Chris would win. Gordon didn't know that Mike was the person who started the chatter. Mike wanted to force Gordon to agree to the fight.

For his part, Trent couldn't wait to meet Chris in the ring. Trent was tired of Chris's attitude and he was ready to shut him up for a while. He thought it would be good for Chris to be knocked down a few pegs and he wanted to end all of the questions he was hearing at the gym. He was a better boxer than Chris and he wanted people to see it for themselves.

Their first boxing match was on a Saturday evening in late August. Phen was in town that weekend so he came to watch the match. Trent's mother came to watch him. Chris had a few friends come. He knew his mother wasn't going to be there because she had flat out refused to ever attend any of his matches.

Mike gave Chris a pep talk and told him that if he wanted Gordon to take over his training, he had to leave it all in the ring. Trent didn't need Gordon to give him a pep talk because Trent had all the motivation that he needed. He couldn't wait to take a swing at Chris.

They were pretty evenly matched. In the middle of the fifth round, Trent hugged Chris and whispered, "Does your father know Gordon fucks you?" Trent expected Chris to lose his form and get sloppy, instead, Chris unleashed a flurry of combinations and knocked Trent on his ass. Trent was surprised. He got back up and continued boxing. They were scheduled for eight rounds and they went the full eight rounds and had to wait for the judges' decision. Trent won.

Chris thought Trent won because the judges liked Gordon, but Mike assured Chris the judges were fair.

Chris was paranoid. He knew that he and Gordon had been very careful about their relationship. He briefly wondered if Gordon told Trent but he knew Gordon wouldn't do that. The next alternative was that Gordon had either hit on Trent or Gordon and Trent had something more than training going on and Trent somehow realized Chris was competition.

Chris knew he wouldn't be able to talk to Trent that night but he made plans to corner him the next day. Chris couldn't sleep that night because he was paranoid other people besides Trent might know about his relationship with Gordon.

He and Gordon had a two and a half year relationship. They both had their reasons for keeping their relationship secret. Gordon had a wife, kids, mistresses and a best friend to consider and Chris didn't think his father could handle knowing he was gay and in love with Gordon. Chris was content with things the way they were. He wasn't dreaming of a future with Gordon or hoping Gordon left his wife and kids behind or abandoned his mistresses. Gordon loved women and he loved Chris and Chris was okay with that as long as he was the only guy in Gordon's life.

Chris and Gordon met at a hotel the next afternoon. Gordon carefully inspected Chris's injuries. Gordon rubbed cream on Chris's visible bruises. Gordon joked, "It's a good thing I stopped by Viv's on my way here." Chris responded by kissing Gordon. He let the kiss speak for itself and send Gordon the message that Chris's body was ready and willing to give him what he wanted. Gordon broke the kiss and asked, "What did Trent whisper to you yesterday?" Chris was dumbfounded. Gordon added, "Don't make that face."

Chris said, "He knows about us."

"His mother must have told him. I wonder how long he's known." Gordon remembered the look on Trent's face when he told him he was training him because of his mother.

"How would his mother know?" Gordon stopped rubbing the cream into Chris's skin. Chris nervously asked again, "Gordy, how does she know?"

Gordon cleared his throat. "She's why we don't go to the park anymore. She took a picture of us kissing in my car and she blackmailed me with it."

"You've been paying her off?"

"She didn't want money. She wanted me to train Trent."

Chris hated Trent even more because Trent's success was a fraud. Trent's mother had to blackmail Gordon in order to get Gordon to train him. Chris could have blackmailed Gordon if he wanted to, but he had taken the right path

and tried to earn his place as one of Gordon's boxers. He put in long hours in the gym and gave up the sport that he had loved since he was a child. He changed his diet. He sacrificed a peaceful relationship with his mother. He gave all he could because he wanted to make Gordon proud of him and because he wanted Gordon to look at him the way he looked at Trent.

The next day, Gordon called Mike and told him he was going to take over Chris's training sessions. Mike was ecstatic. Chris pretended to be surprised by the news, but he and Gordon had already discussed things. Chris was going to become friends with Trent and find out exactly what Trent knew and when he knew it. Gordon was hesitant about the plan at first because he thought Chris might actually like Trent if he gave him a chance and that scared him. Gordon wasn't going to commit to Chris, but he loved him enough to not want to think about the day when their relationship came to an end.

Mike took Chris out to dinner to celebrate the good news. Chris's mother stayed at home. She refused to celebrate anything about Chris's boxing career. She wanted Chris to wake up one day and go back to the sweet kid he was before he bonded with Gordon. She didn't approve of their friendship. She and Mike had argued about it a lot. Mike made her feel like she was imagining things and eventually, she believed him. She trained her eyes to look around the smoke and that usually worked, but sometimes Gordon put his hand on Chris and she got a creepy vibe.

Gordon decided to train Trent and Chris at the same time so neither could accuse him of doing something different with one of them. A few days after the fight, Trent and Chris were face to face again. Trent couldn't believe Gordon was going to train his main competition. He took it as a personal shot against him.

When they were done training, Trent pulled Gordon aside and said, "I don't want to work out with Chris."

"Why not?"

"He stares at me all the time and it makes me uncomfortable." Trent didn't mention that he was sexually attracted to Chris and it was difficult for him not to get hard when he had Chris touching him while he stretched or spotting him

while he lifted. Then there was the way Chris smelled when he was sweaty. It was an intoxicating mix of deodorant and foul funk that was shocking at first, but addictive after the initial shock. Trent had sniffed Chris a few times that day and he swore Chris caught him once.

Gordon told him, “Man up. Who the fuck cares if he stares at you?”

Trent wanted to argue but he decided to go home and ask his mother for advice. She had heard him bashing Chris for a full year so she said, “Just fuck him and get it over with.”

Trent played dumb. “Huh?”

“I know you. You want him so go get him and get it out of your system.”

Trent was done talking about it. He stormed off to his room and called Phen, who was at the airport waiting for his flight back to school. He knew something was wrong. He asked Trent about it but Trent said he was fine. Phen assumed Trent was upset because he was leaving. Phen told Trent he was proud of him and he couldn't wait for the summer so that they could move in together. He was doing his best to cheer Trent up but Trent's tone let him know that Trent was still in the dumps. Phen got off the phone and boarded the plane. He was worried about Trent. The sex they had that morning didn't have its usual fire and he knew something was wrong with Trent. He was worried that Trent was getting ready to break up with him.

Trent tried to train with Chris without focusing on him, but he couldn't do it. Chris distracted him and he had to put an end to it. He cornered Chris in the locker room one day and asked, “Why do you want to train with me? Do you want me to tell your father your secret?”

Chris laughed then went in to full asshole mode. “Tell him.”

Trent pushed Chris. “Why are you fucking with me?”

“Because you like it.” Chris said it to be sarcastic, but the look on Trent's face surprised him. Chris's eyes increased in size from the realization that Trent liked the attention he gave him. Trent stepped away from Chris. They stared at each other until Trent couldn't take it. Trent turned around and left.

Chris told Gordon about the incident in the locker room and Gordon felt a wave of jealousy in his heart. He was certain that he was going to lose Chris to

Trent. Chris couldn't see it, but he and Trent were perfect for each other. Gordon thought about shutting down the whole thing before it fully took root, but he couldn't bring himself to do that to Chris. Gordon found his match in Kathy and it wouldn't be right for him to deny Chris the same opportunity. He wanted Chris to have what he had and he hoped he and Chris could still get together from time to time.

From the outside, people thought that Gordon was cheating on Kathy, but he wasn't. Kathy knew about all of Gordon's women, including Viv, his long-term mistress, and she didn't care. The only person Kathy didn't know about was Chris and that was because Gordon knew she would leave him if she found out he was sleeping with her nephew. He had always agreed that friends and family were off limit but Chris made him break that rule. He didn't care that his wife was Chris's aunt or that Chris's father was his best friend. All that mattered to him was the way Chris made him feel. He had spoken to his therapist about it and his therapist thought his feelings for Chris were reflective of his feelings toward Mike. When he and Mike were teenagers, they had fooled around a few times. Mike ended things and they went on being best friends as if they had never touched each other, but Gordon didn't forget. Gordon's therapist tied everything to his secret feelings for Mike. According to his therapist, Gordon probably fell in love with Kathy and married her because he subconsciously wanted to be related to Mike. Gordon didn't believe everything his therapist said, but he did agree that it was nice seeing Mike almost every day and that he would replace Chris with Mike if given the chance.

Four years later, Gordon was still managing Chris and Trent and only a few things had changed. Trent and Phen had broken up and Phen was working in California. Trent's mother was engaged to a local news reporter. Chris and Trent had become frenemies. They were best friends and fierce competitors. They had fought each other four more times. Trent was up four to one, but Chris had won the last fight with a knockout.

Gordon rarely allowed Chris and Trent to spar together because they were too violent with each other. Gordon knew it was built up sexual tension. He

felt the tension oozing from them and it started to interfere with his relationship with Chris. Chris had recently dyed his hair and gotten the same hair cut as Trent. Gordon and Chris fought about it. Gordon realized he and Chris were fighting all the time over little things.

Gordon hated watching Chris and Trent train together. He knew their spontaneous wrestling matches were just excuses for them to touch each other. It drove him crazy until one day he snapped. He forced Chris and Trent to stay until after the gym closed. Chris and Trent went to shower. Gordon closed the door that separated the bathroom and shower area from the locker room and locked the door from the outside. He waited until Chris and Trent finished showering. Chris tried to pull the door and it wouldn't budge.

Gordon yelled, "You guys need to have sex already so you can stop distracting each other and focus on training."

Chris asked, "What the fuck are you talking about? Open the door!"

Gordon responded, "You've been friends with Trent for four years and you still haven't been able to tell me what he knew and when he knew it. Why is that?"

Chris ignored the question. "Open the door!"

"The janitor will be here in a few hours. Deal with your shit. Good night."

Trent and Chris banged on the door until they realized Gordon was serious and he was gone. They sat on the floor for a few minutes and complained about Gordon losing his mind and locking them in there then Trent stood and dropped his towel. Trent claimed he had to pee, but he was really just looking for an excuse to be naked again. He walked over to the urinal.

Chris got up and dropped his towel too. He walked over to the urinal next to Trent. Trent whispered, "Your boyfriend just gave you permission to be with me. What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing."

Trent turned toward Chris. Trent's dick was at full attention. Chris turned and looked at Trent. Chris wanted Trent but he wasn't going to make the first move. Trent reached for Chris's semi-erect penis and stroked it a few times. Chris hesitantly reached for Trent's dick. They quietly stroked each other.

Trent leaned in and kissed Chris. Chris's penis hardened. They both kept their free arm behind their back as if they were trying to hold back. They kissed and stroked until Chris came. Chris felt like he had cheated on Gordon. He fell to his knees and cried. Trent knew Chris felt guilty. Trent kneeled in front of Chris and wrapped his arms around him. He rubbed Chris's back and promised him everything was going to be okay.

Once Chris calmed down, Trent moved and got more towels from the shower area. He made a pallet on the floor and he and Chris sat on the pallet and had a strained conversation about what happened between them. Chris swore it would never happen again, but there was hesitation in his voice so Trent knew Chris didn't believe his own words. Somewhere along the lines, Trent had fallen for Chris and Chris had fallen for him. Neither planned it or wanted it, but it happened and it was real.

The janitor freed them two hours later, after the damage was done. Chris spent the next week trying to forget how good it felt to have Trent touch him and kiss him. He blew up at Trent and Gordon multiple times when they were working out. Gordon knew Chris was as good as gone. In private, Chris yelled at Gordon for trying to give him away. Gordon didn't argue or say much. He allowed Chris to vent his frustrations because he knew the real problem was that Chris wanted to be with Trent but Chris didn't know how to say it.

Three months later, things had sorted themselves out. Trent and Chris were officially a couple and Gordon and Chris were mostly over. A year later, Trent and Chris were an exclusive couple and they were happy together. Trent's mother loved to take credit for their relationship because it was her meddling that led Trent to Gordon's gym, and by extension, to Chris. Gordon loved to take credit for seeing what the couple could have been long before they saw it themselves. He often reminded them he was the one who gave them the push they needed to begin exploring the chemistry between them.

Chris and Trent went public with their relationship three years later. They wanted to tell the world they were in love with each other and they did. They eventually retired from boxing and worked at the gym preparing the next generation of boxers.

THE END

Author Bio

L.T. Ville (aka internet author Lustyville) specializes in gay fiction with a twist. Most of L.T.'s stories are slice of life stories that reflect some aspect of the human experience. L.T.'s stories often deal with serious topics such as depression and abuse. L.T. dabbles in gay erotica, but even the sex stories have substance.

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STRIP, PLEASE

By **Jena Wade**

Photo Description

Man with a buzz cut, dressed in jeans and a SWAT team vest, has another man, face not shown, in handcuffs.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

What happens when this cop falls for the man he just arrested? And is the guy as innocent as he seems?

Sincerely,

Holly

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: law enforcement, stripper, undercover, booklovers, poledancing

Word count: 13,307

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STRIP, PLEASE

By Jena Wade

CHAPTER ONE

Matt Hayes stomped through the crowded streets, boots clapping against the pavement as he weaved around the mess of people. *Doesn't anyone fucking work?* Matt clenched his jaw as a random person stopped right in front of him, forcing him to halt abruptly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Matt saw another man come out of the *Fun N' Fantasy* adult store headed right for him, not paying any attention. He couldn't move out of the way fast enough and the brunet ran right into him, almost knocking him to the ground.

"Watch where you're goin'!" Matt held the man at arm's length and righted both of them.

Soft doe-eyes met Matt's hard glare. An inch or two shorter than Matt's six-foot frame, the man wore a button-up black shirt with jeans that clung to his body in all the right places. Matt's anger dissipated as a grin split across the smaller man's face. Then he spoke.

"Hey, baby, don't be like that. I can put a smile on that face. Just say the word." The man practically purred as he spoke, running his hand over Matt's biceps, outlining the tattoo he had there. His eyes held all sorts of suggestions as to the meaning of his words.

Matt tensed under the caress. *You've got to be kidding me.* "Come again?"

"You looking for a good time? Name your price. For a hot piece like you, I'd offer a discount." The man looked Matt up and down, undressing him with his eyes.

For a moment Matt was tempted, but he shook that away. Disappointment and anger fueled his actions. *Disappointment? Why do I care if the man is a prostitute?* Reaching behind him, he located the cuffs attached to his belt. He had one cuff on the man's wrist and was twisting his arms around his back before the man had time to react.

“What the hell?” Panic filled the smaller man’s voice.

“You’re under arrest for solicitation.” The cuffs snapped into place. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.” Grasping the man’s shoulder, Matt stood him upright and started walking towards his car. “You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you.” Matt paused. Usually at this point his perp would be spouting off obscenities or pleading for a break. *Pretty eyes has nothing to say?* He shook his head. *You can’t be attracted to a man you’re arresting.* Matt’s cock didn’t seem to agree, though. He discreetly adjusted himself as he pushed the man along. “Do you understand these rights?”

“Yes, sir.”

Sir? What kind of criminal is this?

Approaching his car Matt said, “Stop. Don’t move.”

The man did as he was told. Matt clicked the button on his key fob, unlocking the car. He opened the back door of his unmarked police car and checked to make sure the seat was empty. It had been a long time since he’d arrested anyone.

Grabbing his catch by the arm he steered him toward the door. *Holy muscles.* Heat radiated under his fingertips where his skin touched the thin material of the other man’s shirt. He placed his hand on the man’s head and gently pushed him into the backseat.

Matt walked to the driver’s side and slid inside. He met the perp’s eyes in the rear view mirror. They were masked, with an indecipherable expression. *What’s your story?*

“What’s your name?” He turned to look at the man sitting comfortably in the backseat.

“Lucky Johnson.”

“Johnson?” Matt raised his brow.

Lucky winked at him and flashed a sexy smile. “It’s a stage name. I work at *The Topless Bottom.*”

Ignoring the lust heating his skin, Matt turned and started driving. *A stripper. Should've known.*

The ride to the police station was quiet. Matt glanced in the rear view mirror every so often to see Lucky staring out the window, admiring the scenery as if he was on an adventure. He didn't beg, he didn't plead. He didn't offer any "favors" to get out of the charges. *Good thing. I probably would've taken him up on that.* Lucky had a confidence about him that Matt couldn't help but admire.

Pulling into the police station, Matt flipped off the car and exited the vehicle. He opened the back door and motioned for Lucky to get out. When Lucky stood up, Matt grasped his shoulder and directed him to the precinct entrance. Once inside, he set him on the chair in the bullpen and started filling out paperwork.

"Who's this?" Brad Donovan, one of the detectives, asked.

Matt didn't look up from his paperwork. "A prostitute. Caught him for solicitation outside of *Fun N' Fantasy*."

Brad placed his hands on his hips and looked pointedly at Matt. "Hayes, you haven't filled out all of your HR paperwork. You can't go around arresting people without being a full employee."

Matt tossed the pen on the form he was filling out and narrowed his eyes at Brad. "I'm not going to ignore law-breaking when I see it." He went back to his paperwork.

Brad sighed, but didn't argue further. "Did you interview him yet?"

"No, we just got here. I haven't even run his name yet."

"You won't find anything. This is my first arrest." Lucky joined the conversation.

Both officers turned to look at him. Matt couldn't hide his surprise.

"Have you ever been paid for sex or sexual favors?" Brad asked.

Lucky shook his head. "No, sir. I made the mistake of hitting on a good-looking man and found myself in handcuffs."

You manipulative little fuck.

Before Matt could argue, Brad started talking. “You arrested him for hitting on you?” Brad rolled his eyes. “You might find it offensive that he’d mistake you for a gay man, but it’s not against the law.”

“Fuck off, Donovan. I didn’t arrest the guy for having accurate gaydar.” *Chew on that, asshole.* “I arrested him because he told me to ‘name my price’ and since I was hot enough, I could get a discount. That’s grounds for arrest.”

“Is that true?” Brad looked at Lucky.

Lucky leaned back and shrugged. “I think it’s open for interpretation.”

Cheeky little bastard. Matt continued to fill out the paperwork, pen pressed against the paper harder than necessary.

“C’mon, I’ll take you to the interrogation room.” Brad pulled Lucky to his feet and led him across the room.

Matt didn’t check out his ass as he walked away. He didn’t.

Jordan took a deep breath as his cousin Brad closed the door to the cold, concrete room. Once inside he leaned against the wall, resting his head against the hard surface. He breathed heavily.

Brad laughed and shook his head. “Lucky, huh? First day as my planted informant and you end up arrested?” He spun Jordan around and unlocked the cuffs.

Rubbing his wrists, Jordan looked at Brad. “Fuck you! I was trying to get into character. How was I supposed to know he was a cop? With an uncle and cousin on the force I kind of assumed I knew all the cops.” Jordan scrubbed his face with his hands. “Christ. I can’t stop shaking. Is this going to mess things up for you and Uncle Rick?”

Brad waved his hand in the air. “It’s all good. You aren’t going to be booked for this. It’s too flimsy and Hayes is just in a pissy mood.”

Jordan let out a sigh. *Thank God.* “Who the hell is he, anyway?” *Besides drop dead gorgeous.* He met Brad’s eyes.

“Oh, no. No. No. No. I’ve seen that look before. You cannot be interested in Matt Hayes. First of all, he’s a cop—a detective. He was just hired last

week. Apparently he's waiting for some job to open up in Texas, so he's here temporarily or some shit. We needed the extra help with the drug and prostitution ring run out of *The Topless Bottom*."

"Why can't we just tell him that I'm... not a criminal?" *Then he'll know I'm not actually a whore.*

Brad sighed. "I talked with Dad about that. Apparently there's a rumor that Hayes is dirty. I don't get that vibe. I think it's just a disgruntled co-worker making trouble. Hayes is good at what he does and he exposed some police corruption out in California. Apparently some people didn't take too kindly to that. But, we can't take chances with your safety, Jordan."

"I'll be fine."

"You need to be focused on the task at hand. You're undercover. Your job is to gather intel and get out." Brad ran his fingers through his hair. "Maybe this isn't the best idea. You aren't a cop, Jordan. I worry about you working at that club."

Jordan stood up straight. "No. I can do it. We've been over this before. You and Uncle Rick agreed to let me try."

"If I had anyone else who was capable, you wouldn't be in there. You're a business major. You work at a bookstore. You haven't been trained for this sort of thing. You're a bookworm, for Christ's sake."

Jordan rolled his eyes. "But you don't have anyone else. And if I want to buy the bookstore, I need the extra money. This is a win-win for both of us. I get some intel for you and some cash for me. And I know how to take care of myself. You and your dad made sure of that when I moved in with you." *So I could protect myself the next time someone beat me to a bloody pulp.*

Brad nodded and sighed. "Okay. Okay. I just worry about you." He patted Jordan's shoulder. "You're doing great. I barely recognized you."

Jordan's face flushed and he laughed. "Shit. I'm freaking out." He rubbed his hands across his face. "I was hoping I was putting on a good show. But I wasn't sure."

"Hell, I nearly blew your cover when I saw you sitting there. Jesus. What the hell were you doing at that store, anyway?"

Jordan smiled. “Getting an outfit for my first performance tonight.”

Confusion flashed across Brad’s face. “You’re a stripper. Why do you need an outfit?”

“Perhaps outfit isn’t the best term. I bought a G-string... well, three of them. I’m wearing one right now.”

Brad shook his head and walked toward the door. “Don’t fucking tell me those things, dude. That’s gross.” Brad turned. “Where are the other two?”

“In my back pocket. I didn’t think a bag was necessary. They’re so tiny. Hardly anything—”

Brad covered his ears. “Okay. I get it. You can shut up.”

Jordan’s smiled faltered. “So, what do we do now?”

“Well, I have to put the cuffs back on. Then we’re going back to the bullpen and I’m telling Hayes that we’re letting you go.”

“I don’t think he’ll like that.”

“No, probably not. This should be fun. C’mon.”

Jordan turned around and placed his hands behind his back. He chuckled. “This remind you of when we stole Uncle Rick’s handcuffs and got them taken away at school?”

“Yeah, Dad got so mad he took us to the jail and pretended to book us.” Brad laughed. “He even called your dad to come get you.”

“When your dad left us in that cell, I nearly puked. I was more scared of my dad coming to get me than I was of going to jail.” Jordan sobered at the thought. That day had been the first of many times his father’d beaten him.

“Let’s get this over with, cuz.” Brad placed his hand on his shoulder and directed him out of the interrogation room.

They walked over to where Hayes was sitting at his desk, reading glasses over his deep chocolate eyes as they roved over a sheet of paper. *Gorgeous*. It had been Matt’s glare flashing with anger that had made Jordan want to erase that look from his face and kiss him senseless until his eyes showed arousal and nothing else. *Fuck, I’m in trouble*.

Looking up, Matt removed his glasses and rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. Something in the motion made Jordan's cock twitch. He looked at the floor, the wall, the chairs, anything except for the sexy cop who probably thought he was some sort of junkie-whore-stripper. *Great first impression.*

"What are you doing?" Matt's commanding voice did nothing to quell Jordan's arousal.

"I'm letting him go." Brad unlocked the cuffs and set them on the corner of Matt's desk.

Matt narrowed his eyes and tossed the glasses on his desk. "Oh, you are?"

Brad wasn't intimidated. "Yeah, your grounds for arrest were flimsy at best. Lucky is a stripper, not a whore. And that isn't against the law."

Matt stood up and faced Brad. Jordan held his breath while the two macho men sized each other up.

"I'm a detective, just like you, Donovan. Isn't it about time you started playing nice?" Matt's voice was quiet but firm.

Brad crossed his arms over his chest. "You can be a detective and arrest whoever you want once you get your paperwork done. You can't go around arresting every twink who hits on you, just because you had a shitty day."

Matt snorted and rolled his eyes. "He's hardly a twink."

Jordan shifted his feet. His eyes flicked to the clock on the wall. "Am I free to go? I have to be at work in an hour."

Both men looked his way. Matt gave him a hard stare. "Yeah, but rest assured we'll be seeing you again."

I look forward to it. "Well, officers, it's been a pleasure." He looked at Matt. "If you really would like to see me again, you can see all you want of me at the club any day of the week." He winked and walked away.

Once outside he leaned against the building, catching his breath. *Holy shit.* Jordan shook his head at himself. Never in his *real life* would he have approached a man like Matt Hayes. *And never in my real life would a man like Matt Hayes want a bookworm like me.* Straightening up, he began his walk

back to the apartment he lived in above the bookstore. He needed to get back into character before his first performance tonight.

Think of the money, and the people you're helping. That'll get you through the night.

CHAPTER TWO

Matt exited his car, and Brad got out of the passenger's side. It had been a week since he'd arrested Lucky Johnson and he hadn't stopped thinking about him. *I'll probably see him tonight.* Matt's pace quickened at the thought, forcing Brad to jog to catch up.

"Where's the fire?"

Matt ignored him. "Tell me about the club."

They walked side by side. The club was a two block walk from their parking spot. The lull of the afternoon traffic rush lingered in the background. Shops and restaurants lined the streets and people crowded the sidewalks.

"It's a clean place. We're far enough outside of Chicago to attract a wealthier clientele rather than the typical 'hood rats. But we're also close to the highway, so a lot of truckers frequent the place. Both men and women dance there. There are three stages, numerous backrooms, and an upstairs, which is where we suspect most of the prostitution takes place."

Matt's stomach tightened. *Does Lucky use the upstairs?* He mentally kicked himself. *Why do I even care? He's just a stripper, possibly a whore. Not someone I should be interested in.* Not that he was interested, because he wasn't. He'd spent the last week thinking of Lucky at random times, but that didn't mean anything. *Right?*

Brad continued, "There's no nudity on the main stages. Just men and women dancing in... outfits. The backrooms are another story. Pay enough money and you can get pretty much anything, or so I've been told."

"What made you suspect this place to begin with?"

"Couple of months ago a young man was found dead not far from here. His body had been dumped. He had a lot of drugs in his system and had been raped. Our investigation led us here. One of the female strippers told us she suspected the owner was pimping out the workers and selling drugs to the customers, but she couldn't prove it. She left town soon after. Case is still open."

Matt shook his head. “After ten years of this work you’d think I’d be used to hearing things like that. Still makes me sick.”

Brad nodded and met his eyes. “Probably why you’re good at what you do. It’s hard to solve crimes when you’re too jaded to care.”

Matt nodded in return. They approached the building. Brad had been right, it looked clean. A bouncer stood outside checking IDs and letting people inside, turning away the few that tried to get in underage. The two story brick building had no windows, just a neon sign reading *The Topless Bottom*.

“What’s the game plan?” Brad asked.

Matt shrugged. “Just two guys visiting a club after a long day at work. Have a beer, watch some of the entertainment. See what we can see.”

“Let’s do it.”

Inside the club Matt waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark. There was a smoky haze, caused by the fog machines, and it was loud. The smell of liquor and sweat hung in the air. Strobe lights flashed and moved across the stage, following dancers as they tantalized and teased the customers.

Matt’s eyes were immediately drawn to a man dressed in a pair of tight white briefs, which showed off his luscious bubble butt. He had on a white shirt, unbuttoned, flowing behind him as he moved. He made his way across the stage in perfect beat with the pounding music. *Lucky*. Matt’s heart rate quickened, and his cock stood at attention as Lucky gyrated to the rhythm of the music. As the tempo increased, Lucky gripped the stripper pole at the end of the stage and spun around. His muscles flexed and rippled as he flipped himself upside down and wrapped his legs around the pole. The artful display of his movements surprised Matt and he couldn’t look away. As far as he was concerned, he and Lucky were the only ones in the room, and Lucky was dancing for him and him alone.

Lucky spun and flipped, and flipped again, bending and twisting his body into impossible contortions. At one point he held himself upside down and gripped the pole with both hands. While spinning around, he extended his legs into a full split. After a moment, he bent one knee and wrapped it around the

pole, then let go with both hands and arched his back. The flowing white of his shirt took the form of angel wings as he circled the pole in slow motion.

Matt held his breath at the sight. The beauty and grace of Lucky's movements seemed out of place in a strip club. *That body should be worshiped and cherished.*

The music stopped, and Lucky let go of the pole. Sweat glistened on his chest, and blue and red strobe lights followed him down the stairs off the stage. Men and women alike tucked bills into his briefs. Matt let out a ragged breath and turned toward the bar. *Fuck*

A hand clapped on his shoulder startled him. "See anything you like?" Brad asked.

"Nope. Not a thing. Wouldn't mind a drink, though." *And a cold shower.*

Brad and Matt sat at the bar, facing the stage for a while, sipping their beers slowly.

Lucky took the stage again with a group of dancers and did a quick dance routine, clad only in a G-string and combat boots. The moves were nothing like what he had done on the stripper pole, but still sexy as hell. Matt looked away and watched a different stage for a while.

After a few minutes Brad nudged his shoulder. "Take a look to your right. We might have trouble."

Matt turned slowly to see a large man handling one of the male dancers roughly. He held a tight grip on the smaller man's slender shoulders, hard enough to leave bruises. The smaller man cowered next to the meaty jackass, who was trying to force him into one of the backrooms. The dancer tried to twist out of the man's grip, but that only angered the larger man. Just as Matt and Brad were about to interrupt, Lucky came in and pushed on the big man. The smaller man ducked behind Lucky.

Matt and Brad approached to hear Lucky yell, "He said *no*, asshole. Back off."

The big man shoved Lucky and lunged for the other dancer. Lucky recovered and threw a hard punch, which connected with a resounding crack, knocking the big man on his ass. "I said back off." Lucky quivered with anger.

Matt stood and stared. He was sure his eyes must have been as big as saucers watching Lucky nearly knockout a man twice his size. *So he knows a little self defense.* The realization was oddly comforting.

Lucky took the smaller man into his arms. “Are you okay, Gavin?”

Gavin nodded and leaned into Lucky.

Matt seethed with jealousy. “This happen here often?”

Lucky met his eyes, but said nothing. He kissed Gavin’s forehead and let him go. “C’mon, go get cleaned up behind stage. You’re on soon.”

Gavin nodded and walked away.

Lucky looked past Matt. “Nate. Take care of this trash, please,” he told the bouncer as he approached.

Lucky turned to Matt and Brad. “What are you two doing here?”

“Just watching the show,” Brad said.

Lucky nodded, and then turned away. “Well, enjoy your evening, gentlemen,” he said over his shoulder, as he waltzed back behind the stage.

“Your boy is a little spitfire.” Brad clapped Matt on his back.

“He’s not *my* boy.” *Though I wouldn’t be opposed to that.* Matt walked toward the bar and tossed a few bills down. “You ready to go?”

Brad nodded. “Yeah, we’ve seen all that there is to see tonight.”

Jordan scuffed his shoes across the pavement as he walked. The pole-dance fitness classes he taught did not prepare him for the physical challenge of dancing for horny men and grabby women all night. *Quick ten-minute walk and I’ll be in my bed for the next twelve hours.*

It was two in the morning, but the streets were well lit and Jordan had a tight grip on his pepper spray. He’d made the walk numerous times before.

Headlights flashed behind him, and he turned around. A blue impala drove up beside him and stopped. The window was rolled down, and Matt Hayes rested his arm on the window ledge.

Exhaustion coursed through Jordan. “I’m not looking for any action tonight, Officer. I’m just walking home.”

Matt gripped the steering wheel, but he didn't look at Jordan. "Get in the car, Lucky. You shouldn't be walking around this late at night."

Jordan's heart raced. "Th-That's okay. I only live about ten minutes away."

"Well, then it's only a few minutes by car. Get in, Lucky. Please."

Jordan's resolve melted. His shoulders slumped in defeat. "Okay." He started to open the back door.

"In the front seat." Annoyance filled Matt's voice.

Duh. Jordan jogged around to the passenger side of the car and slipped inside.

The car didn't move. Jordan looked at Matt, who turned to him with a raised brow. "You going to tell me where you live?"

Could I be any more of an idiot in front of him? Jordan schooled his features. *Lie.* He thought quickly. *Where would a stripper and possibly prostitute live?* "Um... Do you know that apartment complex on the south side? Just off of Cranson Street?"

Matt took a deep breath. "That shithole place?" He put the car in gear and pressed the gas. "You live there?"

Jordan nodded. "Yeah."

The car lurched forward, and Matt turned out of the strip-club parking lot. Confusion filled Jordan. "Um, you turned the wrong way."

Jordan could barely make out Matt's features in the dark car, lit only by the light of the clock radio. "I'm not taking you to that place. I'm taking you to my apartment."

I don't have time for this, or the energy. "I'm really not looking for—"

"Because it's safe, Lucky. Not for anything else. I'm not going to leave you at some seedy shithole in the middle of the night."

Jordan sighed. "Okay." He fished his phone out of his pocket and sent Brad a text to let him know that he was done at the club and fine. It was the same text he sent every night that he worked at *The Topless Bottom*.

The rest of the ride was made in silence. Jordan looked out the window at the lights as Matt maneuvered through the empty streets. The radio played

quietly in the background. Jordan rested his head against the window and almost fell asleep, feeling oddly comfortable with this cop he barely knew.

Matt pulled into a small apartment complex—the exact opposite of the trashy one Jordan pretended to live at. He parked in an empty spot and turned off the car.

Matt opened the door and exited. Jordan followed. Apprehension filled Jordan as they walked to the entrance, and Matt pulled a card out of his wallet and swiped it on the door. A light flashed green, and the soft click of the locks sounded. Matt opened the door and motioned for Jordan to go ahead of him.

Inside the hallway Jordan followed Matt to his apartment door, where he swiped the same card.

“High tech around here, huh?” Jordan broke the silence.

Matt pushed open the door and nodded. “I miss keys.”

Matt’s apartment was plain and drab. The walls were white, the furniture was straight out of the 70s. No photos hung on the wall. No decorations cluttered the space. Jordan recalled seeing a similar apartment when picking out places for Brad to live after college. The complexes all had one apartment that was their “tour” area. It was furnished, but its only purpose was to show off the space. *How can he live like this?*

“Do you want something to drink?” Matt shucked off his jacket and hung it on a hook, then toed off his shoes and kicked them against the wall. Jordan took off his shoes as well, and placed them side by side on the doormat.

“Yeah, I could use some water.” *Stripping makes a man thirsty.*

Matt walked deeper into the apartment, and Jordan followed. Matt’s jeans clung to the curve of his ass perfectly, and Jordan couldn’t help but admire it. His white T-shirt accentuated his back muscles. He looked positively delicious with his empty gun holster still around his shoulders. Jordan’s cock swelled in his jeans. *This is a hell of a time to get a hard-on for a cop.*

The kitchen was clean and organized. A loaf of bread and a toaster sat out on the counter, and there were a few dishes in the sink. Jordan’s stomach growled.

Matt turned to him. “You hungry?”

Jordan shifted his weight. “Well, I won’t say no to food. But I really don’t want to be any trouble.”

“Cereal okay?” Matt opened the fridge and pulled out a pitcher of water.

Jordan smiled. Cereal was what he would be having if he were at home right now, anyway. “Yeah, that’s great.”

Matt opened the cupboard and pulled out a glass and two bowls. He poured Jordan a glass of water and handed it to him. Jordan gulped it down with one pull and set the empty glass in the sink.

“It’s in the pantry.” Matt pointed to the door to Jordan’s left.

He opened it. “Cheerios or Lucky Charms?” he asked.

Matt smiled. “You pick.”

Jordan’s heart flip-flopped. Matt’s wide smile and easy demeanor made him forget for a moment why he was there, and what Matt thought he was. He ducked his head and pulled the Lucky Charms from the shelf.

“Good choice.” Matt opened the fridge and pulled out the milk.

Jordan poured his bowl, and then grabbed the milk from Matt while handing him the cereal. Once Matt poured his bowl, they switched again. Matt returned the milk to the fridge, and Jordan put the cereal back in the pantry.

They stood in the kitchen and shoveled spoonfuls of milk-soaked marshmallows into their mouths. *Like this is an everyday occurrence.* Jordan smiled at the thought. In his *real life* he was alone every night. He couldn’t help but think that having someone to come home to at night like this would be nice.

Towards the end of his cereal Jordan tipped the bowl back and drank the milk. A trickle dripped down his chin. Matt reached his hand out and used his thumb to clean the mess off Jordan’s face. Heat shot through Jordan at the touch, and he met Matt’s gaze.

Matt narrowed his eyes. “What made you become a stripper? Why... Why not something else?”

Jordan set his bowl on the counter and ran his hand through his hair. *More lies. Kinda.* “My dad found out I was gay and he... didn’t approve.” *Truth.*

Jordan sighed. Matt's eyes begged him to continue. "He found me looking at online porn. Gay porn. When I was sixteen." Jordan shrugged. "I was a curious teenager, and I'd already figured out I was gay. He beat me. Pretty bad. I had broken ribs, a busted jaw, black eye, boot-print bruises in my back." *Truth.* "My uncle, on my dad's side, let me stay with his wife and their son while I recovered." *Truth.* "But when I was well enough to be on my own they kicked me out, too." *Lie.*

In reality, Uncle Rick and Aunt Lily had taken him in with open arms, and they never spoke to his father again, since he had rejected his only son for being gay. Brad had been ecstatic to have his best friend and cousin move in. Every night was like a sleepover. Jordan had been lucky.

"Why?" Matt's body was rigid and he had a white-knuckled grip on the counter.

"They didn't approve, I guess. I didn't ask." *I should've thought of a backstory before now.* "I stayed at a few shelters, but those are hard to get into. After a year or so I got a job at a club, cleaning during the day. One thing led to another, and once I was old enough, I started dancing. I'm good at it."

"And the other? The prostitution?" Matt's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

Jordan met his eyes. "Are we on the record here, Officer? Or am I speaking freely?"

"Detective Hayes is off duty right now." Matt unclipped his badge from his belt and tossed it on the counter.

"That just... happened." *Someone get me a shovel—the shit's getting deep.*

"Just another thing you're good at?"

Jordan bit his lip. "I suppose so." *That's laughable, considering the amount of experience I have.*

"You can get out of this. You don't have to go back there, Lucky."

Jordan ached for Matt to use his real name. The truth lingered on the tip of his tongue. *I'm not a whore! I'm about to be a bookstore owner. The most exciting thing I do at night is read! I'm only trying to help.* He shook his head

and laughed. “Oh, that’s cute, Officer. But I can take care of myself. I promise.” *Once this is over, I want an Oscar.*

Matt nodded. “Okay.” He walked out of the kitchen and opened a closet in the hallway. He pulled out a blanket and a pillow. “You can go ahead and sleep on the couch. In the morning, when it’s light out, I’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

In the living room, Matt tossed the bedding on the couch. Jordan leaned against the back of the gaudy plaid furniture and met Matt’s eyes. “Thanks.” He reached out and squeezed Matt’s hand. “For everything. I appreciate your concern. I really do.”

Electricity zinged between the two of them where their skin met, startling Jordan. He dropped Matt’s hand and walked around the couch to sit down. Matt turned and retreated down the hallway.

A maroon and gold book caught Jordan’s eye. He walked to the shelf to get a better look. His eyes widened when he read the title. “Detective?” he called out down the hallway.

“You can call me Matt.” Slow footsteps approached and stopped behind Jordan.

Jordan felt the heat of Matt’s body, just inches away from his back. “What’s this?” Jordan pointed to the spine of the book.

Matt pulled the book cautiously off the shelf, holding it in his hands like it was priceless china. “*The Princess Bride* by William Goldman. First Edition.”

Jordan held his breath. “Can I... Can I touch it?”

Matt chuckled, and placed the book carefully into Jordan’s hands. “So, you’re a fan of *S. Morgenstern’s Classic Tale of True Love and High Adventure*?”

“S. Morgenstern doesn’t actually exist.” Jordan ran his fingertips down the cover of the book, skin barely grazing the slipcover.

“Non-believer.” Matt scoffed.

“I have a signed copy of the hardcover twenty-fifth anniversary edition.” Jordan met Matt’s eyes. Matt’s wide smile nearly knocked the wind out of

him. Jordan's eyes returned to the book, holding it in his hands like it was the lost treasure of the Sierra Madre. "I own every version of the cover, including this one. But I don't have the first edition."

Matt eyes widened. "Really?"

Idiot! Your bookworm is showing. Do strippers own signed copies of popular fiction? "Well, I mean, I did. I sold it. Them. 'Cause I needed the money." *Might as well have said "for drugs."*

Matt nodded and closed the space between them. He reached up and cupped Jordan's cheek. "What is it about you," Matt asked, "that I can't seem to stay away from?"

Jordan's breath hitched. "What is it about you that makes me wish things were different?" *I wish I really was this interesting. You'd never be drawn to a nerd like me.*

Matt stepped closer to Jordan and then stopped, as if asking for permission. Impatience overcame Jordan, and he lurched forward and pressed his lips to Matt's.

Heat soared through Jordan as Matt leaned into the kiss. Matt grasped the book from his hands and set it back on the shelf. He wrapped his arms around Jordan's waist and tugged at his shirt.

Jordan thrust his tongue into Matt's mouth. A tinge of sugary Lucky Charms lingered there. *So sweet.* Matt pushed at Jordan's chest, forcing him to break the kiss. Jordan's eyes met Matt's. Arousal and hunger pooled in their depths. Matt led him down the hallway.

Inside the bedroom, Matt yanked at Jordan's shirt. Jordan lifted his arms and let Matt undress him. Once the clothing was thrown carelessly to the floor, Matt's hands flew to the button of Jordan's jeans. Jordan thrust his hips forward. *Yes, please.* His cock ached for Matt's touch. Matt dropped to his knees, flicked the jeans open, and jerked them down Jordan's legs.

"Oh, fuck me." Matt leaned his forehead against Jordan's groin, nuzzling his face against the silk material of the bright red G-string. Jordan's cock twitched at the sensation. Matt palmed Jordan's hips and mouthed his cock through the thin material.

Jordan nearly fell backward as Matt licked his cock from base to tip through the cloth. “Off, take them off,” Jordan bit out through clenched teeth.

“No way. Been thinking about doing this since I saw you on stage. Gonna torture you like you tortured me.” Matt stood up. “Stay right there.” He walked over to the nightstand.

Jordan whimpered when he left. “What are you doing? Come back here.”

Matt turned and smiled. “Anxious?” he asked as he walked back over to Jordan, condom and lube in hand.

More than you know. Jordan nodded.

Matt dropped to his knees in front of Jordan and resumed his tortuous assault on Jordan’s cock. Jordan barely noticed the click of the lube bottle opening as he moaned and caressed Matt’s head. Matt wound his hands around Jordan’s hips and slipped his hand between Jordan’s cheeks. His lube-slicked fingers pressed against Jordan’s opening.

Fuck, yes. “Matt.” Jordan couldn’t decide between thrusting forward into Matt’s mouth or impaling himself on Matt’s fingers. “Please, Matt.”

Finally, Matt tugged at the G-string with one hand and Jordan’s cock sprang free. Matt closed his mouth around Jordan’s prick as he pressed one finger inside Jordan.

Jordan’s knees wobbled. “Oh, my God.”

Matt inserted another finger and Jordan had to grasp the wall for support. Matt’s mouth worked his cock with expert precision. *Never been like this before.* His balls drew tight to his body, his orgasm within reach. Matt’s movements slowed and Jordan moaned. “Don’t stop.” He thrust his cock into Matt’s mouth. *More.* Matt laid a hand on his hip, halting him.

“No. You don’t get to come until I’m inside you.” Matt licked at Jordan’s balls.

“Then do it. Stop teasing me.” Jordan surprised himself with his command. *When did I become so assertive?* He looked down at the man who was driving him insane with his mouth.

Matt met his eyes and flicked his tongue up the length of Jordan’s shaft.

Jordan shuddered. “Please. Please, just fuck me already.”

Springing to his feet, Matt guided Jordan to the bed and laid him gently down on the mattress. He covered Jordan with his body. Grazing his fingers over Jordan’s forehead and through his hair, he asked, “What was it you wanted?”

Jordan held his breath, mesmerized by Matt’s chocolate-brown eyes. “I forgot.”

Matt chuckled and kissed Jordan softly. Jordan tugged at Matt’s shirt, wanting to feel his warm skin. They broke the kiss long enough to slip Matt’s shirt over his head. Their lips met again, harder this time. Jordan fumbled with Matt’s jeans. He reached his hand inside to grasp Matt’s cock. Jordan stroked Matt and felt him tense under his lips.

Matt pushed off of Jordan quickly and shucked off the jeans. He picked up the condom and ripped it open. “Sorry, Lucky. I can’t wait any longer,” Matt said as he put the condom on.

Pre-cum leaked from Jordan’s cock at the thought of being filled by Matt. “Thank God.” He spread his legs on the bed and his hand drifted down his chest to stroke himself. Matt climbed between Jordan’s thighs and pressed his cock to Jordan’s puckered hole. He pushed Jordan’s knees closer to his chest as he thrust inside slowly.

Jordan clenched his jaw at the intrusion. It had been a long time for him, and he could’ve used a bit more stretching. But he couldn’t tell Matt that. *He thinks you’re a whore.* Up until now Jordan had let himself forget that fact.

The burn subsided as Matt’s cock grazed Jordan’s prostate and filled him completely. Pleasurable shocks ripped through Jordan’s limbs, and he drew his legs closer to his chest. He moaned as Matt arched his back and changed the angle of his thrust.

“Fuck. Right there. Don’t fucking stop!” Jordan screamed. His hands left Matt’s hips, and he grabbed his own ankles and pulled his legs into a full split. *Being flexible is good for something.*

Matt’s eyes went wide and he plunged harder, the new position allowing him to sink deeper into Jordan. “So hot, Lucky. Not gonna last.”

Jordan's cock ached for release as Matt fucked him into oblivion.

Jordan let go of his ankles, but left his legs spread. He cupped Matt's face and held his gaze. "Let go, baby." He pressed his lips to Matt's and thrust his tongue into Matt's mouth.

Matt's body tensed under Jordan's fingertips and he moaned against Jordan's mouth. He drove into Jordan one more time as he released deep inside Jordan. Matt pulled his lips from Jordan's and met his gaze.

The heat in Matt's eyes spurred Jordan's orgasm, and he splashed warm cum between their stomachs.

Together they lay breathing hard. Matt laid his forehead against Jordan's, still holding his gaze. "That was... something else." He laughed. "I'm anxious to see what other sort of positions you can manage."

Jordan laughed as well. "I'm glad you liked it." He kissed Matt slowly and relaxed his cramping legs.

Matt slipped from Jordan's body and rolled over. He leaned on his side and started kneading Jordan's hips, as if he knew that Jordan was sore from holding the position for so long.

Jordan moaned and closed his eyes. *Should I move to the couch?* He wasn't sure. He knew he didn't want to. He turned his head, eyes roving Matt's features. *I'd rather wake up to this sight.*

The bed moved and shook as Matt stood. Exhaustion returned to Jordan and his eyes fluttered closed. He didn't open them when Matt came back with a warm wash cloth and cleaned the cum from his stomach. After a moment Matt climbed into the bed and wrapped his arm around Jordan, spooning against his body. He kissed Jordan's shoulder softly and said, "Good night, Lucky."

Jordan smiled and nestled into the embrace. "G'night, Matt."

CHAPTER THREE

The sunlight shone through the open curtains and hit Matt's closed eyes. He winced as he awoke, and tried to bring his arm over his head to cover his face. His arm wouldn't move. He opened one eye and looked over to the chestnut-haired man using his biceps as a pillow.

Lucky. The stripper who's read *The Princess Bride*. Matt smiled to himself, remembering the awe in Lucky's eyes as he held the first edition. It'd been a while since Matt had met anyone who shared his love of the written word.

He stared at the soft features of the sleeping Lucky. His lips turned upward in a slight smile. He looked so innocent and pure in his sleep. Did Matt regret sleeping with Lucky, the stripper and possible prostitute who worked at the club he was investigating? *No*. He brushed a wayward strand of Lucky's hair behind his ear. There was no way he would ever regret his night with Lucky, and if it were up to him, it would be the first of many nights. And Lucky would be with him and only him.

Matt sighed and cupped Lucky's head with his hand as he slipped his arm from underneath it. He gently laid Lucky's head back onto the mattress.

Slowly, Matt stood and stretched. He located his jeans on the floor and dug in the pocket to find his wallet. He pulled it out and flipped it open.

"If you're looking for money to pay me, I'm going to be pissed." Lucky's groggy voice caused Matt's cock to stir.

Matt turned to look at him. Lucky had rolled to his side and was facing Matt. He rested his head in his hand, propped up by his elbow. The sunlight illuminated his bronze skin and a smile crept across his face.

Matt returned the smile. "I was looking for another condom. We used the last one last night." He lay back down and scooted closer to Lucky, resting his hand on Lucky's hip.

"How do you feel?" Matt asked.

Lucky rubbed his eyes. "Tired." He yawned. "I usually sleep in a little later than this after a night at the club."

Matt rolled to his back and opened his arms. Lucky curled up next to him and nestled his head on Matt's chest. Matt sighed. *Heaven*. "Go back to sleep."

Lucky's breath tickled Matt's bare chest and he bit back a laugh. Lucky kissed his nipple softly and licked.

Matt hissed. "Hey! I thought you were tired?"

Lucky moaned and nuzzled into Matt's chest. "I'm waking up." He sighed. "I should sleep, though. I have to work tonight."

Matt went cold. "Don't go," he said.

Lucky sat up and met his eyes. "Don't go? I have to. I gotta work."

"You could do so much more with your life, Lucky." Matt put more heart into the words than he knew he had in him. "I can help you." He cupped Lucky's cheek and caressed the skin with the pad of his thumb.

"I don't need help." Lucky pulled Matt's hand from his face and held it.

"You could get your GED. Go to college." Matt narrowed his eyes. "You can't honestly want to be a stripper forever, right?"

Lucky slid away from Matt and huffed out a breath. "You can't honestly be having this conversation with me right now." He shook his head and sat on the edge of the bed, his back to Matt. "Why do you care?"

Matt sat up and put his hand on Lucky's shoulder. "I care. Last night wasn't just a convenient fuck. I care about you." Matt's heart ached. *Didn't Lucky feel the same?* He shook his head. *Why would he? It was only one night.*

Lucky snorted. "This isn't Cinder-fucking-rella, Matt. This isn't a fairy tale. It's real life. And in real life, I'm a stripper and you're a cop." He turned. "If you care about me, then you'll be fine with that. You'll accept me for who I am and what I do."

Anger coursed through Matt. *Why doesn't he understand?* "In real life, people don't strip as a long-term career." He bit the words out.

Lucky stood and looked at him, placing his hands on his hips. "Well, it's my career right now." He pointed his finger at him. "You know, I didn't ask you to pick me up last night. I didn't ask for you to care."

Fuck. This is not going the way I wanted. Matt sighed and said nothing.

“Would you be able to introduce me to your friends? Your co-workers?” Lucky asked. “Right now, as a stripper. Would you be able to tell them that’s what I did for a living?”

Matt shook his head and smiled sadly. “I don’t know, Lucky.”

Lucky nodded. “When you can answer that with a ‘yes,’ then we can talk.”

Matt pinched his eyes closed. “It’s dangerous. I’m worried about you.”

“I appreciate your concern. But as you saw last night, I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it for quite a long time now.”

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Matt stood. *I’m not giving up.* He pulled Lucky close to him. “I want to see you again. Not at the club.”

Lucky kissed him on the mouth and then said, “I’d like that.” He leaned in for a real kiss. He pressed his lips to Matt’s and wrapped his hand around the back of his neck. Matt moaned and opened his mouth. Their tongues met in hot abandon. *Never letting go.* Matt framed Lucky’s face with his hands and kissed him hard.

A knock at the door had them scrambling apart. Lucky’s face flushed crimson and he covered his groin with his hands, as if someone would see him.

Matt jerked on his jeans. “I’ll be right back.” He walked toward the door. “Stay here.”

Jordan looked around the room after Matt left. He located his pants and carefully pulled them on over his aching erection. *I’m in so much trouble.*

He clicked on his cellphone. Three missed calls. All from Brad. *Shit.*

He tiptoed around the room and looked for his shirt. He found it near the door and slipped it over his head. Pieces of Matt’s conversation with his unknown guest sifted through the closed space.

“We’re moving tonight.”

The familiar voice stopped Jordan in his tracks. *What’s Uncle Rick doing here?*

“Tonight? Why so soon?” Matt asked.

“We have some reliable intel that there’s a meeting tonight between Schmoeller and a potential buyer. It’s supposed to be a big drug deal, and I want to catch them in the act. The warrant’s been issued. We just need to put a plan in place.”

Jordan’s breath hitched. *So soon?* He had sent the information to Brad just last night in a text message. He’d overheard Schmoeller on the phone while he changed. *Gavin’s working tonight.*

Panic shot through him and spurred him into action. He had to talk to Brad. Now. He needed to warn Gavin that he should stay away from the club tonight. Over the past week Gavin had become a friend. Like Jordan, he had been kicked out of his home when he came out as gay. But unlike Jordan, he didn’t have a loving aunt and uncle willing to take him in. Because of that, Jordan felt he owed Gavin something. Gavin was a sweetheart, a victim of circumstance, and it wasn’t fair that Jordan had been more fortunate than him just because he happened to have supportive family members.

Jordan flew across the room. He eyed the fire escape outside the window. *That could work.* He slid the window open and climbed outside. The cold, harsh metal hit his bare feet and he winced. He shivered in the chilly morning air as he scrambled down the rickety stairs.

Hitting the pavement, he peered around the alleyway. He fished his cell phone out of his pocket and pulled up the navigation app.

A familiar car turned down the street and pulled up next to him. “Get in the car, Jordan.” *Brad.*

Jordan climbed into the passenger seat and wiped his feet on the floor mat. He flipped on the heat and held his hands up to the vent.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Brad backed out of the alleyway.

Here we go. “Umm. Whoops?”

Brad slammed his palm on the steering wheels. “Dammit, Jordan! This is serious.”

Jordan flinched. It was rare for Brad to lose his cool.

“I’m not mad at you. I’m not mad that you went home with Matt. It’s not ideal, but you’re a grown man. You can fuck whoever you want. But dammit,

he's supposed to be a good cop. He thinks you're a prostitute, for Christ's sake." Brad shook his head. "Those rumors about him are obviously true. He sure had me fooled."

Jordan folded his hands in his lap and dipped his head, feeling like a scolded child. "It wasn't like that, Brad. He's a good guy." *Matt likes me. As a stripper.* "He never treated me like a whore."

"I'm sure he didn't." Brad gave a wry laugh. "Jordan, he's a cop. A fucking dirty cop. No wonder he's never stayed in one place too long. I thought he was a good guy, but then he takes home a stripper and suspected prostitute from the damn club we're investigating. How many times has he done this? Can I trust the work he's done in the past week?"

Jordan's skin itched with the need to shower. He felt dirty. With every word, Brad cheapened Jordan's night with Matt.

"It wasn't like that." The argument felt weak, even to Jordan's ears. *I hope.* "He said he wanted to help me. Get me out of stripping." His gut told him that Matt was genuine and Brad was wrong.

Brad laid his hand on Jordan's shoulder and squeezed. "I'm sorry, Jordan. I never should've put you through this. For your sake, I hope you're right." He dropped his hand. "After tonight this will all be over, and you can go back to your normal life."

My boring life. Without Matt.

"Why can't we just tell him I'm not a stripper?"

Brad rolled his eyes. "Really, Jordan? You want me to tell a suspected dirty cop that he's been duped by a soon-to-be bookstore owner?" Brad shook his head. "No, you stay away from him and the club. I mean it."

Jordan crossed his arms. Brad must be wrong about Matt, Jordan's heart told him so, but he didn't have any proof. "How did you know where I was?" Jordan asked.

"Uh." Brad buried his hand in his hair. "*Find My Friend* app. I put it on your phone and activated it. There's no way I was going to let you work at that club without some sort of way to track where you were." Brad looked at him, concern etched on his face. "You mad?"

Too numb to be mad. “No.”

“I’m dropping you off at your apartment. Stay there. Do not go to the club. Based on the information you gave me, we’re moving tonight. I don’t want you there.”

“What about Gavin?”

Brad placed his hand on Jordan’s shoulder again. “Don’t even think about it. He’s not innocent in all of this, Jordan.”

“He did it to survive!” Jordan’s voice rose. “Let me talk to him! I can get him to roll over on the whole prostitution ring. I know I can.”

“No. I don’t want you anywhere near that place ever again.”

Frustration had Jordan pleading with Brad. “If it weren’t for Uncle Rick and Aunt Lily, and you, I would be just like him! You have to give him a chance.”

Brad shook his head. “He broke the law, Jordan. My hands are tied.”

Jordan clenched his fists. Anger at Brad pulsed through him. Brad stopped the car as they arrived outside the bookstore. Jordan could see some of the regulars inside, and the current owner, Mr. Walton, behind the counter. He wasn’t in the mood to chit-chat with his friends. He wanted to pick up his favorite book and lose himself in the pages for a while, and forget he was ever involved in this operation and met Matthew Hayes.

Jordan reached for the door handle, but he was stopped when Brad grasped his forearm. “Don’t go to the club. I mean it. Gavin will be arrested, along with some of the other names you’ve given us. He’ll be offered a plea bargain. It won’t be the end of the world for him.” He let go of Jordan’s arm.

Nodding, Jordan opened the door and stepped onto the cold pavement. Still barefoot, with no jacket. *Walk of shame.*

Matt closed the apartment door, finally saying goodbye to the police chief. He jogged back to his bedroom. “Lucky?” He looked around the room and frowned. *Where did he go?* His gaze landed on the partially open window. *Motherfucker.*

Pulling open his nightstand drawer, Matt entered the combination to his gun safe and it clicked open. He drew out his pistol and shells and set them on the bed.

He sighed and searched for his holster. Finding it on the floor next to his shirt, he put it on and placed his gun in the slot. He scrubbed his hands over his face. *Would Lucky go to work tonight? Probably. Fuck.* He shook his head. How was he going to focus on the operation when Lucky would be in danger?

The club was busier than normal for a Saturday night. Jordan stepped in the door and waited for his eyes to adjust. Through the fog, he located the stage Gavin was on and walked over. He casually looked around at the other customers. *How many of these people are undercover cops?*

The music changed, and Gavin twirled toward the stage stairs. Jordan hustled over to catch him before he started passing out drinks. “Gavin!”

Gavin’s blue eyes flooded with concern. “Lucky! You’re late and Joe’s already noticed. You better have a good excuse.”

Jordan grabbed Gavin’s arm and pulled him to the side, away from the crowds. “Gavin, I don’t have time to explain, but we have to get out of here.”

Gavin’s eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“Listen, don’t you want a chance to turn your life around? Stop stripping? Stop... the other thing?”

“Lucky, you’re being crazy. C’mon, I don’t have time for games. Go get changed.” He tried to move away, but Jordan held him still.

“Gavin, I’m not a stripper.” He ran his hand through his hair. *This is harder than I thought.* “I’m working undercover with the police. They’re going to be here any minute to bust this place. We need to go!”

Gavin’s eyes widened and he tried to bolt away. “Let go of me, Lucky!”

“Please, just listen to me. If you cooperate, we can get you a deal. You won’t go to jail. Just come with me.” He held Gavin’s hand. “Please.”

“How can you promise me that? After the things I’ve done?” Gavin’s voice was quiet as he stared intently at the floor.

“My uncle is the police chief. He’ll help. I know he will. They only care about taking down Joe. If you give them information, they’ll cut you a deal. Let me help you, Gavin.”

“Why should I trust you? Why would you want to help me?” Tears gathered at the corner of Gavin’s eyes, and he wiped them away.

“Because once upon a time, I was you. I was kicked out of my house when I was just a teen. If I hadn’t had other family members to take me in, I would be in your situation. I want help you.”

Gavin nodded. “Okay... let’s go.”

Jordan wrapped his arm around Gavin’s shoulders and pulled him along. Facing the crowd again, the room felt stuffy, like there wasn’t any clean air left. With the exit in sight, Jordan breathed a sigh of relief that they would soon be safe.

Suddenly, a loud cry silenced the room. “Everyone get down!”

Too late. Shit.

Officers dressed in SWAT uniforms invaded the club. Customers, servers, and dancers all rushed to comply.

Jordan stood frozen. He searched the faces of the officers. *Where’s Matt? Where’s Brad?* Gavin’s nails bit into his skin as he stood behind Jordan. Jordan gripped Gavin’s hip and held him close. “Don’t move,” he whispered.

Many of the officers crowded close to where Jordan stood. *Fuck.* Just then he realized where he had stopped. Directly outside of Joe Schmoeller’s office.

The door creaked open and Jordan quickly turned to Gavin, shoving him to the floor. A large arm snaked its way around Jordan’s neck and he was hauled violently against a man’s chest. *Joe.* Cold metal pressed against Jordan’s temple, biting into the skin as sweat broke out on his forehead. He swallowed and grasped the arm holding him captive.

“Drop your weapon, Schmoeller!” Matt stepped forward, pistol drawn.

Jordan avoided his eyes. *Don’t do anything stupid.* He wasn’t sure if he was more worried for himself, or for Matt.

“Not happening.” Joe pulled Jordan even tighter. Jordan winced as pain shot down his spine.

Matt's steps faltered, and his voice rose. "Damn it, Schmoeller. Drop your weapon!"

"You're surrounded, Schmoeller. Give it up." Brad appeared on the other side of Matt.

Matt took one more step, and Joe turned the gun away from Jordan to Matt and said, "Don't even think about it. You aren't fast enough."

"Even if you shoot me, you won't get away."

Jordan's breath hitched and his eyes widened. *No! Not Matt.* He squirmed, moving just a fraction of an inch, and Joe put the gun back to his temple. "Quit moving, pretty boy. No one's gonna miss you."

Jordan met Matt's eyes. His expression was unreadable. *I'm sorry.* Jordan pushed the thought out and hoped it was visible in his eyes.

A muscle ticked in Matt's jaw. "This is your last warning, Joe. Drop the weapon."

Joe waved his gun toward Matt. "Fuck you!"

Jordan's eyes never left Matt's face. Matt was looking just behind Jordan and he gave a slight nod of his head. *What the—*A shot rang out right next to his ear and Jordan was jerked to the ground by a tumbling Joe.

The room spun and blood thundered in Jordan's ears. The gun clattered to the floor and slid out of Joe's reach. Jordan seized the opportunity to maneuver himself onto Joe, digging his knee into the man's back. Another officer pushed him out of the way and subdued Joe.

Jordan stood and found himself face to face with Gavin, holding a fire extinguisher in his shaking hand. "Did you—?" Jordan gestured to Joe.

Gavin nodded, eyes wide.

"Nice work." Jordan surveyed the room. Officers were moving quickly, arresting the bartender and some of the other employees. Others took pictures of the scene, while some raided Joe's office and began their search. Jordan looked frantically for Matt.

Brad blocked Jordan's movement. "Jordan." He spoke quietly. "I have to arrest you. These people can't know you were involved."

Jordan pushed at his chest to move him out of the way. *Matt*. He had to get to Matt.

“Where are the paramedics?” An officer kneeling on the floor called out to the others, his hands covered in blood.

No. No. No!

“Matt!” Jordan lunged forward, but Brad was too quick. Jordan was handcuffed and being directed the opposite way before he even knew what was happening. “No! I have see Matt! Let me go!” He tried to break free of Brad’s grasp, but it was no use. Years of training had Brad prepared for any fight Jordan was able to give.

“Calm down, Jordan.” Brad spoke close to Jordan’s ear. “Matt’s going to be fine. I promise.”

Tears threatened to fall from Jordan’s eyes. “No! Matt. I need to see Matt.”

Brad ushered Jordan out the door and forced him into the back of a cop car. The door closed and Jordan smashed his face against the window. “Please! Brad! Please!” He thrashed in the backseat, kicking at the door.

Another officer slid into the driver’s seat and started the car. Jordan begged and pleaded with him all the way to the station, but his arguments fell on deaf ears. Finally, his voice gave out and he could beg no more.

CHAPTER FOUR

“The bullet just grazed the outside of your shoulder. Change the bandages regularly and take it easy, and you’ll recover just fine.” The doctor finished wrapping the wound and began to write on his prescription pad. “I’m giving you some painkillers and antibiotics. Come back in two weeks and we’ll take the stitches out.”

Fat chance. I’ll do it myself. Matt just nodded and stared at the floor. He hadn’t spoken to Brad or the chief yet about how the operation ended. He’d been rushed to the hospital, despite his protests that he was fine.

“Hey. There’s the man of the hour.” Chief Donovan peeked through the curtain of the bay where Matt had been stitched up. “Is he free to go?” Rick asked the doctor.

“Yes. He can go anytime.”

“Thanks, doc.” Matt reached for his shirt and winced as he tried to carefully pull it on. The buttons were going to be impossible without help, and there was no way he was asking the chief to dress him. “How did everything go?”

“Fine. Everything is shipshape. Bad guys are put away. Good guys prevailed.”

Matt knew he wasn’t telling him something, but he couldn’t fathom what it could be. *Lucky.* He itched to ask, but that would give too much away about his relationship with the man.

Rick cleared his throat. “There’s, uh... someone I brought to see you. Brad tells me you two already know each other. Not sure how I feel about that, but that’s a discussion for another time.” He paused, and placed his hand on Matt’s uninjured shoulder. “You’re a good man, Matt. I’d be lucky to have an officer like you on the force.”

“Just doing my job.” *A bang-up job.*

Rick walked to the door and stopped. “Just... hear him out, okay?”

Matt just nodded. He was too tired to ask questions. He stood and looked around the room for the rest of his stuff so he could get the hell out of there.

Find Brad, figure out what the hell he did with Lucky. He was probably sitting in a jail cell right now. Matt's chest tightened at the thought.

"Matt?" Lucky's quiet voice made Matt's spine straighten. He winced as the movement pulled at his injury.

"Oh my God, Matt!" Lucky was at his side, running his hands carefully over the sling that held Matt's wounded arm.

"Lucky? What are you doing here?" Matt cupped his cheek and forced him to meet his eyes. "Are you okay?"

Lucky bit his lip and looked away. He took a step back from Matt. "It's Jordan."

"What?" Confusion clouded Matt's already befuddled mind.

"My name is Jordan Donovan. Not Lucky." Jordan continued to worry his bottom lip.

Matt sat back on the hospital bed. He narrowed his eyes. "Donovan?"

Jordan avoided his eyes and nodded. "Yeah. Uncle Rick—"

"Uncle?" *I've been played for a fool.* Anger radiated through Matt, but he schooled his features. Jordan didn't need to know how much he affected him.

Jordan nodded again. "Uncle Rick and Brad agreed to let me work at the club undercover. It was approved by whoever the hell approves that shit. They needed someone on the inside to gather information, and you know as well as I do that there aren't extra cops running around. So, I went in."

Matt breathed deeply through his nose, causing his nostrils to flare. "What the fuck made you qualified for that? What the hell were they thinking?"

Jordan took a step forward and reached out to touch Matt, but he flinched and moved away. Jordan dropped his hand back to his side. "I know how to take care of myself. And I..." He took a deep breath. "I teach a pole-dance fitness class. They needed someone who could dance." His cheeks reddened at the confession.

Normally Matt might think it was adorable, but he was too angry at being lied to. "Why wasn't I told?" He closed his mouth and ground his teeth so hard that his jaw ached.

“We thought it was best to keep it quiet. We weren’t sure who we could trust.” Jordan fidgeted with his hands. “Brad... Brad thought you might be a corrupt cop. I’m sorry, Matt.”

Matt’s blood boiled with anger. His shoulder throbbed as he took deep breaths and clenched his jaw. He nodded and looked hard at Jordan, who finally raised his eyes. *Fuck this.* “I understand. I would’ve done the same in your situation.”

“Really?” Jordan’s eyes brightened and a small smile spread across his lips.

“Corrupt cop? That’s fucking ridiculous.” Matt stood and fumbled with the bottom buttons of his shirt. “You’re a good liar. You sure had me fooled. I felt sorry for you, for Christ’s sake. If whatever it is you do when you’re not acting as a prostitute doesn’t work out, you could have a career in espionage.” Matt’s anger seeped into his voice as he bit out the words. *I gotta get out of here.*

He didn’t know what was real and what was a lie anymore. *How did Luck—Jordan feel?* He shook away the thought. Now was not the time to borrow trouble.

Jordan lost his smile and looked away again. “I work at a bookstore.”

Matt gave a wry laugh. “A bookstore? You’re much more interesting as a stripper.” He picked up the prescription the doc had given him. “Well, I’ll see you around, Lucky-Jordan. Whatever.”

He walked away from Jordan’s hurt look, pulled the curtain aside with a jerk, and stomped out of the ER. Putting distance between him and the man he thought he knew—thought he cared about. *Thought he cared about me.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Jordan stood at the counter in the bookstore, looking over the final papers that would be signed on Monday. *Mine. The bookstore is going to be mine.* A few weeks ago this would've been the happiest day of his life, his long-time goal finally achieved. But instead, it felt empty. *Me and my bookstore. That's my life.* No one to share it with.

It had been a week since the incident at the club, and Jordan had been going through the motions of life, not enjoying anything as he normally did.

The bell above the door chimed, interrupting Jordan's lonesome thoughts. "Sorry, we're closed," he said, without looking away from his paperwork.

Footsteps sounded in the background. "I'm sorry. We're clos—" Jordan lifted his eyes and met Matt's gaze. Jordan's breath hitched in his throat. "Matt."

Matt walked forward and leaned against the counter, resting his injured arm. "Hello, Jordan." He looked him up and down. "You look... tired."

Jordan rolled his eyes and started packing up his paperwork. "Thanks." He clutched his papers to his chest, ready to retreat to his apartment. "Can I help you with something? I'm rather busy at the moment, perhaps you can come back later." *Or never.*

"I've been working with your uncle and cousin for the past week closing up the case." He paused. "They're worried about you. Said you've been quieter than usual and you didn't show up for dinner the other night."

Jordan shrugged. "I've been busy. I close on the shop on Monday. There's been a lot of work to do."

"Congratulations. Guess being a stripper paid off, huh?" Matt gave him a forced smile.

No. Jordan remained silent, not taking the bait.

"Do you miss it?" Matt asked.

"What do you care? You're going off to a new job, new city soon anyway, right?" Anger laced Jordan's voice. He hugged the papers tighter to his chest and stared at Matt.

“Just thought I could help.” Matt pushed off the counter with his good arm and turned to leave.

Panic gripped Jordan and had him stepping forward. *This might be the last time I see him. The last chance I have.*

Matt almost made it to the door before Jordan cried out, “You’re the only person I’ve ever told about my dad beating me.” The words rushed out of him before he could stop them. “I told Uncle Rick and Brad that I was mugged. They don’t believe the story, but I could never bring myself to admit to them what really happened.” He set the papers on the counter and held on to the edge. “I-I wanted you to know that it wasn’t all lies. That I didn’t sleep with you as part of the act. That was real.”

Matt turned and met his eyes, but didn’t move.

“You were right. I’m more interesting as a stripper.” He gestured at the bookcases in the shop. “This is who I really am. I live upstairs. I read a lot. My life revolves around this shop. It’s how I escaped reality when I was younger. I would come here, crawl up on one of the chairs, and read. Owning this place has been my goal since Mr. Watson told me he was interested in retiring.” He ran his hands through his hair. “The bank wouldn’t loan me the money to buy the place without a bigger down payment. So, yes, I stripped for the money. But I also did it for kids like Gavin. If I hadn’t had my family, I would’ve been just like him. I would’ve been a whore for real or worse, instead of a nerdy bookworm who stays home on Friday nights—alone, reading one of his fifteen copies of *The Princess Bride*.” He jerked his thumb at the bookshelf behind him, which held each and every one of his prized books.

Matt walked over to the counter. “I lied, too.” He reached out and cupped Jordan’s cheek. “You aren’t more interesting as a stripper. I shouldn’t have said that, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Jordan pulled away from Matt’s touch and flicked at the papers on the counter. “I just wanted you to know all that before you left.”

Matt took a deep breath. “Well, I’ve been offered a job. It’s a slight pay cut from what I’m used to, but the guy I’m seeing and I are going to be looking for a house soon, so a double income will help. Plus, it’s about time I stayed in one place, put down some roots.”

He's seeing someone. Tears stung Jordan's eyes, but he blinked them away. *Don't cry.* "That's great. I'm happy for you." He sounded convincing even to his own ears, but inside he was dying. His stomach flip-flopped and threatened to lose its contents.

"Happy for us."

Jordan's brow furrowed, and he narrowed his eyes. "Huh?"

Matt walked around the counter and stood next to Jordan. "You should be happy for us. Now, I've already got a few houses picked out for us to look at. I wasn't sure what your schedule was like, so I haven't made any appointments. Personally, I think it would be fun to get an older house, a fixer-upper, and work on it together. But I'm open to whatever you want."

Jordan's mind reeled. "Huh?" *Not my day for witty repartee.*

Matt kissed Jordan's lips. "I've accepted a job as a detective here for Lakeside PD. Turns out I like working with Rick and Brad. They're good people, once they figured out I wasn't a dirty cop. And there's this really cute bookstore owner who stole my heart, straight off a stripper pole."

Jordan blinked rapidly, processing the information. "I'm the guy you're seeing?"

Matt laughed deep in his belly. "Yes. If you're interested."

Jordan threw his arms around Matt's neck and kissed him. He smashed their lips together roughly and hugged Matt to him.

Matt pushed at his chest and tore his mouth from Jordan's. "Easy, Jordan. I'm still on the mend here." He put his hand over his bullet wound.

Oh shit. Jordan's eyes widened and he jumped back. "I'm sorry!" He stuck his hands into his pockets to keep them from attacking Matt again.

"It's okay," Matt laughed. "So, would you like to go out sometime?"

Jordan nodded enthusiastically and smiled wide. "I think it's worth a shot." He winced at his choice of words, causing Matt to laugh harder.

"No more shots." Matt cupped Jordan's cheek and stepped closer to him. He reached around to grasp the back of his neck and pressed their foreheads

together. “Also, I think we should make sure to get a bedroom large enough to install a stripper pole.” He shrugged one shoulder. “Just for the fun of it.”

Jordan laughed and kissed Matt softly. “I’d like that.”

EPILOGUE

Three months later

Jordan sat on a bench outside the courthouse. He checked the time on his cell phone. Jordan was waiting on the verdict for the case against Joe Schmoeller. Matt was in court today to hear the ruling. And Jordan would finally be able to see Gavin, who had been kept in a safe house for the duration of the trial.

Matt emerged from the building. A bright smile lit up his face when he saw Jordan. “How’d it go?” Jordan asked, as he stood.

Matt kissed him hard. Their lips pressed together hard and tongues danced. Heat infused Jordan’s limbs at the contact and he grasped Matt’s shoulders.

Suddenly, Matt let go and Jordan stumbled back, holding onto the bench to keep from falling. “That good, huh?”

“I love you.”

The words sent tingles down Jordan’s spine, just like they always did. “I love you, too. I take it Joe’s guilty?”

“Yes. Joe’s been found guilty. He’s going to jail for a long, long time.” He paused. “You want to go see Gavin?”

Jordan nodded.

Matt placed his hand in Jordan’s and tugged him toward the courthouse. He stopped and smiled, then twisted the ring on Jordan’s finger with his fingertips. Jordan’s heart warmed, and he smiled back. Matt had given him the ring just last week, when they closed on their house. They were set to move in over the weekend.

Jordan nudged Matt’s shoulder, forcing him to start walking again. “C’mon, let’s visit with Gavin. Then we have some packing to do.”

Matt wagged his eyebrows. “I think we have other things to attend to first.”

Before Jordan could reply, Gavin came out of the doors of the courthouse and paused at the steps. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“Gavin!” Jordan jogged up the steps and wrapped him in a tight hug.

“Jordan! It’s so good to see you!” Gavin hugged him back.

Matt came up and shook Gavin’s hand. “Good work in there, Gavin.”

“Thanks. I couldn’t have done it without you, and Mr. Stone, of course.”

Jordan’s brow furrowed. “Mr. Stone?” He hadn’t been able to talk with Matt about the trial.

“Yeah.” Gavin looked behind him as a handsome man, dressed in an Armani suit, came out of the courthouse. “My lawyer.” Gavin’s shoulders slumped and the energy left his body as the taller man approached. “Um, Jordan, this is Mr. Stone. Mr. Stone, this is my friend Jordan.”

“Please, call me Lawrence,” he said, as he reached out to shake Jordan’s hand. He nodded at Matt and smiled. “Detective, good to see you outside the courtroom.”

“Gavin.” Jordan turned to his friend. “What are your plans now? Do you have someplace to stay?”

Gavin shook his head and shuffled his feet. “Um, I’m not sure.” He looked from Matt to Lawrence and then back to Jordan. “I haven’t given it much thought.”

A plan jumped into Jordan’s mind. “You know, I’m crazy busy at the store these days. I could use a good employee to open and close when I’m not available. Pay won’t be great, but it would come with the apartment above the store.” He smiled, and snuck a glance at Matt. “I won’t be needing it anymore.”

Gavin’s eyes grew wide. “Are you sure?”

“Of course.” Matt clapped Gavin on the shoulder and gave him an encouraging squeeze. “We’d be happy to have you. Jordan’s been looking for a person he can trust at the store for a while now.”

“That would be great.” Gavin turned to Lawrence. “After a few paychecks I can start paying you, Mr. Stone. It won’t be much to start with, but I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

Lawrence shook his head. “I’ve told you that isn’t necessary.” He waved his hand dismissively. “I have to go. Lots of paperwork to file after a day like

today. Matt, it's always a pleasure. Jordan, it was nice to meet you." He jogged down the steps and left without a backwards glance.

Gavin stared after him longingly.

Jordan narrowed his eyes at the man running away. A pinch to his side had him turning to look at Matt, who stared at him with a raised brow. Jordan just winked.

"C'mon, Gavin. We'll take you to the store and get you settled." Matt laced his fingers into Jordan's again and pulled him toward the parking lot.

Jordan squeezed Matt's hand and smiled at him. Lucky me.

THE END

Author Bio

Jena Wade is new to this writing business. She's an avid reader. By day she is a web developer. She overuses smiley faces in everyday emails.

Most of her evenings are spent typing away on her laptop, with her beagle and basset hound curled up at her feet.

Yup, that about sums up her life.

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TRANSFORMING US

By Jena Wade

Photo Description

Dark-haired man sitting on top of a child's dresser with a picture of a Transformer on it, wearing only a red pair of briefs, holding a child's toy, with his head thrown back in laughter.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

**sigh* Is he the best dad ever, or is he the Best Dad Ever!*

I was so afraid of him the first time I agreed to babysit for him—he's very intimidating with his permanent five o'clock shadow, his gruff exterior, his buttoned-up business suits. Then I saw him with Bug.

But I showed up early to babysit Bug today, and found this. This! I remember walking in on him painting that dresser—seriously, how does someone get paint on their back?

He lives for Bug, and I don't want to do anything to change that, but how can I convince him that he deserves to have someone be there for him too?

Sincerely,

Babysitting Bug for the Babe (cturtlechick)

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: single father, men with children, sweet no sex, HFN

Word count: 6,532

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TRANSFORMING US

By Jena Wade

Adam smoothed his damp palms over his pale blue polo shirt. With a deep breath, he knocked on the door. He tried to shake off the nervousness again. It'd been three months since he'd been to Bryan's house to babysit for the single father. Before that, it had been a regular occurrence—every Tuesday and Thursday night from four to eight. He wasn't sure why Bryan had found a replacement babysitter, and Adam still tried not to take it personally. At twenty-five, he was a little old to be doing teenage jobs for extra cash, and he had a full-time job now, so it wasn't like he needed the money.

It'd still hurt when Bryan stopped calling, though. And Adam missed Colton. The little three-year-old had wiggled his way into Adam's heart from the very first day. Bryan had found his way there, too, but that had taken longer.

Four. Colton was four now. Adam hadn't been invited to the birthday party. His sister, Bryan's co-worker, had attended and shown him some pictures she'd captured on her cell phone. Bug, Bryan's nickname for the toddler, had grown so much since Adam last saw him.

Adam peeked in the window of the silent house. No movement. He checked his watch. He was on time, like always. He bit his lip. He could ring the doorbell, but if Bug was on the same nap schedule, it might wake him. As well-behaved as the kid was, interrupting his nap was not how Adam wanted to start the day.

He picked up the picnic basket he'd brought with him and turned the knob. The door was unlocked, so he let himself in.

“Bryan?” he whispered.

No response.

With another deep breath, he crossed the threshold. He knew his way around the one-story home and went straight to the kitchen to set the basket down. As quietly as he could, he tip-toed through the living room. There were

Legos spread across the floor in front of the couch. Bug had a pretty good-sized tower started and Adam smiled. He'd helped his sister pick out the Transformers Lego set for Bug's birthday, and it looked like they were a hit.

A grunt from down the hallway caught his ear and he turned to investigate.

When he reached the open door of Bug's bedroom, his eyes widened at the sight.

Bryan sat on the dresser clad only in a pair of bright red briefs. His bare chest was sprinkled with a patch of chest hair that trailed down through the middle of his six-pack abs. His dark hair was disheveled. He had dots of paint on his arms, with one big glob of yellow right above his eyebrow.

Adam wished he still had the picnic basket so he could hold it in front of his groin. His cock hardened at the sight of Bryan half naked.

"Bryan?"

Bryan dropped the Optimus Prime action figure he was holding and hopped off the dresser.

"Adam? What are you doing here?" Bryan's cheeks turned ruddy.

"Um, you texted me last week to see if I could watch Colton this afternoon. Something about a meeting..." Adam cleared his throat and averted his eyes from the man standing just a few feet from him. Apparently, Bryan had no qualms about standing mostly naked in front of his gay babysitter.

"Oh, shit." Bryan picked up the action figure and set it on top of the dresser.

Was that paint on his back? How did he get paint there?

Adam shook his head and looked around the room. Not much had changed since the last time he'd been there. A few more toys littered the space, but it was mostly the same. Transformers were piled high in the toy box. Bug loved the cartoon, and it was top on his wish list of toys, books, and clothes. If it had a Transformer on it, he wanted it.

"I forgot to tell you. My meeting was cancelled. I don't need you to watch Bug today. I'm really sorry." Bryan ran a hand through his hair, making it stand straight. "Shit, I feel like a jackass."

Adam nodded and tried to hide his disappointment. He'd been looking forward to watching Colton all week. Pretty lame for a grown man to be excited about babysitting a four-year-old anyway. Maybe he should spend his free day going to the coffee shop or park—try to meet some people or something. He needed to rid himself of this stupid crush on Bug's sexy dad. This wasn't his family and wasn't going to be.

"It's okay. Um, I'll just go, then."

"Adam! Adam! Adam!"

Little footsteps echoed down the hallway and within seconds Adam had a child hugging his knees.

"Hey, Bug!" Adam picked up the blond tyke and cradled him in his arms. "You've gotten so big. And why are you naked?"

"Daddy sleeps naked, so I do, too."

Adam raised his brow. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah. Do you sleep naked?"

"Um, no. I sleep in pajamas."

Bug pushed at Adam's chest until Adam set him on the floor.

"Is it done, Daddy? Is it done?"

Bryan's face lit when he smiled at his son and he ruffled Bug's hair.

Adam's chest tightened. Christ, he'd forgotten what a great father Bryan was. Always attentive, caring and patient, even when Bug was a holy terror.

"Yeah. It's done. Don't touch the sides. They're still wet." He pointed at the dresser. "What do you think?"

The dresser was painted off-white and a three-foot-high Optimus Prime picture covered the drawers.

"It's awesome!"

"It really does look fantastic," Adam said. "Last time I was here you just had it sketched out. Looks great filled in. I can't believe you can draw like that."

Bryan shrugged. "Well, I am a cartoonist."

“I know. I read your column and comic strips every morning.” Adam bit his tongue. Now, why did he have to go and admit that?

“Really? Thank you.” Bryan flashed him a brilliant smile. “I’m surprised someone as young as you still reads the actual newspaper instead of getting all your news on social media.”

Adam shrugged. “I like getting the morning paper and reading it while I have my coffee.” *And because I know the artist.* He wasn’t going to admit that aloud, though.

Bryan turned to Bug. “Why don’t you run to the bathroom and get your clothes. You can sleep naked, but this isn’t a nudist colony, so you have to get dressed. Then we’ll have lunch.”

“But you’re still naked.” Bug looked up at his father and scrunched his eyebrows.

Bryan eyes widened. “Shi—Sugar Jets.” He looked at Adam and winced. “Sorry. I forgot I wasn’t dressed.”

“No problem.” Adam kept his eyes on Bryan’s face to avoid staring openly at his lickable chest. He bit back a groan. Lickable? Damn, he had it bad.

Bug tapped Adam’s thigh. “Are you havin’ lunch with us?”

“Um, actually I just stopped to say hi, but I’ve got to get going.”

Bug pouted and he looked at his dad. “Can Adam stay for lunch, Daddy?”

“That’s up to him, honey. Why don’t you go get dressed and he and I will talk about it? Okay?”

Bug ran out the room as fast as his little legs would carry him.

“Would you like to stay for lunch? I feel terrible about forgetting to call you. Lunch is the least I could do, even if it is just SpaghettiOs. And I can still pay you for your time.”

Ugh. That stung.

“Actually, I planned on taking Bug to the park for a picnic. I made a few sandwiches, put together a fruit salad, some cut-up vegetables, and pudding for dessert.”

Bryan's eyes widened. "Awesome. Why don't we all go? You and I can catch up and you can spend time with Bug. He's really missed you."

I haven't gone anywhere.

"Sure. That sounds like fun." *And pure torture at the same time.*

"Kay. I'll go get dressed."

"Um, Bryan? You might want to wash the paint off your arms, and face... and your back."

Bryan laughed. "Yeah, I'll jump in the shower real quick. I'll just be a minute."

"No problem." Adam scrubbed his face with his hands after Bryan left the room. Christ, his attraction to Bryan hadn't waned at all since he last saw him. This was going to be a long day.

Adam retreated to the kitchen while Bryan and Bug got dressed. He shook his head. Bryan slept naked. He'd tuck that piece of information away for later—when he was in bed.

Making himself at home, he opened the fridge and slapped together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He hadn't made enough lunch for three.

"Hey, there you are." Bryan entered the kitchen with Bug on his shoulders. Adam wiped the counter to keep from staring. He was afraid his less-than-overt ogling of Bryan had caused the man to quit calling him to babysit in the first place.

Adam picked up the basket. "Shall we?"

Bryan tossed him a knee-weakening smile. "Yeah. Let's go."

The stroll to the park was quick, only three blocks from the house. Adam quizzed Bug on his colors, and they sang the ABCs as they walked. The kid was sharp as a tack and had learned so much since Adam had last seen him.

At the park, Bug ran off to play with some of the neighborhood kids he knew.

"Stay close!" Adam stood on the edge of the area designated for five-and-under children. He kept a close eye on the little four-year-old as Bug climbed the ladder to the slide.

“He’s fine, Adam. Come sit. We can see the whole playground from here.”

Adam sat on the opposite end of the too-short bench—as far from Bryan as he could get. “How have you been? Work keeping you busy?”

Bryan nodded. “Yeah, but they let me work from home two days a week, so I can spend time with Bug. He usually plays on the office floor while I work.”

“That’s great.”

Bryan rested his arm on the back of the bench, his hand almost touching Adam’s shoulder. “So, what have you been up to? Your sister says you got a full-time job at the university?”

Adam nodded. “Yeah, I’m working for the Communications Department coordinating newsletters and other publications the university puts out.”

“Great. Good for you.” Bryan leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He turned toward Adam with a hard-to-read expression. “I hear you have a boyfriend now, too.”

“What? Where did you hear that?” Adam shook his head. “No. I’m not seeing anyone.”

“Oh. Stephanie mentioned that you had a date, I just assumed...”

Adam thought he saw a smile, but Bryan turned away too quickly for him to be sure. “Well, I’ve had a few dates, but they were just casual. Nothing serious. What about you? Have you been seeing anyone?”

Bryan grimaced and shook his head.

“I’m sorry. That was none of my business. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, it was a fair question. I mean, I asked you first.”

“I know, but after Annie—”

“Annie?” Bryan’s brow furrowed. “What’s Annie got to do with me not dating?”

“Well, she was... um... Bug’s mom and your girlfriend.” Adam stomach turned. Why did he have to mention Bryan’s dead girlfriend? Christ, he was such an ass.

“Adam. I’m gay.” Bryan straightened and met Adam’s stare. “Annie was my best friend, not my girlfriend. I thought you knew that.”

Adam blinked. Once. Twice. Three times. “You’re gay?”

Bryan laughed and turned toward the playground. “Yeah. I’m sorry, I really thought you knew.” His smile disappeared. “Annie and I both wanted kids and we weren’t getting any younger. So, we had one together—via a test-tube.” Bryan’s eyes clouded with sadness. “She would’ve loved Bug. She’s the one who gave him the nickname actually. Her little Bug. She used to talk to him every night when she was pregnant.”

Not knowing what else to do, Adam grasped Bryan’s hand and squeezed. “You’re doing a great job with him. She would be proud of you and him.”

Bryan took a deep breath. “It’s hard to believe she’s been gone for four years.” He smiled and waved at Bug standing on the platform of the playground equipment. “He has so much of her in him.”

“He’s got a lot of you, too.”

Bryan faced Adam with a full grin. “Like my stubbornness?”

“Well, he does have that.”

Bryan narrowed his eyes. “You really didn’t know I was gay?”

Adam shook his head. “No, it’s none of my business. I just assumed that Annie was your girlfriend. I’ve never been given any reason to think otherwise.” Despite spending a lot of time hoping.

Bryan’s eyebrows shot up. “Really?” He looked down at their clasped hands. “I just figured that your sister would’ve told you.”

Adam pulled his hand away. “No, she’s not one to gossip. She probably assumed that you told me, you assumed that she told me, and I assumed it was none of my business.”

“Well, you know what they say about assuming. Makes an ass out of you and me.”

Adam chuckled. “That it does. So, what keeps you from dating then?” Oh, shit that really wasn’t his business, but he was dying to know.

“Bug.” Bryan turned his focused eyes on his son playing with the other kids. “He doesn’t need me introducing a different guy every few weeks.”

Always the vigilant father. Adam gazed at Bryan. His dark hair was longer than when Adam had last seen him. His permanent five-o'clock shadow covered the lower half of his face. Adam would gladly suffer whisker burn just to feel Bryan pressed up against him. Adam sighed. Bryan deserved to find someone to share his life with. And Adam was more than willing to apply for the position.

He shook away the thoughts. *Keep dreaming.*

“Well, now you’re assuming that whoever you’re seeing won’t work out. You don’t know until you try. After all you’ve been through, you deserve to take a little time for yourself.”

Bryan smirked. “That’s all easier said than done.”

“But, you could have anyone. You’re successful, sexy—” Adam clamped his mouth shut.

“And a single father. That last one throws a wrench into the dating game.” Bryan laughed. “No one wants a premade family.”

“I do.” Adam resisted the urge to slap his hand over his mouth. *Idiot.* “I mean, I want a family. Someday. Sooner rather than later, preferably.”

“Daddy.” Bug ran to the bench and launched himself onto Bryan’s lap. “I’m hungry.”

“Me too, Bug. Let’s break out this picnic basket.” Bryan sent Adam an apologetic smile and stood.

Adam unpacked the picnic blanket and spread it out on the ground. “Come here, Bug. I got some hand sanitizer for you. We need to wash your hands.”

Bryan sat on the ground and pulled out the sandwiches. “You brought hand sanitizer?”

“Of course. And bug spray and sunscreen.”

“Geesh. Which one of us is the dad, again? I didn’t even think of bringing any of that.”

Adam laughed. “Well, it’s better to have it and not need, than to need it and not have it. Besides, I used to take my younger brothers to the park all of the time. You can never have enough sunscreen and bug spray.”

“I didn’t realize you had younger brothers.” Bryan narrowed his eyes.

“Yeah, Steph and I are the oldest and the only ones that were planned. The twins were born when I was ten. Then my mom... well, she left.” Adam shrugged. “Most of my teenage years were spent babysitting my little brothers, and they got bored fast, so I had to get creative to keep them out of trouble.”

“That explains why you’re so good with Bug.”

Heat infused Adam’s cheeks and he started handing out their food. While they ate, Bug asked questions and talked non-stop. With him keeping the conversation going, Adam could focus on not saying the first thing that popped into his head.

Bug fell asleep on Adam’s shoulder on the walk home. They’d eaten their lunch and then played tag. Which was more Bug chasing Adam and Bryan in circles, than an actual game. The afternoon tuckered the four-year-old out and within minutes of walking home, he asked Adam to carry him. There was no way Adam could resist those eyes, so much like his father’s. He’d handed Bryan the picnic basket and swung Bug into his arms.

Bryan opened the door quietly. “Go ahead and put him in my bedroom. His still smells like paint.”

Adam nodded and shuffled through the house to the master bedroom.

Unlike Bug’s room and the rest of the house, which was neat and tidy, Bryan’s room was a disaster. Clothes were strewn across the room—hanging off the dresser, piled on the floor. Everywhere. Adam shook his head. The man needed a maid.

He carefully laid Bug onto the middle of the king-size bed and gathered pillows around him to keep him from rolling around. Not that it was likely that he would. The kid slept like a rock. He covered Bug with the blanket. With one last look to make sure he was asleep and secure on the bed, he left the room, trying not to imagine Bug’s father sleeping there naked.

Inside the living room, Bryan sat on the couch with his head leaning back against the cushions.

Adam bit back a chuckle. Looked like Bug wasn't the only one tired out from their afternoon.

“He still asleep?”

Adam plopped on to the couch next to Bryan and sighed. “Oh, yeah, he'll be out for a bit.”

Bryan scoffed. “Or he'll wake up early and be cranky.”

“Yeah, that could happen, too.”

Bryan turned and pulled one leg onto the couch, his foot resting against Adam's thigh. “Thank you for lunch and for getting us out of the house today. It was a lot of fun.”

Adam yawned. “Yeah, we should do it again sometime.” He snapped his mouth closed. So much for not saying the first thing that came to his mind. “I mean, if you ever need some time to yourself or if you do decide to start dating, I'd be happy to watch Bug for you.”

Bryan rested his arm on the back of the couch and his fingers grazed the back of Adam's neck. “That sounds nice.”

Adam gazed back at Bryan, whose eyes were filled with interest and a spark of lust. He darted his tongue out to wet his lips, debating whether or not now was the time to make his move. He'd been wanting to for so long, and when would he have another opening like that?

Reaching his hand around to the back of Bryan's head, he hesitated a moment. When Bryan didn't pull away, it was all the encouragement he needed. His lips crashed hard onto Bryan's. They tasted faintly of the chocolate pudding they'd had for dessert. The sweet scent of his cologne tickled Adam's nostrils and intensified his arousal.

He moaned low in his throat as he coaxed Bryan's mouth open with his tongue. Bryan's fingers tangled in his hair and his other hand lay on Adam's chest, fingers sneaking under his collar to touch his skin.

Adam pushed into the caress. His body tingled with excitement and his cock pressed against the zipper of his jeans. Bryan's hands wandered down Adam's body, slipping under his shirt and resting above his hips. His tongue swept into Adam's mouth. The kiss was sheer perfection, everything Adam had hoped it would be and so much more.

He bucked forward, wanting more, needing Bryan's hands on his skin. Adam slid his hands down Bryan's back until he found the waistband of his khakis. He ached to see if Bryan still wore the red briefs from this morning. Adam moved his hands to the front and found the button quickly and popped it open with one hand. He pulled his mouth from Bryan's and focused on releasing the man's cock from its prison of fabric.

Bryan's hands returned to Adam's chest and he pushed. It took a moment for Adam to grasp that Bryan was telling him to stop.

He met Bryan's eyes. "What's wrong?"

Bryan looked away and fumbled with the fly of his pants. "We can't do this." He stood and walked away. "It's not right."

Adam's heart thundered in his chest and he struggled to catch his breath. "What do you mean?"

"You're a young kid, Adam." Bryan shook his head. "I can't do casual hookups. I'm a single father—it wouldn't be right for Colton."

Adam collapsed into the sofa like he'd been sucker-punched. "Oh."

"You have your whole life ahead of you. You don't want to tie yourself down to a family."

Anger killed the last of Adam's arousal and he shot to his feet. "I'd like the option, thank you very much." He kept his voice low, so they didn't disturb Bug. "I'm a grown man. I can make my own damn decisions."

Bryan winced. "I think maybe you should go."

Tension settled in the air around them. Adam's shoulders slumped and he walked toward the door. He glanced down the hallway to Bug's room and briefly wondered if he'd ever see the kid again—or his dad. Damn him for getting too attached to a family that wasn't his. And damn Bryan for letting him have a taste of what could be.

Adam stared at the television while some sort of terrible sci-fi thriller played out on the screen. Were those sharks with octopus tentacles? What the hell kind of crap was he watching anyway?

He searched around for the remote just as his phone rang. A glance at the clock told him it was well into Saturday night. He picked up the phone and pressed ignore, not wanting to tell his friends he wasn't coming out for yet another Saturday night. For the past two weeks, he couldn't shake the feeling of loss that had settled in his chest the moment he'd left Bryan's house.

The phone rang again and he looked at the screen. A picture of Bryan and Bug flashed on the screen with Bryan's name displayed across the top. He answered without thinking, wanting to hear the voice that set his body on fire and pissed him off at the same time.

"Hello?"

"Adam. It's Bryan. Colton and I are on our way to the hospital. Can you meet us there?"

Adam hesitated. Bug was hurt?

He walked toward the door. "Of course. Yes. Which one?"

"Sacred Heart. We should be there in about fifteen minutes."

"No problem. I'll be there in ten."

A sigh came through the other end of the phone and made Adam's heart melt. Why couldn't he just stay mad at Bryan?

"Thanks, Adam. I—"

"Don't worry about it. I'll see you soon." Adam hung up and grabbed his keys from the hook.

This wasn't the first time he'd gone to the ER for Bug. The last time had been in the middle of the day when Adam had been watching him. Bug was just learning to walk and Adam had turned away for just a second. He'd fallen in the living room and cut his head on the coffee table. Adam shook the thought away. Remembering that day made his blood run cold.

What could be wrong with Bug right now? And why did Bryan call him? Adam didn't care, he just wanted to get to Bug, make sure the kid was all right. He sighed. No matter what happened, he was going to get his heart broken in this situation.

Bryan pulled up to the hospital entrance just as Adam jogged to the door. Bryan flew out of the car and opened the backseat. Within a few seconds he had Bug in his arms. Bug had his blanket over his face, so Adam couldn't see what was wrong with him.

“Go inside and check in. I'll park,” Adam said.

Bryan nodded and carried Bug inside.

Adam parked Bryan's car next to his and ran back to the ER. Did Bug fall out of bed? Down the stairs? Was the child even conscious right now?

The hospital was slow for a Saturday night. Thank God. Bryan and Bug were being taken back to a room just as Adam stepped in the door. He moved toward the waiting area, but Bryan motioned for him to follow. Adam caught a glimpse of Bug's face resting on his father's shoulder. His skin was pale and sweat dampened his blond hair. Adam stomach tightened. His poor baby was sick.

He's not your baby, dumbass.

Bryan laid Bug on the examination table and the nurse took his temperature and pulse. Bug remained still the entire time. He didn't even open his eyes.

The nurse smiled at both Bryan and Adam. “The doctor will be in shortly.”

How about quicker than that? Like right now? Adam kept the thought to himself. He didn't need to cause a scene in the middle of an exam room.

“Thank you,” Bryan said.

After she left the room, Adam turned to Bryan. “What's wrong? Is he sick? How long has he been this way?” He scooted his chair closer to the table and picked up Bug's hand. It was warm and clammy.

“He said he wasn't feeling well this afternoon. So, I kept a close eye on him. I took his temperature before bed and he had a slight fever. I gave him some Children's Tylenol, but his fever didn't come down. I woke him up to bring him in. And when I got him dressed, I found a rash on his back.” Bryan bit his lip and stared at the floor. “I called you because I didn't want to sit up here all night worrying.”

“I’m glad you called.” Adam cleared his throat. “Even though we... you know. I’d still like to watch Bug whenever you need me to. I miss the little guy.”

Bryan nodded. “I know. I wanted to talk with you about—”

The doctor came in the room holding a clipboard in his hand. “Hello, Mr. Daniels, what brings you in this evening?”

Bryan stood. “My son, Colton. He has a one hundred and four fever. It started earlier this evening, and he has a rash on his back.”

Bug stirred and both Bryan and Adam moved to hold him still so he didn’t fall off the table. His lips curled into a pout and little tears pooled in the corners of his eyes.

“It’s okay, Bug. You’re just at the doctor’s office. Your dad and I are right here.” Adam brushed the damp hair from Bug’s forehead as the child turned to look at him.

“Adam!” Bug’s pout turned into a small smile and he reached out for Adam to pick him up.

“Go ahead and hold him. I’ll take a look at his back,” the doctor said.

Adam held Bug in his arms and the boy snuggled into his shoulder. He looked over at Bryan, realizing he maybe overstepping his bounds as a friend who was there for support. Bryan stared back at him. His dark hair pointed in every direction and he had bags under his amber eyes. Maybe he needed Adam to hold him, too.

“Is this the first day that he hasn’t felt well?” the doctor asked as he inspected the rash on Bug’s back.

“Well, yesterday he didn’t want to eat and said he had a sore throat. I didn’t think anything of it. I was trying to get him to eat broccoli, so I assumed he was just being stubborn.”

Adam chuckled. “You don’t like broccoli either.”

Bryan smiled. “No, but he’s never given it a chance.”

The doctor began writing on his clipboard. “It appears as if little Colton has chicken pox. Nothing to worry about, it just needs to run its course.”

“Isn’t he young for that?” Bryan asked. “Colton was supposed to get the vaccine, but he’s allergic to Neomycin. I guess I didn’t expect it to happen this soon.”

“It can happen at any age. The younger the better, really. The rash usually lasts about five to ten days, and he’ll be contagious until the bumps crust over. Both of you have had it before, correct?”

Bryan and Adam nodded.

“Great, then there’s nothing to worry about. He’ll have to stay home while he’s contagious.”

Bryan’s brow furrowed. “That won’t be a problem, I can always work from home and when I do have to go into the office—”

“I can work from home, also. We’ll figure out a schedule.” No way was Adam going to let his little Bug suffer without him. Whether Bryan liked it or not, he’d pulled Adam into this and he was staying for the duration.

The doctor nodded and smiled. “Good. You can give him some over-the-counter fever-reducing medication, and once his rash sets in, I suggest using some anti-itch cream or soaking him in a baking soda bath.”

Adam chuckled as he rocked Bug gently. “And getting some oven mitts for his hands. This little guy won’t listen when we tell him not to scratch.” He glanced at Bryan. “My brothers had it when they were four and they were terrible with the scratching. Now they have some small scars from it.”

The doctor nodded. “Yes, that is a concern. You don’t want him opening up any sores.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate it.” Bryan rolled his shoulders back and the tension cleared from his face.

“Not a problem. If his fever gets worse, or he doesn’t regain his appetite, give Colton’s primary pediatrician a call.”

Bryan nodded and picked up Bug’s blanket.

Adam carried Bug back to the lobby while Bryan signed paperwork. Once he was done, they walked to the car together.

“Thank you for coming.” Bryan smiled. “I feel silly. It never occurred to me that he could have chicken pox.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m glad you called.”

Bryan opened the door of the car and Adam set Bug into his car seat. The little guy slept like the dead, even though he didn’t feel well. Adam bit back a laugh as he buckled the straps to the car seat.

He straightened and closed the door quickly. “He doesn’t feel as warm now, though it could just be from holding him for so long.”

“That’s good.” Bryan shuffled his feet. “Would you like to come back to the house? I feel like I owe you coffee or maybe a stiff drink after dragging you out so late.”

“Sure. Why don’t I stop at a twenty-four-hour store and pick up some cortisone cream and baking soda? That way we—I mean, you—won’t have to leave the house tomorrow.”

“That would be great.” Bryan opened the driver’s side door and slid inside. “Adam? You had it right when you said ‘we’.”

The door closed, leaving Adam contemplating what Bryan could’ve meant. The man was hard to understand sometimes. He’s lucky he had a cute kid.

Adam picked up everything he could think of that Bug might need in the next few days—juice, popsicles, anti-itch cream, baking soda. Plus, he found a cheap Transformers toy that changed from a robot to a car. Bug probably had a million like it, but it would make him smile while he was feeling sick.

When he finally arrived at Bryan’s house it was dark. He let himself in the front door and tip-toed to Bug’s bedroom.

Bug was half-awake and talking to Bryan.

“But I didn’t see any chickens.” Bug rubbed his tired eyes and frowned.

Bryan chuckled. “No, honey. You don’t get chicken pox from chickens. That’s just the name. Get some sleep, buddy. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

Adam leaned against the doorframe, drinking in the sight of Bryan tucking his child into bed.

Bryan kissed Bug's forehead and stood. He switched on the night-light and turned to leave.

Bug snuggled into the blankets. "Night, Daddy. I love you."

"I love you, too, Bug."

Bug glanced up at Adam in the doorway and hugged his teddy bear closer to him. "Night, Adam. I love you."

Adam cleared his throat. "Night, Bug. I love you, too." The kid sure knew how to tug on his heartstrings. He probably got that from his father.

Together, Bryan and Adam walked to the living room and sat on the sofa. Exhaustion rippled through Adam and he yawned.

"I'm sorry I kept you out so late."

Adam shrugged. "It's not a big deal. I was up anyway."

"You can sleep on the couch if you want."

Adam turned his head to stare at Bryan with a raised brow.

Crimson swept over Bryan's cheeks. "I'm sorry about... you know."

Adam chuckled. "You shouldn't be sorry. I'm sorry. I thought you were interested." He shook his head. "I obviously saw something that wasn't there. It was a stupid move on my part."

Bryan picked up Adam's hand. "No, you weren't seeing things. I am attracted to you. I'd love to have the chance to go out sometime on a date, where we eat something other than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches." He looked away. "But, I have a child to think about. I can't do the casual dating thing anymore."

"You aren't giving me any credit here. Christ, I'm not some sort of flake who just wants to get in your pants." Adam pulled his hand from Bryan's. His skin prickled with irritation. "I know you're a single father. But you gotta make time for yourself, too. I was raised by a single dad, Bryan. I have a pretty good idea of what it's like."

“It’s not that easy.”

“You’re making it difficult.” Adam shook his head. “What are you going to tell Bug when he starts dating. ‘Don’t do it, it might not work out. Don’t take chances unless it’s a sure thing?’”

“Hopefully, Bug won’t date until he’s at least thirty.”

“You’re thirty-four. When are you going to start?”

Bryan leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. He stared at the carpet like it was going to give him the secrets of life.

“Look, we don’t have to talk about it anymore. I’m going to crash here though, there’s no way I can—”

Bryan’s arms encircled Adam and pulled him close. His lips crushed against Adam’s, stopping what Adam had been trying to say.

Adam melted against the embrace and moaned into Bryan’s mouth. He placed his hand on Bryan’s cheek and held him there. Bryan wasn’t going to pull away from him this time.

The kiss was warm and slow. Adam felt like he was home for the first time in weeks.

Bryan lifted his lips from Adam’s and pressed their foreheads together. “Was this what you had in mind? If we were dating, I mean.”

Adam blinked. “Well, I was hoping to get dinner first, but there aren’t any rules that say we can’t make out a little before the first date.”

Bryan laughed. “Any date we have in the next week and half is going to have to be takeout. We have a sick child to care for, remember?”

“Yeah. Luckily, both Bug and I love the same kind of pizza.”

Bryan leaned back on the couch and Adam settled against him, held close by Bryan’s arms.

Cuddling. Bryan was a cuddler. Who knew?

“Does this mean you’ve changed your mind? Or are you just being a tease? I kind of need to know, like now, if we’re actually going to try this or if you’re going to freak out again.”

“You’re right. I have to give us a chance. I’d like to go out sometime. On a real date—not to McDonald’s Playplace or the playground. Though, I’m sure we’ll have plenty of dates there, too.” Bryan cupped Adam’s face with his hand. “It’s not going to be easy. But it will be one hell of an adventure.”

Adam met Bryan’s eyes. “It could be easy. Everything could fall into place and be perfect.”

Bryan laughed and covered his mouth to muffle the sound. “Oh, I think you have a bit to learn about raising kids.” He kissed Adam’s forehead. “I wonder if Rachel has had chicken pox.”

Adam stifled a yawn and laid his head against Bryan’s chest. He made a good pillow. “Who’s Rachel?”

“The sitter I hired to replace you, after I couldn’t be around you without thinking about ripping your clothes off.”

“Hmm. We’ll have to try that sometime.” Adam eyes drifted closed and he fought to stay awake. “Why do we need Rachel?”

“So we can go on a date. She can watch Bug. Though, I think it’s going to be your job to explain to him that you and I are going out without him.”

Adam’s eyes popped open and he froze. “Yeah, that might become a battle. We’ll need a good distraction. Is it too soon to get him a puppy?”

Bryan chuckled, the laughter rumbled through his chest and vibrated against Adam’s ear. “You are going to keep things interesting around here, aren’t you?”

Adam lifted his head and smiled. “I’m going to try.” He kissed Bryan’s lips softly and then settled against his chest. “Go to sleep Bryan. It’s gonna be a long week.”

THE END

Author Bio

Jena Wade is new to this writing business. She's an avid reader. By day she is a web developer. She overuses smiley faces in everyday emails.

Most of her evenings are spent typing away on her laptop, with her beagle and basset hound curled up at her feet.

Yup, that about sums up her life.

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HAPPY ENDINGS

By Deanna Wadsworth

Photo Description

The picture is a black-and-white photo of a nearly naked man sitting on the floor, shoulders and head drooped in defeat, the epitome of sadness. Why is he so sad? What happened to leave him in this state and can anyone help him?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This picture, while disturbing, is one I really want to know the story behind. All I see is someone in pain. I don't want him to have been brutalized or physically harmed in any way because I'm not into violence against people, but he's been hurt.

I see him naked, cradling himself, bare, and vulnerable.

Why?

Sincerely,

D.H.

Story Info

Genre: historical, late twentieth century

Tags: Russian gymnast, physical therapist, broken heart, friends to lovers, sensual massage, Olympic hopeful, HFN

Word count: 5,718

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Historical Note

On December 24, 1979, the Soviet Union deployed tanks to invade Afghanistan. President Jimmy Carter gave the Soviet Union an ultimatum on January 20, 1980 that the United States would boycott the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympic Games if their troops did not withdraw within one month. They did not. The Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan until February 15, 1988.

Due to these political issues, the United States Olympic team, along with teams from over sixty other countries, did not attend the Moscow Games. This story takes place before the Soviet invasion thus the characters are still preparing for a competition that will never happen.

HAPPY ENDINGS

By Deanna Wadsworth

I rapped gently on the door.

No answer.

Knocking again, I heard stirring on the other side.

It had taken some convincing on my part to calm Coach Kozlov into not coming here to beat this door down. I could still hear his thick Russian voice reverberating in the gymnasium, ranting that Olympic hopefuls “do not miss practice!”

“Alexei,” I called. “Alexei, I know you’re in there. It’s me, Will.”

Again, no answer.

The Olympic tryouts were approaching and despite Christmas being less than a week away, this was not the time to slack off. As the lead man on rings, pommel horse, and floor exercises, Alexei Morozov had dominated practice and competitions, paving the way toward the podium in Moscow next July and giving the US Men’s Gymnastics Team a golden glint in their eye.

Alexei had come to America from the Soviet Union with his parents in late ’74. As one of the best gymnasts on the list of Soviet hopefuls, there had been quite a media spectacle about his family’s defection. Three years ago, however, at the age of eighteen, Alexei had been granted full United States citizenship—too late to compete in Montreal, but plenty of time to prepare for Moscow. This past year he’d shown his talent by taking a bronze and a silver in two international meets. The media hinted he might be chosen as captain of the men’s team, and I had my own suspicions Coach Kozlov might agree.

Moscow would be Alexei’s chance to fulfill a lifelong dream of gold.

While I pitied the rest of the team as Coach took his anger out on them through a rigorous practice, my thoughts had been distracted by concern for Alexei. He’d claimed a sore hamstring, but that seemed like a shoddy excuse to me. I had just given him a therapeutic massage two days ago, and I’d seen no sign of pain.

I shifted the portable table in my hands, the weight of it uncomfortable now. Since '75 I'd been working with the men's gymnastics team, traveling with them as their physical therapist. I'd been there the day Alexei received his citizenship and remembered it fondly. So affected by his tears of joy and relief, I'd taken full advantage of the opportunity to embrace the beautiful Alexei along with the rest of the well-wishers. Never before had I met a happier or more driven young man.

So what had happened to keep him away from practice today?

Knowing how stubborn the Soviets who surrounded me were, I figured Alexei might be covering up something. Understandably, when he had not shown up at the gym at five a.m.—a first for Alexei—Coach Kozlov's fury had been explosive. Since Alexei and I had an unspoken friendship, no doubt he'd rather see me knocking on his door than Coach.

I leaned my table against the wall and pounded a little more forcefully on the door. "Look, Alexei, I can hear you in there. You told Coach your hamstring was bothering you, so he sent me. If you don't want me to look at it, I will gladly send Coach back here and he can talk to you."

That did the trick.

"Come in," a thick, accented voice called. Though one o'clock in the afternoon, he sounded as if he had just woken up.

I turned the knob, finding it unlocked. A dark gloom filled the studio because the curtains had been drawn, blocking out the afternoon California sun. I allowed my eyes a moment to adjust then hauled my therapy table inside. Having never been here before, I took a curious look around the place Alexei called home.

A carbon copy of all the apartments assigned to the gymnastic team while in training, the one-room apartment consisted of a main living space, a small kitchenette, a door to the side for the bathroom, and a semiprivate nook for a bed. Instead of having living room furniture, the main area remained open, with tumbling mats and a barre on the wall—probably harkening back to Alexei's ballet days and perfect for all forms of stretching.

A swath of light broke through the drawn curtains, illuminating Alexei.

He sat on the floor, wearing nothing but a pair of small, white briefs. He'd pulled one knee to his muscular chest while the other collapsed in defeat. His broad shoulders slumped and those gorgeous blond curls concealed a face which visited me often in my dreams.

Never in all my days had I seen someone so broken, so sad. My heart gave a pang of sympathy, and I wanted to hold him close, tell him everything would be okay.

Naturally, I ignored this instinct.

I rested my table against a small dinette table. On its surface sat a glass, an empty bottle of vodka, and a shoe box full of letters. Several were opened and strewn about carelessly. One quick glance showed they were in Russian. Though I had picked up plenty of Russian from Coach Kozlov—mostly curses, orders, and gymnastic terms—I could not read the language. But I did note the return address said Moscow. From someone back home then.

“Alexei,” I whispered, inching forward as one might approach an animal in the wild, fearing it would bolt.

Alexei, however, remained motionless, as still as a statue in that one patch of light, a snapshot of a broken man, burned into my mind for eternity as the epitome of sadness.

I swallowed back the lump in my throat, blinking to stave off tears. Knowing better than to touch, I knelt beside him. “Are you okay?”

A bitter sniff answered my question. “*Nyet*,” he said—“no” in Russian.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“*Nyet*.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

This question took him longer to answer. “I don’t know.”

Well, that was progress.

I took a fortifying nasal breath and placed my hands on my thighs. “Coach said your hamstring was bothering you. Can I take a look at it?”

Finally, the man raised his head. I had to catch my breath when I saw those deep green eyes, the ones I had imagined opening beside me in bed so many

times, but now ringed with redness. He'd been crying and not just a little. His puffy face and lips were the victims of serious grief.

"I am fine," he replied.

"You don't look fine," I countered.

That got a half chuckle out of him, offering a hint of the happy-go-lucky man I adored.

"That is because I am not fine, as you say, Will."

I suppressed a shiver, loving the way his accent always made my name sound like "*Vill*." Living in the States for six years, Alexei had embraced the music, fashion, and culture but his accent remained thick since he spoke primarily Russian at home and with Coach.

"So why didn't you come to practice?" I asked, hoping he would tell me. I had no right to pry, but I cared about him as a friend and I wanted to help. "Did you hurt something?"

He sniffed again and raised his other leg up, resting his muscular arms on both knees much the way a child would. I wisely kept my attention averted from the ample bulge between his thighs. As the team physical therapist, I had seen him naked a hundred times, worked the kinks out of his groin muscles and even glimpsed his erection as I did my job, all the while ignoring my own thoughts and desires which continued to grow the more time I spent with the younger man.

"I have not hurt myself," Alexei replied.

The emphasis he put on the word "I" made me think of the letters on the table and the vodka. "Who hurt you?"

"You are... how do they say it?" He searched his Russian mind for the English word, a habit I found endearing. "Very intuitive, Will."

I smiled and shrugged off the compliment. "It's a gift."

We were silent for a while, and I could feel the tension in my knees from sitting on them and the tingle in my feet. I couldn't stay in this position much longer, but with Alexei hurting I would be damned if I got up and left him. He might not admit it, but he needed me. I knew it in my bones.

“You don’t have to tell me who it is,” I eventually offered. “But I brought my table. Might as well have me work on you a bit. Maybe then you’ll feel better.”

Though almost eight years my junior and a violation of all my ethical and professional standards, I thoroughly enjoyed rubbing down Alexei and hoped he would agree to a session. I longed to touch his splendid male body, too thick for the ballet he had first been assigned to in the Soviet Union as a little boy. He’d been gifted with a stocky, muscular build, well suited for the gymnastics he’d taken up at the age of ten. When he competed he had the power of a gymnast with the fluid grace of a dancer. He was magic tumbling on the mats in floor exercise, truly mesmerizing.

Always one of my favorites on the team, Alexei was not only gentle and kind in nature, but also responded to touch unlike any other patient I’d ever treated. He would purr, almost catlike, arching into my hands. Only when I worked deep, causing pain, did he flinch or hiss. But he never complained. Something about his sensuality lured me into spending a few minutes longer with him, soothing his muscles after I put him through the ringer. He always seemed to be revived afterward, the natural effect of a well-done massage.

As the therapist, I, too, walked away feeling some of his goodness and happiness within me. That was the beauty of shared touch—both parties benefitted. If only Alexei knew how badly I had come to crave his own unique touch.

Alexei contemplated my offer, appearing tempted.

“No deep tissue,” I said, sweetening the pot.

Then I finally got what I had been missing since I’d walked into the apartment.

A smile. One which revealed the slight twist of his left front tooth overlapping the other. The imperfection gave his smile character, illuminating his entire face.

Of course, he did not smile big now, but the faint gesture was the first real glimmer of hope I’d seen from him.

“*Da*,” he answered in the affirmative. “I would like that.”

As I set up my table, Alexei stood, shedding his briefs. My eyes shifted to his magnificent bare form, heat flashing under my skin. I quickly averted my face but not before Alexei caught me staring. His posture straightened, not the slightest bit uncomfortable with another man checking him out. Were my own desires misinterpreting his ease with me gawking, or was he telling me something? Maybe years of showering in locker rooms, having professionals massage his groin area, and walking around in tight uniforms just gave him a confidence I could never possess.

Whatever it was, I never tired of admiring him, and I was glad he didn't seem to mind me ogling.

Sometimes I had a hint he might find me attractive. I was decent enough, tall, and in fair shape, with dark hair and pleasing features. Or so I had been told. Either Alexei wasn't attracted to men, afraid to be, or just plain afraid of being exposed and watching his Olympic dreams go up in flames, but he never gave me any indication of interest.

So everything remained in my fantasies.

Once the table had been set up, I turned back to him and gasped. He stood in front of the dinette, the sinewy curve of his spine, the musculature of his legs, and the solid pertness of his perfect ass highlighted by the lone light from the curtains, creating shadows of definition on his perfectly carved body. His mop of blond curls came to the center of my chest when he stood in front of me, but all those muscles kept him from seeming small or frail.

My cock throbbed in my shorts, inching down my leg without permission. I swallowed back the saliva pooling in my mouth. While I knew—as did my cock—within moments my hands would be all over his body, I longed for it to be with both of us naked, tangled up in the throes of passion, erections battling while our skin collided and our mouths sought one another.

I cleared my throat and Alexei turned, one of the letters clutched tightly in his hand.

Our eyes locked, and I counted my heartbeats. One... two... three... four...

When I reached ten Alexei smiled, the tension in his shoulders easing as he broke the intense stare he'd pinned on me.

I let out a rush of breath, not surprised to find my pulse racing.

“The one I love has told me they are marrying another,” Alexei said, startling me.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“As am I,” he agreed, dropping the letter.

We both watched the paper drift to the floor like a leaf in the wind, me standing awkwardly by my therapy table and Alexei, the epitome of masculine beauty, nude and immobile before me.

I felt like I should say something. I, too, had been the victim of a lost love before. “You may not believe me now, but you will find someone to love you the way you deserve, Alexei. I can promise you that.”

Then Alexei gave me the saddest, most defeated expression I had ever seen from another human being. I had to resist the urge to hug and reassure him.

“I fear that may not be true for a man like me, Will.”

I tipped my head to the side, curious why he would say something like that. “What was her name?”

Those piercing green eyes, ringed with the redness of grief, captured mine, stealing my breath away. He did not reply, rather, he studied me, much the way I had seen him scrutinizing the mats in the gym, the rings, and the pommel horse. As if he were laying out possible outcomes, falls, injuries, or mistakes. Going over routines in his head, preparing for both victory and defeat. It was this single-minded intensity, coupled with a jovial attitude out of the gym, which had always drawn me to him. He had a sort of magnetism one could not learn.

Finally, he answered, “Viktor.”

His gaze did not waver when my brows shot up, the weight of his full confession like a cold bucket of water in the face followed by a burst of exhilarating awareness.

However excited I suddenly felt, I kept my composure, not wanting to react in any way which he might misconstrue. I steeled my face, keeping the shock and happiness at bay. “Yeah, I had the same thing happen to me once upon a time. His name was David.”

And then, just like that, every unspoken tension dissolved, every eggshell either of us had ever been forced to walk on, every fear or misconception we had faced... gone. Our secret was the same and we had no more reasons to pretend.

Alexei smiled, showing a hint of that crooked tooth I wanted to feel under my tongue. "At the games next summer he was supposed to leave with me and come to America so we could finally be together."

I nodded in understanding. So many Soviets, especially athletes, defected to the United States or Canada due to the harsh way of life in their homeland. Naturally, Alexei would assume his former lover would wish to do the same.

He sighed in defeat. "But now he has chosen to marry a woman. He claims what we had was mistake. A sin. He is wrong." Alexei bunched a fist at his side, trying to convince himself or Viktor, I wasn't really sure. "But he forgot what we had. Perhaps it had been too long since..."

His voice trailed off and his cheeks reddened. I could imagine what he'd intended to say after hearing the longing and the grief in his words, seeing it in his posture. Alexei had not been to the Soviet Union since an international meet two years ago. Could that have been the last time he saw this Viktor? Had Alexei been alone, untouched, and unloved all this time?

Just imagining Alexei lonely hurt me to my very soul.

Awkward due to my sudden overwhelming desire to be the salve to mend Alexei's broken heart, I didn't know what to say. I yearned to embrace him, kiss him, and tell him everything would be all right. But it was not my place. Instead, I offered him the one thing I could. I gestured toward the table, surprised to find my hand shaking a bit. My nerves were not from my usual anticipation of touching him. Now that all my suspicions had been confirmed, I couldn't stop my mind from dreaming that someday something might happen between *us*.

Dare I hope?

Without making eye contact, Alexei climbed onto the table and lay face down. Perhaps he felt he had confessed too much. Then again, maybe I was reading into it.

I tossed the sheet over his delectable ass, more acutely aware of the masculine scent of his sweat than ever before. He must have consumed a lot of alcohol after receiving the letter from his lover, because his skin glistened with sweat as his body expunged the toxins.

Oiling my hands, I focused my energy into my work, starting with his feet. Slowly, I kneaded the arches, the balls, and heels. Each toe I worked on elicited a soft little groan of pleasure from Alexei, so faint I would have missed it if I had not been waiting for it, listening intently. A gymnast used every part of their body, and I devoted my talents to each and every toe, stretching them, removing the kinks.

Being a much larger man than Alexei, my hands could wrap almost all the way around his muscular calves. I slid my thumbs slowly up his legs, getting into every tendon, each muscle receiving diligent care. His alabaster skin, shaved smooth of all hair, felt like silk against my palms.

When I went to work on his hamstrings, Alexei moaned, arching his ass up ever so slightly, like a kitten being petted. He'd suffered a hamstring pull once, and I knew how much he loved the special attention to the vital muscle group. I could also not deny how much I adored standing above him, trailing my oiled palms up his inner thighs and the innocent way the back of my hands brushed his sack as I drove my thumbs into the fascia where the hamstring met his groin.

Alexei sighed with pleasure, widening his thighs to grant me better access to his sore muscles. I had to bite my lower lip to contain a longing groan.

As my hands moved upward, so did the sheet. I let out a shaky breath when the wrinkled skin of his sack came into view. My cock burned in my shorts, knowing he was like me. That he, too, relished the intimate touch of another man. Even if he had expressed no interest specifically in me, knowing he had trusted me and that in some world there might be a chance for us, I could not stop my hard-on from throbbing.

Trying my damndest to keep my focus on the task at hand, I shifted my attention to the sides of his thighs, working the large muscles with deep massage and effleurage. But as soon as I placed my hands on his glutes, my breathing became labored—and not from the exertion of my work. I massaged

the globes of his ass, kneading them like two balls of dough, careful not to allow my fingers to slide into the valley of dark pleasure I longed to explore. I focused on the connective tissue, the hip flexors, and the pressure points which needed to be kept limber for gymnastics. His skin glistened with the oil, a beacon calling me to caress him forever. I struggled to ignore the faint dust of hair in his crack and the way his muscular ass just begged to be parted and laved clean of sweat by my tongue.

But the harder I tried to remain professional with my hands, the more my mind insisted on conjuring illicit scenarios. Ones of me climbing onto the table, spreading his cheeks and lubing his pucker with my spit, then driving my aching cock home into that tight, gymnast ass.

My God, I had never wanted him more!

Was it just his recent show of vulnerability which drew me to him, made me want to protect him and make sweet love to him until he forgot all about this old lover? Or perhaps it was that same fantasy which played often in my head. The one of Alexei stretching in the gym, his legs spread wide in a side split, face flat on the ground before him. Such flexibility could afford two men countless positions in which to find relief.

Shaking my head to clear away such inopportune thoughts, I dedicated myself to his back, tracing the ridges of his perfectly defined latissimus dorsi, and digging my thumbs into his trapezius before caressing his solid deltoids. Something about focusing solely on the technical treatment of the muscles beneath my expert hands helped me regain part of my composure.

Alexei groaned loudly when I repeated the circuit of massage on his back, starting lower this time, by his hips. At his indication of pain, instantly, the therapist in me took over. "Hips bothering you?"

"Just tight," he responded, voice choked.

My wayward gaze drifted over the top of his ass cheeks peeking out from the sheet. *Not the only thing tight on you, I'd wager.*

"Roll onto your side." I raised the sheet so he could maintain a measure of decency while he assumed the proper position, on his side with his upper leg bent. I didn't do this as much for him as myself. I couldn't handle seeing his cock in my current state of turmoil.

I exposed just his ass and dutifully treated his hip, massaging and breaking up any lactic acid which might cause him strain during a routine. Once finished and so in tune with my medical task that my arousal had subsided somewhat, I instructed him to flip over so I could take care of his other hip.

Still discombobulated by everything, I forgot to hold up the sheet. Before I could walk to the other side of the table I was faced with the one thing my fragile composure could not handle.

His cock.

I choked back a whimper. Alexei had rolled onto his side, eyes still closed and cock jutting out with a partial erection. In my business, such an involuntary reaction to massage was not unusual, but after his confession to me, I fixated on it. The length was not much, but overall his cock was thick like the man, with a bulbous head tucked neatly into a pink foreskin. I had the notion if I were to give his veiny length one smooth stroke, the head might pop out of its protective home to say hello. I smiled, thinking of how he might taste or feel in my hand or mouth.

Before my imagination got too carried away, I hastily moved to the other side, where an equally distracting view of his ass awaited me. I completed the necessary massage on his second hip, trying unsuccessfully to ignore his moans of pleasure.

“Okay,” I said, clearing my throat. “Lay flat on your back.”

Like a sleepy cat, Alexei raised his arms over his head and pointed his toes, arching his back as he rolled toward me. The contentment on his face as he stretched his entire body, the sway of his muscle, and the seductive movement of his limbs froze me in place. I watched in awe as he shifted, the motion completely dragging the sheet under his ass. His cock, still at half-mast, drooped to the side. My eyes did not know how to obey any longer. They roamed all over him, soaking in his beauty much the way a starving man took in a buffet. From the softness of his relaxed face and those rumped blond curls, to his sweat-slicked chest with wrinkle marks from the sheet, and down to those solid muscular legs, finally stopping at the dark blond thatch surrounding his beautiful, uncut cock.

My jaw dropped, the need for oxygen too great to continue breathing through my nose.

Then Alexei opened his sleepy eyes and smiled at me. The same content smile I'd fantasized seeing every morning when I rolled over in my lonely bed and saw an empty pillow beside me.

I stood beside him, oiled hands helpless at my side, studying his face, the pleasure and serenity he wore. Rendered mute and immobile, my body flushed as arousal swept over me in full force.

Swallowing hard, I just kept staring. I could not have looked away for anything. Recalling the loneliness in his voice when he'd spoken about Viktor flooded me with the desire to ease any pains he might carry. So intent on the man on my table, I had not realized how hot the tiny studio apartment had become, and sweat trickled down my spine.

Alexei's gaze dropped, taking in the sizable tent in my shorts I did not attempt to hide. His smile changed and I shivered despite the heat.

Beefy chest rising and falling, Alexei regarded my face again, desire coloring his expression now. He lowered one arm to his side, the other across his bare stomach, lying still with one knee raised to remove the pressure from his lower back.

My professional mind told me to take the sheet and cover him, but I couldn't bring myself to hide one inch of his perfect body. Boldly, I swept him with my gaze, taking him in and memorizing his perfection. When his erection started to rise, I stared at it, transfixed. My blood pounded in my ears and I waited with bated breath as that moist head slowly emerged from its protective sheath.

A quick peek at his face revealed a desperation which stole the air from my lungs. His lips were swollen, no longer with grief, but with hunger. They were parted and his breaths came shallow. I stared, disbelieving, as his hand inched toward one brown nipple, thumbing it. A blush colored his beautiful pale skin and his hooded expression pleaded with me. Then he uttered one simple word.

“Please...”

Attention held total prisoner by Alexei, I took hold of his shaft, a giddy sense of surreal delight washing over me when I felt its heat. My hand was liberally oiled, and when I twisted his shaft upward the skin glided beneath my

grip with ease, his foreskin encasing his head once more. Playing with an uncircumcised man was new for me and terribly erotic.

Alexei hissed, hips twitching and reminding me of something feline, fluid and sensual. I massaged his cock, devoting as much care and attention to that muscle as I had all the rest. On the downward stroke I delighted in watching his moist, dark head pop out of its protective home. Mouth watering, I stared at his cock, so different, so unfamiliar to a circumcised man like me. Suddenly, all the men I had been with—not that there had been a lot—were rendered boring and unexciting in light of the new plaything in my hands. Touching Alexei’s perfect, unadulterated penis felt like the first time I’d ever touched another man’s cock.

New, exciting... perfect.

I pumped him, relishing the way the foreskin slid back and forth across his head and knowing by the way he writhed beneath me it had to feel extremely good for him. Up and down I jerked him, twisting my hand as I did so. Alexei played with his nipple, pinching and pulling, then every now and again squeezing the other one. He grunted a bit, body trembling. As intoxicating as the sight of his cock in my hand was, his face was even more enticing. Contorted in passion, he watched me, lips swollen and parted with lust.

I moved closer, only touching him with the one hand. I smiled when he clutched at the sheet by his side, fighting for control or desperate to let go, I couldn’t be sure. Still he kept his determined gaze on my face.

“Will,” he gasped, thrusting his hot, rock hard cock deeper into my grip.

“It’s okay,” I heard myself whisper though the voice did not sound like my own. “Just let go. I’ll take care of you, I promise. You don’t have to worry anymore.”

Then his entire body gave in, a dam breaking. I stroked him faster, caught up in a fever and needing to give him this. He threw his head back with a strangled cry, and his cock pulsed beneath my palm. I looked back just in time to see glorious ropes of cum spew from between my fingers.

“Alexei,” I murmured, my own body trembling now.

He whimpered, thrashing a bit on the table as he continued to come.

Witnessing his release sent a shock wave through me and my back convulsed. Without even touching the erection hidden in my shorts, the cum rose within me then burst free.

“Oh, God!” I cried, shaking hard.

As I rode out my own pleasure, I never stopped stroking his cock, imagining his hand was on me doing the same. I wavered on my feet and gripped the table with my free hand, the sweet blackness of orgasm crashing over me in surges of heat.

Head spinning, I slowly peeled my eyes open once I finished. Alexei’s entire body had melted into the table, his expression glazed over with sated happiness. My hand still held his cock, massaging on its own though he had softened, the head disappearing under the foreskin. I couldn’t help being reminded of a turtle hiding away in its shell and I managed a weak smile. I braced my weight on the table as the weakness after coming consumed me.

Not releasing his cock, I studied his face. At a loss as to what to say, I simply stared, embarrassed, happy, and unsure. I had crossed a line professionally, but at his behest. My first instinct was to apologize but he had needed this as badly as I had.

While I gazed into the green depths of his eyes, I understood it would take time for him to heal, to mend his broken heart. I did not know what this moment meant to him or meant for us, but it would always be incredibly special to me. I offered him a faint smile, one of assurance, affection, and appreciation. I had promised during the heat of the moment to take care of him, and it surprised me how much I really meant those words.

Suddenly, the warmth of his hand covered mine, halting my gentle caress on his cock. I withdrew, imagining he might be overstimulated after coming.

But Alexei did not let me go.

He took hold of my hand and gave me a squeeze, ignoring the wetness of his cum smearing between our palms.

Then he smiled at me, his face illuminating as he flashed that adorable crooked tooth. All uncertainty about the future faded away.

Alexei and I had made a connection today, bonding us irrevocably.

Whether or not we would have a real happy ending remained to be seen. But I planned to give it one helluva shot, and help him heal along the way.

If the sparkle in his green eyes were any indicator, Alexei wanted the same thing, too.

THE END

Author Bio

Bestselling erotica author Deanna Wadsworth leads a pretty vanilla life in Ohio with her hubby of sixteen years and two adorable cocker spaniels. Since 2010 she has published thirteen erotic novellas and has already contracted two manuscripts in 2013, including her first full length novel, Easy Ryder, which will be available later this summer. A wildly active imagination and a love of romance in all stages and incarnations inspire her to write Romance with Spice and Love without Boundaries.

You can buy her books at Amazon and all other reputable e-book distributors.

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PLEDGE NUMBER SEVEN

By C.M. Walker

Photo Description

Two dark-haired young men sit on a hardwood floor, viewed through a doorway. The younger, clean-shaven man has his back against the wall, wearing a white undershirt, dark pants, and boots. The other man faces him, bracing himself with his hand between his boyfriend's feet. He wears a dark T-shirt and has the beginnings of a beard growing in. The men's faces are close, suggesting an intimate conversation or a kiss.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Something new that must be kept a secret. But secrets will out, and who discovers this “forbidden” relationship? (And is it really as “forbidden” as they think? Are they keeping their relationship a secret because of a game, because it's easier, because one person in particular cannot know the truth?)

HEA (or a strong HFN), and a “forbidden affair” at least at the beginning. Bonus points for some dub-con and/or (reluctant?) kissing in public. Can be any level of heat.

Sincerely,

May R.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, coming out, barely legal, first time, in the closet, fraternity, homophobia

Content warnings: dub-con

Word count: 20,488

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PLEDGE NUMBER SEVEN

By C.M. Walker

CHAPTER ONE

The pledges stand in a line in front of us wearing nothing but their underwear, hands clasped behind their backs. Large, black numbers label their bare chests. I scan their faces one by one. Even as my brain repeats *don't look at him*, my gaze snaps back to lucky number seven. I wipe his real name from my mind. Until he's a brother, he's just Seven.

From this distance, his eyes look black. Though he's not what you'd call built, taut olive skin covers his deliciously defined pecs and the faint ridges of his abs. The top line of the seven is perfectly centered between his dark nipples. Boxer briefs contain the bulge between his legs and snugly wrap around to his backside. The dark hair covering his legs matches the mop on the top of his head.

Seven is one of fifteen lucky freshmen who received their Alpha Phi Kappa pins yesterday. Earlier tonight, three brothers waxed the freshmen's chests and wrote the numbers onto the smooth surface with a bold marker. Nothing starts the brother-bonding process like having your chest hairs ripped out with hot wax.

My gaze travels back up to his face. He stares at me. No way he missed my inspection of his entire body. Shit. I quickly look to Eight, who's shorter and a little rounder. Better. No inappropriate reactions there.

As Chuck, this year's Pledge Master, talks about the tradition of pledging and the ritual of becoming a brother, my attention wanders back to Seven. He continues to watch me, perhaps expecting another eye-fuck. Sorry to disappoint you, Seven. And yet, I can't seem to avert my gaze. Are his eyes really black or just very dark brown?

"Fifteen of our brothers have so graciously volunteered to personally guarantee that your pledging semester gets off to the right start." Chuck shakes the bowl of paper in his hands. "They'll each draw a number and then

supervise your completion of a task of their choosing. Failure to complete the task will result in consequences. And trust me, you don't want the consequences."

Chuck offers the bowl to Paulie first. He pulls out a slip of paper, unfolds it, and reads, "Two."

Two nods. You can almost see his mind working a mile a minute, wondering if Paulie is exactly the type of person people mean when they say, "It's the quiet ones you gotta look out for."

Mikey draws next. "Twelve, you're my bitch." He rubs his hands together. "This is gonna be fun."

Chuck steps over to me. "Your turn, T.K."

Please be Eight. Or Nine. Anyone but Seven.

I fish around in the bowl, as if the paper marked Seven will feel different from the rest. I tear my eyes off Seven just long enough to read the one I've chosen. My mouth grows so dry that my announcement comes out hoarse. I clear my throat and wet my lips. "Seven," I repeat, this time loud enough to drown out the throbbing of my heartbeat in my ears.

Chuck moves on to Boomer.

Seven shows no reaction. He's either a damn fine poker player or too cocky for his own good. No. Better not think anything about cocks right this minute. I take Seven's stoic nature as a personal challenge. If he can stand there unaffected by what's happening, then I sure as hell can. Well, I'll have to fake it because just the thought of getting him alone in my room makes my dick stand at attention.

Seven still eyes me as Chuck gives the "Go to it" command. Some of the other pledges eagerly approach their assigned brothers. Idiots. Others glance around nervously, as if unsure what to do. Seven stands just as he has been the entire time, back straight as a rod, no hint that he's embarrassed to be standing there in his underwear or nervous about what task he might have to complete.

I reach him in two strides and wrap my fingers around his upper arm. “Let’s go,” I say as I tug him forward.

He brings his hands out from behind his back, but doesn’t yank his arm away or resist. He doesn’t speak. Because he’s not sure if he’s allowed to or he just doesn’t want to?

What had my brothers seen in him? The first time I saw him, last week during Rush, I got a hard-on. I avoided him the rest of the week and hoped he wouldn’t get a bid. Turns out I was the only one who voted against him.

I lead him upstairs to my room. I shove him toward the middle of the room and shut the door.

He stands there, waiting calmly. I walk up to him, getting right into his face. He’s maybe an inch shorter than me, but I’ve got at least twenty-five pounds on him. He meets my eyes, giving no indication that my closeness bothers him. Our noses could collide with the slightest of movements.

“You sure you can handle this, tough guy?” I ask.

“Sir, yes, sir!”

I bark out a laugh, unable to help it. “This isn’t the fucking army, genius.”

A muscle in his cheek twitches, the first sign that he’s not some kind of robot, that there might actually be a person in there. A comedian. Who would have guessed?

I slowly circle him, not taking my eyes off him. “You don’t want to fuck with me, Seven.”

I pause to appreciate that ass, clenching my fists to keep from grabbing it.

He scoffs. “I can handle myself. Against you? Any day.”

I complete my circle and step back into his space. He has full, dark pink lips. With a tilt of my head, we could be kissing.

“You’ve got a mouth on you, don’t you? Tsk, tsk.” I shake my head. Then I know exactly what that mouth—and those lips—can be used for. I lock the door. “Let’s put that mouth to good use. Your task is to suck my dick.”

His face finally changes, his eyebrows raising so high they become part of his hair. “What?” His voice jumps an octave, as if I couldn’t possibly have said what he thinks I said.

“Suck. My. Dick. Right here. Right now.” I palm my dick through my jeans to make my point.

His throat moves in a slow swallow as he continues to size me up with those dark, dark eyes. I can see now that his eyes aren't actually black, just very close to it. Have I misjudged him? I've never really believed in the gaydar thing, but something about the way he looks at me, it's like he knows about me. Which, of course, he doesn't. The guys I've been living with the last two years don't even know, so how could Seven?

My stomach drops. Have I gone too far? We have to be careful about what we force our pledges to do. Strictly speaking, hazing is against University policy, but you can't get through pledging without it. Anyone with a set of balls can handle the shit we put our pledges through. And we always steer clear of anything that would land us in the news, especially sexually-themed tasks, so what the fuck am I doing?

As I open my mouth to tell him that his first official pledge task isn't actually a blow job, he steps toward me. He lowers his eyes to unbuckle my belt, but looks up again as he reaches for my jeans. My breath stops in my throat when his knuckles graze my stomach. It's only once he pops open the button and unzips the fly that I can breathe again, and even then I feel like I can't draw in enough oxygen. My dick throbs, as if trying to push itself in his hands, but clothes still block the way.

The unemotional mask hasn't changed. Seven looks neither scared nor turned on; he's just following orders. This frustrates the hell out of me, knowing that I don't affect him the way he affects me. As he slides my pants down my legs, he sinks to his knees. My dick springs free from the confines of my boxers, embarrassingly hard, just inches from his face.

Without hesitation, he grabs my dick with one hand and circles those soft lips around the head. I swallow my moan as his tongue swipes across the slit. He works his way down my length, sucking me into the hot heaven that is his mouth.

Sweet Mother Mary of Baby Jesus and all that is pure and holy in this whole goddamn world, as my mother says. Well, sort of. No fucking way this is his first blow job.

I bite my lip to keep quiet. My hands grab at his thick hair as my hips thrust against his mouth.

Shit, how can I keep any level of respect when I'm ready to shoot my load after a few seconds of my dick in his mouth? Preparing for Rush and pledging has kept me too busy to sneak out to the clubs the last few weeks.

"You don't... have to..." I gasp.

He tugs my sack in time with his bobbing head, and for three long seconds, my legs don't feel strong enough to hold me upright.

"Carlos." My voice is husky and low.

He moans around my dick and sucks me in deep as I come.

When he finally releases me, I stagger back and bang into the door. I close my eyes and catch my breath.

Hot air brushes my ear. "I thought this pledging shit was supposed to be hard."

My eyes crack open. I want to wipe that smirk right off his face. I grab his arm and yank him closer until he crashes against me. I kiss him hard, shoving my tongue in his mouth. He doesn't fight or push back. I whip us both around and shove him against the door. My fingers slide down his smooth chest until they reach the waistband of his boxer briefs. I lift them over his dick and kneel in front of him as I push the briefs down his legs. I'm practically salivating at the sight of his dick in front of my face. It's the thrill of breaking his control, I tell myself, not the fact that he looks particularly delicious.

It turns out Seven is really fucking loud when he gets sucked off. This amount of moaning is inappropriate for the task I'd planned to give him. I heave him off the door and we stumble towards my bed. Pushing him down, I kneel next to him and lick him from sack to head, breathing him in, as I press my hand against his mouth. "Quiet down, would ya?"

He responds by taking two of my fingers into his mouth. He licks and sucks them as I work his dick. He continues to moan, but at least it's muffled now. His hips buck, and his fingers dig into the sheets. I've finally found a way to break his carefully controlled facade.

He mumbles around my fingers. I can't understand what he's saying, but

I'm guessing it's something along the lines of, "I'm gonna come."

I suck harder, pushing him to the edge. A strangled sound comes from his throat and his body stiffens as the salty come shoots into my mouth. I take it all, but I don't swallow.

I crawl up his body, laying my chest on his. Pressing my lips to his, I force my tongue into his mouth and along with it, his come. I can tell from the way his body jerks that he wasn't expecting me to snowball him, but he takes it like a man. All things considered, Seven has worse things to look forward to the rest of the semester.

The kisses progress from hard and bruising to sweet and exploring as our breathing slows. With a final kiss, I take the opportunity to suck in Seven's lower lip as he pulls back. He gives me a small smile when his lip releases. I prop myself up on my elbow. It's the first time I've seen Seven smile in the last two days.

"You know you can't tell anyone what we did, right?" The minute the words are out of my mouth I want to kick myself. Does Seven realize how much I'm trusting him with? "Secrecy of pledging. You signed up for this shit."

It's only a small lie. Pledges are supposed to keep their mouth shut to outsiders. Talking about it within the fraternity itself isn't forbidden. He'll figure that out as soon as one of his pledge brothers opens his mouth.

Seven looks me straight in the eye. "I won't tell anyone. Not about anything."

I nod. I should thank him, but brothers don't thank pledges.

"So I can go get my clothes now?"

"Yup. You're off the hook. For now, at least."

He leaves the room quickly, as if afraid of what else I might do to him.

CHAPTER TWO

As a freshman, I played a lot of foosball. It helped keep my mind off my sexual frustration. Now, I'm APK's foosball champion, which actually kinda sucks because no one will play with me unless I'm drunk. Pledges are good for a game or two though. I take it easy on them for the first few points before I crank it to full T.K. power.

It's Monday afternoon, and I've just scored the fourth point against Two when Seven walks into the lounge. He leans against the wall, watching. Two loses control quickly and I score from my defensive 2-bar.

Seven's eyebrows raise.

I give him a sweet smile. "You want a shot?"

"Hell yeah, I want a shot." His dark eyes bore into mine. Does he mean a shot at foosball or a shot at my face?

I motion to the table. "Well, come on, tough guy."

"Why do you call me that?" he asks as I hand him the ball. I'm a good sport like that, giving my opponent the first serve.

"You don't like it? I could just call you Seven."

"I do have an actual name."

His serve rolls to my 5-bar allowing me to shoot for his goal so quickly he wasn't ready for it. "Damn," he mutters.

"Nope. You're a pledge now. Seven or tough guy, take your pick and be glad it's not something worse."

He does a better job serving the ball this time and keeps control of it. He plays aggressively, but I block his shot.

"Fine. Seven."

"You got it, tough guy."

A noise of exasperation from the other side of the table makes me glance up, but he's focused on the game. That split second of distraction allows him to sneak one by my goalie.

I serve, but not before the hint of a grin tugs at his lips. I don't hold back after that. Two goals in a row. I look up at him and throw him a toothy smile. "Having fun yet?"

"Wouldn't you like to know what I do for fun," is his response as he serves, returning his eyes and his attention back on the game.

My attention, however, diverts completely to my dick, and the things I'd like to do with him, to him, for fun. A bedtime blow job every night during his pledging, for starters.

My hand slips on the handle for my goalie, and he scores. Before serving the ball again, I take a moment to breathe, to tell my dick to behave. I shift my weight from side to side and wipe my sweaty hands on my pants.

Determined not to let up another goal, I serve and position to score immediately. *Bang.*

I won't look up at him again. Absolutely refuse to let him get under my skin.

At least, not more than he already is.

I focus on the game, but somehow my gaze wanders past the table straight to his crotch and his hand twisting the rod to block my shot with his defensive 2-bar. My dick throbs, as if that's what his wrist is twisting over. My breath comes out shaky. I need to adjust myself but that would give away my hard-on. Could I blame it on the adrenaline of a tough opponent? The thrill of the game? Probably not.

Seven manages to tie the score at 4-4. Fucking bastard.

The ball speeds back and forth several times. He blocks my shot, I block his. He plays with the ball, getting it in just the position he wants, just out of reach of my guys. I anticipate his shot going right.

He goes left.

What the fuck just happened here?

"Holy shit!" Boomer cries. "Seven just beat T.K. straight out."

"Whooo boy, looks like we got another House Champ."

Seven holds out his hand, a smug smile on his lips. "Nice game."

“Sure.” I shake his hand and jerk my head toward him at the same time.

Instead of letting go, I squeeze his hand but not in a hard, pissing-contest kind of way. His eyes widen just the slightest amount; somehow it’s enough to put a little vulnerability in his face. He opens his mouth to speak, just as Boomer and Mikey grab him from behind. “What the—”

He flails, trying to get free, but Boomer and Mikey each outweigh him by fifty pounds. Either one could take care of him, but I want in on this action.

They hold him still long enough for me to wrap my arms around him, pinning his arms to his chest. “Get his legs.”

He kicks, but it’s pretty much over. Gotta give him credit, he never stops trying to twist away.

“Don’t you know it’s not nice to win against a brother, tough guy?” I tell him as we carry him down the hall.

“What are you going to do to me?” His voice jumps an octave by the end.

In his ear, I say softly, hoping the other guys can’t hear over his struggling, “I promise I won’t hurt you.”

We reach the bathroom and toss him down in a shower stall. I turn the water on and jump back as it shoots out.

“Hey! That’s cold!”

By the time he gets to his feet and shuts off the water, his T-shirt clings to his chest and water drips from his hair into his face. Boomer and Mikey laugh their asses off. I join in; it’s the easiest way to distract myself from the nipples that are now visible through his shirt.

“Dick!” He shoves me as he walks by.

“Hey, Seven,” Boomer yells. “I know you didn’t just threaten a brother.”

I put a hand on Boomer’s shoulder and shake my head. “I think he’s learned his lesson.”

Mikey snorts. “You’re getting soft, T.K.”

They leave the bathroom, still laughing, while I think that one over.

When Seven returns a few minutes later, I’m still standing there like an

asshole. He's snagged a towel from someone, and his shirt is tossed over his shoulder. He scowls. "Sore loser much?"

"Nothing personal, man. Part of being a pledge."

"Bullshit it's nothing personal."

"You could be a little bit grateful, you know. If I hadn't stopped them, Mikey and Boomer would have held you down and shaved your head or something."

"Because I beat you at foosball?"

"No, dumbass, because you shoved me after I showered you. You don't pick fights with brothers. You take your shit like a man and you move on."

He towels off his hair and I take advantage of his distraction to admire the reflection of his bare chest in the mirror.

He tosses the towel on the counter and wrings his shirt out over the sink. "So why did you stop them?"

I can't come up with a good answer, so I avoid his eyes.

He turns to face me and catches my gaze. His face is uncharacteristically soft, making him look young and hopeful. "It is personal, isn't it?"

Warmth explodes in my stomach and snakes its way through my body. "You want some dry clothes? You can throw yours in the dryer."

He considers.

"I'm not a total asshole," I add when he still hasn't answered.

A smile slowly spreads on his face. "Sure."

"C'mon to my room." I motion toward the door.

Boomer and Mikey are in the lounge when we walk by. They look at each other in confusion.

"You said it, Mikey. T.K.'s going soft," Boomer says.

We ignore them and head up the stairs.

I open my door for Seven and nod for him to enter. I close the door behind us.

He starts undoing the fly on his pants.

“Apparently you’re not shy about stripping in front of other guys.” I pull out a pair of clean sweats and toss them to him.

“You already sucked my dick. Didn’t think I needed to be modest around you. But if you’d be more comfortable—”

“It’s fine,” I say, but I turn around anyway. Just listening to him peel off his wet jeans has me hard. No need to watch it too.

“All of a sudden you’re shy?”

“Jesus, just wanted to give you a little privacy.” I pull a random T-shirt from my closet.

He touches my shoulder. I turn to face him.

“Maybe I don’t want privacy with you.” He holds my gaze for a moment and then kisses me.

There are a thousand reasons why this is a bad idea. Why I should push him away, get him out of my room, and order him to leave me alone. Maybe even slug him. I can’t think of a single one because my body has taken over.

The shirt I was going to give him falls to the floor as I wrap one arm around him, pressing his still damp skin against me, making me wish my shirt was off too. My other hand squeezes a handful of his thick damp hair. Drops of cold water slide down my fingers.

All at once, I regret drenching him in the cold water. I flatten my palms against his skin, rubbing them up and down his back. I draw him closer to me, trying to transfer the heat of my body to his.

He responds by kissing me harder. His hands slide under my shirt. I shudder when his icicle fingers touch my back.

“Sorry,” he whispers between kisses.

“Need to warm you up.”

“Mmm. Bed?”

I take a step backward, pulling him with me.

A sharp knock and the turning of the door handle make us jump apart.

Chuck pops his head in. “Hey, T.K.?”

“Yeah.” My voice comes out strained. I give a short cough. “What’s up?”

“You’ve got”—he glances over at Seven, still shirtless and damp—“the stuff we need for tomorrow night?”

I pick up a bag sitting next to my desk, keeping it closed so Seven can’t see what’s inside.

Chuck looks between me and Seven another time before he ducks out of the room.

I sit down on my bed, blowing out a long, slow breath. “Fucking hell.”

“Maybe next time you should lock the door.” Seven picks up the dropped shirt and pulls it over his head. He grabs his wet pants and towel and walks out.

CHAPTER THREE

That evening, Seven isn't at dinner even though the pledges are on dinner duty.

"Where's Seven?" I bark out at the pledges in the kitchen.

Three responds, "He's got class Monday nights."

I head back out to the lounge. Seven wasn't the only pledge missing; maybe I should have asked about the others. Now I'm just being paranoid. No reason I can't ask about Seven. No reason anyone should suspect anything other than friendship. Were we even friends?

If Seven and I slept together on occasion, no one would have to know. Certainly it would be easier if we were roommates, but Seven wouldn't be moving into the house until next semester. If yesterday was any indication, Seven's blow jobs were better than any I could get in a dark club.

Eventually, I head back to my room to tackle some homework and get my mind off Seven. It only partially helps. Sometime after ten o'clock, there's a knock on my door.

"Yeah?" I call when the door doesn't open.

Seven walks in, holding a pile of folded clothes. "I came to return your clothes."

"Thanks. Just pop them over on the dresser."

He does, and after a moment, he says quietly, "Thanks. For the clothes, I mean. And saving my hair." He runs a hand through it as though he's self-conscious.

"It'd be a shame to lose that thick mess."

I expect a smart-ass comment in return, but all he says is, "You busy right now?"

I glance at my homework, only three lines completed since I started. "Nah, not really getting anywhere with this bullshit."

He pulls a folded notebook from his back pocket. "You mind? The dogbook, I mean. Can I ask you the questions?"

Every pledge must “interview” the active brothers in order to get to know them. The annoying ones just ask the questions down the page, writing down what you say, not really listening. The ones that get it are the ones that have an actual conversation with you. They forget to write anything down and hand in an empty book to the Pledge Master. However, the P.M. can drill them on just about any brother and the pledge can respond with decent accuracy. The dumb fucks that conducted interviews have to look up the answers.

“Shoot.”

“What’s your name? Full name.”

“T.K. Rogers.”

His eyes narrow. “Don’t be a dick.”

“Actually, I’m not. That’s my name. T period K period.”

“That’s what’s on your birth certificate?”

“No, but that’s what everyone calls me. I don’t tell anyone my actual name.”

“Why not?”

“Cause I hate it. ’Cause my parents were assholes.”

“Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, I see.” He winks. “Seriously, am I going to get in trouble for just writing T.K.?”

“Nope. That’s what everyone’s going to have on their papers.”

He doesn’t write it down. He doesn’t have a pen, and he doesn’t ask to borrow one.

His head tilts to the left. “What do your parents call you?”

“T.K.”

“Really?”

“I’ve been T.K. since... well, my whole life. Started with my cousins, I think. It was a losing battle for my parents.”

“Huh. How come you don’t have a nickname like Boomer?”

I shrug. “No one ever came up with one for me? I’m just T.K. It’s who I am.”

“Do you think I’ll get a nickname?”

“You don’t like Seven?”

He makes a face. “Is that really how you think of me? Just a number?”

I don’t answer right away. Of course he stands out. Each pledge has something unique about him. The point of assigning and calling them numbers is to make them feel like they aren’t special. I should say yes, but I can’t seem to do it. “You’re not just a number.”

His face softens, just the slightest change. Even his eyes look less black. His lips part and his tongue darts out to moisten them. The skin on my back prickles where his cold fingers touched it earlier. I force myself to look away.

“Why don’t you have a seat? Make yourself comfortable.” I gesture around the room and then realize that I’m sitting in the only chair. His options are the floor or my bed. He chooses my bed.

We lose track of time as we chat. Every now and then he asks me an actual question from the paper, but most of the time he makes up his own, either things he’s curious about or things triggered from the previous question. It’s kind of a cross between an interview and a conversation. We take detours around the questions, extra side paths, but we still make progress. After a while, I join him on the bed, leaning against the wall.

There’s a lull in the questions for a moment. Then Seven asks quietly, avoiding my eyes, “Have you ever had sex?”

“Yes.”

“With a guy?” Still avoiding my eyes.

“Uh, no.”

His head shoots upwards and he stares at me. “Girlfriends?”

“Nah. Sorority chicks I was drunk enough to get it on with but not too drunk either, you know? After parties.”

He seems to think this over. “You’ve obviously given blow jobs before.”

“Well, yes,” I admit. “But I didn’t think that’s what you were asking.”

“It wasn’t.”

“What about you?”

He shrugs. “I’ve been with a couple guys.”

“No girls?”

He makes a face like the thought horrifies him.

I laugh. “You give good head. You must have had a lot of practice.”

He drops his gaze and gives an awkward sounding chuckle. Is that a hint of a blush on his cheeks?

He slowly looks up at me with those dark eyes from under that thick row of lashes. “Yours was really good, too,” he whispers.

God, I want to see him look at me like that while he’s sucking my dick. I have to look away before I do something I shouldn’t.

“Oh crap, it’s two thirty in the morning!” He scrambles off the bed.

“Shit, I ain’t driving you back to campus. Why don’t you stay here tonight?”

“Here?”

“I told you I’m not a total asshole. I’m not going to make you crash on a couch. It’s up to you.”

“I got an eight A.M. class tomorrow.”

I snort. “Freshman.”

He gives me the finger.

“You better not wake me up.”

He fiddles with his phone and then sets it on my desk.

I leave the room with my toothbrush and toothpaste, trying not to think about how narrow the bed is and the fact that Seven will be sharing it with me. It’s better than driving his ass back to campus, right? Sure.

When I return to the room, he’s already in bed, all the way against the wall. He looks like he’s trying to take up as little space as possible. He’s stripped down to his underwear. Maybe I should give him the sweats back just so his tight-ass briefs don’t tempt me.

I strip as well and then pull on a pair of sweats before turning out the light. I lie down facing away from him, carefully arranging my body so that I don't touch any part of him.

“Good night.”

“Night,” he whispers back.

Although we aren't touching, I swear I can feel every breath he takes.

“T.K.?”

I grunt.

The bed dips and creaks as he maneuvers himself around in the small space. “What are we doing?”

“Trying to get a few hours of sleep before your early-ass class.”

“That's not what I meant.” He doesn't have to elaborate.

I perform my own acrobatics to roll over in bed without touching him or falling off. His eyes gleam in the darkness, and I can see the vague outline of his face, but that's all. “Do you want to stop?”

“No. I just didn't expect... so soon...”

“I'm not looking for a boyfriend.”

“Well, I'm not anyone's girlfriend.” There's an edge to his voice, like I've offended him.

“There's no shortage of girls available if I wanted a girlfriend.”

The only sound is our breathing. Finally he asks, “What *do* you want?”

“I just want to keep it simple. And I don't want anyone to know.”

“Simple,” he repeats. “Like just hooking up once in a while? I'm cool with that.”

“It's nice to have someone that's, you know, the same. My right hand thanks you.”

He chuckles. “Glad to help you with that. Just not tonight. Too tired.”

“Tomorrow then.”

My eyes have adjusted enough that I can see him smile. “Good night, T.K.”

He doesn't turn back away and eventually his breathing slows and evens out. I watch him sleep for several minutes. My stomach tightens as I consider how much I'm trusting him with. But why shouldn't I trust him? He has as much to lose as I do. This is a win-win situation.

I sit up and pick up his phone from the desk. I text my phone from it and save my number as a contact named "Your Favorite Asshole."

CHAPTER FOUR

When I wake up the next morning, Seven is already gone. I pick up the clothes he left on my dresser and give them the sniff test to determine if they need to go in the laundry pile or back in my closet. Although he'd only worn them a few hours, his scent lingers in the fabric. Instantly I can taste the salty skin of his neck, feel his hard length digging into my thigh as he grinds against me. I toss the clothes on my bed.

Down in the kitchen, I scrounge up some toast and a glass of orange juice. Mikey and Paulie are already there, and Boomer joins us a few minutes later.

Only half listening to the conversation, I pull out my phone. I find the text I sent last night from Seven's phone, save the contact under "Tough Guy", and hit reply.

thx 4 not waking me.

ur welcome. your favorite asshole?

;-) coming 2nite?

in ur mouth i hope.

dirty boy.

u luv it.

"Yo, T.K., what's with the big-ass grin?" Mikey asks.

"Huh?"

He gestures to the phone in my hand. "You got a new girl?"

"We'll see."

Mikey fist-bumps me.

"Later. I got class."

After dinner, I challenge Seven to a foosball rematch.

"Oh, you want to get beat again. Okay."

"Bitch, please. You got lucky."

He laughs and gives me the first serve. Knowing that later tonight I'll be exploring other fun things to do with Seven helps keep my attention on the game. And I really do need to stay focused; it's an evenly matched game. The ball travels from one side of the table to the other several times before I manage to score the first goal.

"Yeah, that's right!" I taunt.

"You scored first last game. How did that work out for you?" He flashes me his cocky smile as he serves the ball. I still haven't decided if I love or hate that smile.

I'm lining up a shot when Chuck jogs by banging a pot, breaking my concentration. "All pledges in the lounge," he calls. "Hey, Boomer, help me out here."

"Pledges, get your asses to the lounge!"

I don't even know where Boomer is, but his voice rattles the windows in the lounge.

"What's going on?" Seven asks.

I shrug casually and score a goal while he's distracted.

He grumbles under his breath while I laugh.

We keep playing until Chuck and the rest of the pledges have gathered in the lounge. Several brothers claim spots on the couches to watch the show about to start.

Chuck stands behind the table where there is a box and a pitcher of water. He pulls out a stack of cups and a bottle of liquid soap from the box. Into a neat row, he lines up fifteen cups and then fills each halfway with water from the pitcher. A little squirt of soap into each cup. Finally, he dumps out the bag I gave him last night and fifteen brand new toothbrushes scatter across the table.

"Pledges, the lounge walls are filthy. It's your job to clean them up, ceiling to floor. These are your tools." Chuck gestures to the items on the table. "Any complaining, back talking, or dicking around, and any one of your brothers will be glad to set you straight. Get to work."

The pledges each grab a toothbrush. Seven takes charge and divides up the group. His pledge brothers actually respect and listen to him. Soon they are moving furniture to stand on to reach the top of the walls.

Over the next half hour, brothers come and go from the lounge. Chuck, as Pledge Master, stays to supervise. I stay and watch Seven because I'm some kind of masochist. He works his way down until he needs to squat. What a spectacular view of his ass. Maybe my room's walls need to be cleaned with a toothbrush, too. By Seven. Without clothes.

Mikey mock-tiptoes into the lounge. One of his hands is covered in brown, well, something. Chocolate pudding, I hope. With the other one, he gives us brothers an exaggerated *shhh* signal. He walks up behind Seven then presses his brown hand against the section Seven has just cleaned. He walks the length of the wall, leaving a large brown streak across the freshly cleaned white wall.

Several of the pledges stop. Their backs tense, fists clench, but no one says anything. Disappointing. Seven turns and glares at Mikey. It makes me chuckle. He catches my eye and his face softens just a little before he gets back to work.

“Hey, you guys hear that SigTau's got a fag pledge?”

I'm not sure which brother standing behind me said it because I'm too busy watching Seven's reaction. His toothbrush pauses, and his shoulders raise and lower slowly before he starts scrubbing again.

The room fills with laughter.

“No way!”

“Guess they're gonna start pledging girls now?”

“How hard up does your frat have to be to bid on a fag?” Chuck shakes his head.

The pledges don't say anything because of the gag order.

“Hey, Paulie, stop checking out Five's ass!” someone taunts. More laughter erupts.

“Fuck you. I'm no faggot,” Paulie yells back, which is weird because Paulie hardly ever raises his voice. He must know they're just messing around. Everyone knows he isn't gay.

“We’ve heard you singing in the shower like a girl.”

“You’re just jealous ’cause the only pussy you can get is your mama’s,” he fires back.

A couple brothers “oooooh” and laugh. Seven works away, pretending not to hear anything going on.

“T.K., you were Paulie’s roommate couple years back, weren’t you? Did you hide your ass from him?”

I have to look away from Seven when I respond, “I told him from day one to keep his dick to his faggy self.”

More laughter. Seven scrubs harder.

“Fuck all y’all.” Paulie stalks away.

“Awww, I think you hurt his feelings, T.K.”

Seven turns and looks at me. His gaze shoots daggers right through me. I refuse to avoid his eyes despite the chill that settles in my body. Who the fuck does he think he is, trying to intimidate me? He’s just some gay pledge who agreed to swap blow jobs.

Fuck it. I get up and walk away as well. I’m not sure what bothers me more, the way Seven looked at me or the fact that I actually was thinking about his ass. It could easily have been me they targeted.

“Gonna check on your boyfriend, T.K.? You guys were really more than roommates, huh?”

Without responding, I go straight upstairs to my room. Paulie’s room is right next to mine, so I catch up with him in the hallway. He still looks upset.

“Hey, man, everything okay?”

“My ‘faggy self’? Really, T.K.?”

“You know we’re just messing with you.”

“Yeah, but…” He shakes his head. “Forget it.”

He goes into his room and slams the door.

At least now Seven knows why he needs to keep his goddamn mouth shut.

A couple hours later, someone bangs on my door. Since the door doesn't open right away, I know it's Seven. He hasn't quite grasped the idea of the open door policy around here.

I open the door.

He still looks pissed. "What the fuck, man?"

I drag him into the room and shut the door.

"Why didn't you say anything?" he continues.

"What was I supposed to say?"

"I don't know, how about, 'Hey guys, not cool.'"

"And put a fucking target on my back? There's a reason I'm in the closet. Don't you get that?"

"I didn't realize it meant not standing up to ignorance. And joining in on it."

"You joined a frat, not Campus Pride. What did you expect?"

He glares at me for a moment before shaking his head. "I guess I expected too much."

He reaches for the door handle.

I touch his shoulder. "I thought you were staying tonight."

"Changed my mind. Let me know when you grow a set of balls." He walks out, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Wednesday night, Seven doesn't show up until just before dinner duty and then avoids me during dinner. I hang around in the hallway outside the kitchen afterward. When he walks by, I grab his arm and push him back against the wall. My arm rests across his chest and I lean into him so close our faces nearly touch. I'm hoping that from a distance it looks like a confrontation.

"Can we go to my room and talk?"

"What's wrong with right here?"

I glance around. The hallway is empty but who knows for how long?

He sighs, and as the breath blows across my face, he relaxes. "Fine."

I let him go and he follows me upstairs to my room. I'd spent the better part of last night thinking about Seven and what happened in the lounge.

"So none of what happened last night in the lounge bothered you?" Seven asks me when I close the door behind us.

"It's just guys talking shit. It doesn't mean anything."

"Doesn't mean anything? That was us they were talking about." He gestures between us. "You do realize that, right? And you even joined in."

"Look, maybe I was out of line with what I said about Paulie. But we all know he's not gay. He didn't have to take it so personally."

"Do you, T.K.? Do you know for *sure* that Paulie's straight? Isn't that what everyone would say about you or me? 'We all know he's not gay.'"

Paulie? Gay? I can't picture it. "Paulie's not gay."

"But you don't *know* that. Hell, any of the brothers could be gay and you wouldn't know it unless they wanted you to."

I shake my head.

"It's not unreasonable that there could be others. Lots of awesome people are gay. Like me."

I roll my eyes and chuckle despite myself. "It's not a chance I'm willing to take. I told you upfront: no one can know."

He sighs. “Yeah, I get it. I just wish you’d have stood up for us.”

“I can’t do that. But... next time, I won’t be part of it. I promise.”

He considers for a moment and then nods.

“Want to stay tonight?”

He grins sheepishly. “I brought a change of clothes in my bag, just in case. Eight A.M. class again tomorrow.”

I wake up for the second time Thursday morning when my alarm goes off. I smile, remembering the first time. I’m still not sure if Seven sliding against me as he got out of bed was an accident or on purpose, but I can’t really complain about the way it ended. We’ll have to do something about that boy’s schedule next semester. No more eight A.M. classes.

My phone beeps with a text message from Tough Guy as I’m headed out the door for class.

sorry I woke you.

no ur not.

;-)

maybe u need a punishment.

ill stay here

nope. pledge mtg 2nite

dammit

I find Seven in the lounge after his pledge meeting. He’s scribbling down what looks like a huge list on a piece of paper.

“Hey, man.” My words are surprisingly calm compared to my racing heartbeat. I can’t look at him without thinking about this morning. Or last night. I sit next to him on the couch.

He gives me the biggest smile I've ever seen on his face. "Guess what? I'm in charge of the pledge class fundraiser. We're going to do a Casino Night, and maybe a silent auction, and—"

I laugh. He sounds like a kid about to go on summer vacation. I glance at his list. "You know this is a project for the entire pledge class, right?"

"I'm just writing down some ideas, things we'll need to do. There'll be plenty for everyone to do."

He jots down some more stuff. I remember our conversation from Monday, when we chatted half the night away. "Oh, yeah, this is your thing, right? Hospitality Management or something like that?"

"Uh huh," he says, not looking up. "Hospitality and Business Management. This is what I want to do."

He works for several more minutes before he stretches his arms above his head and arches his back. His shirt rides up, exposing a tempting sliver of his skin.

"Done?" I ask hopefully.

Our eyes meet and lock. We stand at the same time, and then escape to my room as quickly as we can while still looking casual. I shove him against the wall and attack his mouth.

"Mmmm," Seven murmurs when we break for a breath. "If this is punishment, I'll take more, please."

"Just you wait," I growl.

"I've got news," he gasps as I suck on his neck.

After a final lick up his Adam's apple, which makes him shudder, I stop and look at him. "You'd rather talk?"

"My roommate's gone all weekend."

"That's nice."

"Nice?"

"So when should I come over?"

He wiggles his eyebrows. “Come whenever you want. But my roommate isn’t leaving ’til one or so.”

“Shit, that reminds me. I have to go to this stupid play tomorrow evening for my class. I’ve got an extra ticket. Want to come with me?”

He grins. “Are you asking me on a date? Gonna wine and dine me?”

“No, no, not a date,” I say quickly. Maybe asking Seven was a bad idea. “Just... moral support.”

“Mmmhmm,” he says against my lips.

I push him to the bed, and lie down on top of him, bringing my lips to his. The kisses are deep and frantic. I grind my whole body against his. Even through the layers of fabric, it feels so good. I press into him and he pushes up to meet my thrusts. After what feels like hours, I pull away from his bruised lips and tug his shirt off. Sitting up slightly, I run one hand down his perfect chest. I suck on his left nipple, returning my hips to their torturous grinding motion.

He tries to keep his moans muffled, but it’s also clear he really likes having his nipples sucked. I switch to the right nipple, flicking and licking it with my tongue, even biting gently before closing my mouth around it and sucking. I kiss down the center of his chest, down to his flat abs. This is what you don’t get with women. This hard, taut skin stretched over muscles that just beg to be touched and licked and kissed. As I move lower, I start undoing his pants. He lifts his hips to help me get them down. Fuck, I love him in boxer briefs. I mouth his hard dick through the fabric, leaving a wet spot.

“Suck me,” he pleads.

I pull myself up. Immediately his hand goes to his dick.

“Uh-uh. Those stay on,” I tell him as I push his hands away.

He groans.

I pull down my own pants, leaving my boxers on. Then I lay down on him again, sliding our bodies together. The underwear’s so thin that it feels amazing. I kiss him again. His hands slide down my back, scratching slightly. He grabs my ass and squeezes. Holding me tight against him, he rocks his hips

up against me. His head is thrown back, but his mouth is clamped tightly closed to keep his moaning down. I watch his face as he fucks himself against me. He's so fucking beautiful when he lets go of that tension.

I kiss the exposed skin of his neck. Kissing and licking and sucking. I have to move to his mouth when his moans get too loud. I take back control and start humping against him so hard he's probably making a dent in the mattress.

I can feel the moisture on his underwear and swallow all his moans as he comes. The wetness and the heat I feel through the fabric pushes me over the edge. I keep my mouth plastered to his just so I don't lose control and start screaming.

Afterward, I collapse onto him, completely worn out. He doesn't seem to mind my weight. Or maybe he's already asleep. It's hard to tell. He looks so peaceful. I nuzzle his neck. His fingers trail down my back gently. I roll off him.

“Still like your idea of punishment,” he says sleepily.

CHAPTER SIX

“So tell me again why we’re going to *A Million Faces*?” Seven asks as we pull into the parking lot of the small theater.

“For my Performing Arts elective. You’ll have to take it too, eventually. Or some other kind of arts class.”

“Can’t wait.”

After the lady at the will-call window hands me the tickets, Seven says, “Our fraternity, Alpha Phi Kappa, is holding a Casino Night fundraiser and we’re looking for donations from businesses in the community. Is there a manager I can speak to about Millhouse Theatre possibly sponsoring a table?”

“He’s not here right now.” She fishes around on her desk and then hands him a card. “But here’s a card with his number. You can call him direct.”

“Thanks.” He flashes her a smile.

As we walk toward the entrance, I say, “You’re really into this Casino Night thing, huh?”

“Hell yeah. I’m gonna kick ass. Just you watch. Our pledge class will raise the most money in APK history.”

“You’re a cocky son of a bitch, you know that?”

“I can back it up.” He punches me in the arm.

The usher hands us programs and directs us to our row.

“So are you supposed to take notes or something?” he asks when we’re settled into our seats.

“I don’t know. I’m not really sure how I’m supposed to write an essay about a play. Like a review maybe? Dissection of the plot? Evaluation of the actors?”

“Good luck with that,” he says in a glad-it’s-not-my-assignment tone.

There’s still several minutes before the play starts. I slide my fingers along the edge of the program. Seven pages through his copy. My leg bounces. As I glance around the audience, I notice a few other pairs of guys. They all look

like they're on dates. Is that what everyone will think about Seven and me? I rub the back of my neck, trying to slow down my heartbeat and my breathing.

I study the guys a few rows ahead of us. Why do I assume they are a couple? If I was here with Mikey or Chuck, I wouldn't even consider the idea that we look like we're on a date. Those two guys lean in close to each other. Their arms touch. When they look at each other, they smile even if they don't say anything.

"Hey, there's a lot of ads in this," Seven says, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"Huh?"

He puts his hand on my knee. "Restless much?"

I stare at his hand. I should shove him off, but heat soaking through my jeans somehow calms my nerves when it should be sending them into overdrive. I squeeze my eyes closed and try to remember what he said. "Ads?"

He removes his hand to point on the paper. "We can use this as a list of business to talk to. For the Casino Night."

"You never give it a rest, do you?"

He turns serious. "I need to prove I'm APK material."

"You've already proven that to me."

He leans over and whispers into my ear, "Was it the blow job that convinced you?"

I laugh so loud that the people in front of us turn to glare at me. I close my mouth tightly and try to look ashamed, but come on, the play hasn't even started yet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in just a few minutes the lights in our theater will be dimming. Please be sure to take your seats at this time. Remember, food and beverages are not allowed in the theater. Flash photography and video recording are strictly prohibited. Please turn all cell phones off or on silent. Thank you for your cooperation."

Seven slouches into his seat. "Wake me when it's over," he mutters.

I poke him in the side and he yelps. More dirty looks from the people in front of us.

“If I gotta watch it, you gotta.”

“That an order?” he teases.

“Do I need to make it one?”

“Nope.”

The lights dim and the music starts. I’m actually following the story when I feel Seven’s arm nudge mine sometime during the first act. He leans in close. “They’re so totally gonna fuck by the end.” His breath tickles my ear.

I keep my mouth clamped shut. The spot on my arm where he nudged me tingles, and I’m suddenly very aware that we’re sitting together in the dark. Everyone is focused on the play. No one cares about the two guys seated in row twenty. We’re not alone, except we are. It’s a freedom we don’t get to experience at the house. There’s always the chance someone will come in my room. If I lock the door, I’d have to explain *why* Seven and I were in the locked room. No one locks their door at the house unless they’re hooking up.

I glance over at Seven. He’s got an amused expression on his face. He leans over and turns his head as if he was going to whisper something in my ear. He’s surprised to find me looking at him and our noses brush. He covers his noise of surprise by kissing my lips. It’s our first public kiss, even if it is dark and no one sees it.

“I need to pay attention,” I whisper.

“Sure,” he whispers back.

My heart pounds. Fear of being caught? As if we’re the first two people to ever kiss in a theater. It was unexpected and sweet, and so quick that it’s almost as if it never even happened.

Throughout the play, he whispers more smart-ass comments in my ear and I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing. Partway through the third act, his arm grazes mine again. I turn to look at him but he’s staring straight ahead at the performance. I feel his fingers slide against mine and just like that, we’re holding hands. He looks over at me, raises an eyebrow slightly. I smile. He smiles and turns back to the show.

I nearly miss the play’s big finish because I’m too busy staring at our connected hands. Never in my life have I held hands with a guy, and though I

must have with a girl or two in high school, I can't remember any times in particular. Somehow, sitting here in the dark watching a play and holding hands with Seven feels like the most natural thing in the world. Just another Friday night.

Except it's not Seven's hand I'm holding. I can't reconcile this relaxed, playful, *happy* person next to me with the stoic, stiff-backed pledge I'd met. I'd seen glimpses of this happier guy over the last couple of days, but for the first time, I feel like I'm with someone other than Seven. I'm with Carlos and we're holding hands in a theater and not only am I okay with that, it's making me smile.

When the show is nearly over, before the lights turn up again, he lifts my hand and touches it to his lips. Then he lets my hand go. Heat races through my veins, up my arm, down my body, and all the way to my feet.

As the actors take their bows on stage, I've already forgotten what the play was about. Whatever brilliant essay was writing itself in my head is gone. But I can still feel the cool rush of Carlos' breath on my ear, the warmth of his hand on mine, and the moisture of his lips on my hand.

We walk back to my car in silence. My arm has stopped tingling and I can finally think of something other than Carlos' kiss. Bits and pieces of the play come back to me, and I think maybe I'll be able to write an essay after all. Thank God. Going to another play was not something I had the time or desire to do, especially since paying attention would require going without Carlos.

When we reach my car, Carlos grabs my arm.

"Wha—" I gasp as he turns me and pins me to the car. He leans in and kisses me on the lips.

I push him away. "What are you doing?"

"Kissing my not-boyfriend on our not-date." He has a wide, playful grin on his face.

My eyes dart around the parking lot.

"Relax. For one thing, it's dark. For another, no one knows us. Now, are you going to let me kiss you properly?"

“I don’t—”

“No one is paying any attention to us. You aren’t the center of the universe.” He smiles and then leans in again.

This time I let his lips move against mine, let his tongue lick against my lips, let my lips fall open to his kiss. He shifts closer. Heat from his body radiates into mine from my lips down through my legs. I end the kiss earlier than I might have if we’d been alone, but that’s less about someone seeing us and more about appropriate public behavior. All I can think about now is spending the night with him and how little of it we’ll spend sleeping.

He’s smiling when I open my eyes. “You see? You didn’t burst into flames. No one said anything, no one probably even saw us. The world didn’t end.”

“Yeah, yeah, you win.”

We pick up some dinner on the way back to campus. Drive-through. It’s not a date; I don’t feel obligated to buy him a nice dinner, though maybe I should have after he sat through that play with me. Not that the actors weren’t talented. I’m just not a going-to-see-plays kind of guy. It’s just too, well, gay. Is it possible to be gay but not *that* gay? Only a little gay? Carlos isn’t the first guy I’ve been attracted to, but he’s the first I’ve risked exposing my secret for. What does that mean? Is he just exactly my type? Do I have a type? Apparently my type involves slim, dark, and smooth-chested smart asses.

I realize that Carlos is staring at me, perhaps waiting for me to respond.

“I’m sorry, what?”

He laughs. “I said, ‘What did you think about the play? Will you be able to write a good essay about it?’”

“Sure. I can BS with the best of them.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

We have to park in the long-term visitor lot, which is only slightly closer than the freshman lot. I walk a half step away from Carlos; if he notices, he doesn't mention it. I follow him into the building and to the elevator. There're three other people in the elevator with us. Do they know Carlos? Do they know me? Doubtful. They look like freshman. Do they know Carlos and I are together?

Carlos lives on the fifth floor. We pass some people in the hall and he nods to them, but no "Hey, how are you?" or any other indication that they actually know each other. How lonely. No way do I miss living in the dorms. Sure, Carlos spends a lot of time at APK, but he lived here full-time before Rush. Hadn't he made friends?

He stops in front of room 527. "Home sweet home," he says as he unlocks the door and shoves it open with the help of his shoulder when it sticks. Nice.

Carlos' room is evenly divided. On one side is a desk piled with books and papers and a bed covered with, well, stuff. The other side is neat and orderly and has posters of Henry Cavill posing in his very muscular Superman suit, Johnny Depp wearing guyliner, and Matt Bomer looking handsome in a suit. None of the posters have nudity or anything inappropriate, but it does give off the "gay" vibe to have three posters of male actors. Hot actors, I'll give them that. But not a large-chested woman in sight.

"I was hoping my roommate would have cleaned up before he left, but well, I just had to throw his crap on his bed." Carlos looks embarrassed.

"So your roommate knows?"

"Huh? Knows what?"

"About you? Being gay?"

He shrugs. "I didn't tell him either way. Does it matter?"

"I-I just thought, you know, you were in the closet."

"I came out in high school. Had a boyfriend and everything."

"You did?"

He bumps my shoulder. “Hey, don’t sound so surprised. Apparently guys do find me attractive.”

“No, I just meant, you were out in high school but not now?”

“I don’t feel the need to broadcast a message, ‘Hey, I’m gay!’ I mean, straight people don’t go around saying, ‘Hey, guess what? I’m straight!’”

“Well, no. But being straight is...”

He raises his eyebrows. “Normal?”

“That’s not what I meant. Assumed.”

“Maybe it shouldn’t be.”

“Maybe not,” I concede, though I don’t have much faith it’ll ever change. “So what happened? With your boyfriend.”

He leans his back against the door and slides down until he’s sitting on the floor. “I was barely fifteen, and he was a few years older. I thought he was so sophisticated. So smart.”

I sit down opposite him, my toes pressing against the wall. I scoot close to him, leaning on one arm. My palm rests on the floor between his feet.

“I fell for him, totally and completely gone,” he continues. “We dated, slept together for months before I got up the nerve to tell him how I felt. When I did...” He takes a breath. His face grows hard, angry. “He laughed in my face. Said that I was nothing but an ass to fuck. That I’d taken everything too seriously and didn’t I know there were other guys? Other girls too?”

“I’m sorry.”

He looks at the floor, and his voice gets colder. “As if that wasn’t bad enough, he went on to tell anyone who would listen how I’d confessed my undying love for him. That I was pining over him, obsessed with him. The whole school knew within days. Whenever I passed him or his gang in the hall...” He shudders with the memory, and the words die in his throat.

I could picture it, naive Carlos expecting puppy dogs and rainbows and this asshole stomping all over his hopes. I’d like to stomp all over the asshole. “That was a shitty thing to do.”

“Yeah, well. I was stupid.”

“Nah, not stupid. Just young.”

I squeeze his arm and he meets my eyes. I'd thought he was angry at me when we argued the other day, but it was nothing compared to this. His face is red, and the ice in his voice could frost a beer mug in seconds. This is more emotion, more passion than I've seen from him since we met.

His voice comes out very quiet now. “I'm really not all that tough. It's just an act.”

“You're tougher than you think you are.”

“T.K., I...,” he whispers and leans in to kiss me before he finishes his sentence. It's tentative at first, but not for long. I stand and pull him up with me. His fingers skim just under my shirt. It tickles, and I squirm.

He pushes me toward the bed. Just before falling into it, we kick off our shoes. I pull him down on top of me and we resume kissing with barely a pause. My hands run down his back until I reach his ass. Oh God, that ass. When I squeeze those cheeks, he moans into my mouth and grinds his hips down against mine. His hard dick digs into my thigh.

He presses harder against me, and then he really starts moving. It starts in his hips, but soon his whole torso is moving in rhythm. His lips find my throat, and I tilt my head back to give him more room.

“I love how you taste,” he whispers in my ear.

My hips jerk upwards to meet his thrusts. My throbbing dick and his heavy breathing and throaty moans make it impossible to think. All I know is that I want him in a way I've never wanted anyone ever before. I slide my hands up the sides of his body, peeling off his shirt in the process. He quickly pulls mine off too.

“I want you naked. Now,” I say, panting.

He sits up on his knees and undoes his pants. I undo mine as well, but I can't take my eyes off him as he pushes down his jeans, and then finally pulls his dick out of his underwear. He squirms out of his pants as I wiggle mine down and kick them off.

I can't tear my eyes away from his hand jerking himself as he scoots backwards. His head lowers and he kisses the head of my dick.

“Oh, God,” I gasp. My eyes fall shut, anticipating the sweet wetness of his mouth.

Instead, he licks the length, from base to the very top. He flicks his tongue into the hole and I nearly leap off the bed in surprise and pleasure. He licks the entire length a few more times, layering it with saliva. Finally, finally, he takes my dick into his mouth and for one awful, wonderful second I think I’m going to come right then and there. I tuck my left arm behind my head so I can watch him more easily. His head bobs up and down slowly, like he’s savoring my taste. His cheeks hollow with suction, alternating with his tongue against my dick.

He looks up then, and his dark red lips stretched around my dick is possibly the hottest thing I have ever seen in my entire fucking life. He blinks slowly, his wide eyes looking like innocence while he works my cock like no one has ever sucked me before. It’s unfair that he’s so damn good at this.

With my right hand, I finger his hair. When he sucks extra hard, I grab a fistful of hair. I don’t pull it, not hard anyway, but God, does that feel good. I thrust my hips against his face, gently at first to be sure I don’t hurt him, then harder a few more times, and I watch him take it, sucking me in deep, moaning like it’s the best thing ever.

He pops off my dick and immediately lies back down against me, lining up our cocks, and kissing me hard.

“Roll over,” I tell him.

We rearrange ourselves, him on the bottom and me on the top. I start the way he did, kissing and humping our dicks together. Then I move down his jaw and neck, leaving a moist trail. I lick his right nipple, suck it in, scrape my teeth against it. He arches his back, pushing his chest right up into my face. I tug on his left nipple.

“T.K.” The way he says my name, in absolute pleasure, almost in awe, makes my entire body feel like it’s on fire.

I switch sides, sucking and licking the left nipple while tracing circles on the right with my finger.

“Baby,” he gasps. “Gonna come if you keep—”

I kiss down the center of his chest. It's so smooth and fucking perfect I have the sudden urge to cover it in streaks of my come. Another time, I tell my eager dick. I'm not even close to done with him tonight. I lick his cock a few times before I take it in. I go right for the deep throat, catching him off guard. He sounds almost like he's crying. I flick my gaze up to his face, watching him buck and writhe and moan in pleasure. This is one advantage to being in the dorms. I don't give a shit who hears him. I don't have to muffle his beautiful noises, the fruits of my labor.

I stroke his dick with my hand. "You like that, don't you?"

He nods vigorously. "So much. More. Suck me more."

"Mmm. I like not having to keep you quiet."

I go back to sucking, alternating deep and shallow strokes. Giving special attention to the head every few times. When his moans turn into pants I back off.

"Uh-uh. Not time for you to come yet." I tightly circle the base of his dick with my fingers.

"I want... I want..."

Lick.

"Yeah, baby? What do you want?"

"Fuck me. I want you to fuck me."

"I've never... Will it hurt you?" I feel like I'm the freshman, asking such a stupid question.

"A little discomfort, not gonna lie, but it turns into the best feeling ever." He starts to sit up and I back up to give him space. He walks to his desk and rummages in the drawer. He holds up the bottle of lube and a condom.

"Okay."

He must think I don't sound convinced, because he says, "Don't worry. I'll help you."

I chuckle. "My gay-sex mentor?"

"Hell yeah. I'll mentor you anytime."

He tosses me the condom and lies back down on the bed. "I'm hoping you don't need help with that," he says with that cocky grin of his.

"I think I can handle this."

As I roll on the condom, he dribbles some lube on his fingers. When he starts rubbing circles around his hole, I'm shocked at how much it turns me on. Who knew a guy playing with his own ass would be so hot?

He holds the lube toward me. "Here, give me your hand."

I put my hand closer and he puts some lube on it.

"You have to prepare me, stretch me, with your fingers. Just go slow and it'll be fine."

I slide my finger down from his balls until I reach his hole.

He nods. "Go ahead."

I start with circles, the way he was doing, and then I try to push in. I look back and forth between my finger poking him and his face, trying to make sure I'm not hurting him.

He closes his eyes. "God, yes."

Must be a good sign, so I push a little farther. Slowly, I fuck him with my finger.

"Add another finger," he urges. "Go on. I can take it."

I do. He gasps at first, and I start to draw back but he promises me he's okay. "It's just been a while."

Soon I'm fucking him with both fingers, watching as he moans and arches his back and pushes back against me.

"Yeah, that's it. Stretch me. Get me ready for your cock."

I experiment with widening my fingers. If the point is to stretch him large enough to fit me, he needs more room.

"You're a fucking natural." He smiles. "Lube yourself up. I'm ready."

"You sure?"

"Get your dick in me right fucking now."

I laugh. I'll never get tired of that dirty mouth of his. While I stroke with some lube, he rolls over on his stomach, pushing his ass up in the air. I press my lips to one of those perfect round cheeks. I can't help myself. I suck in a patch of skin, biting very gently. He practically pushes his ass back into my face. I release the skin and there's a red mark. I trace the outline with my finger. Yeah, I like that.

Sitting up on my knees, I move closer to him, placing one hand on his hip and one on my dick. I line up with his hole and push. Even with just the head in, I can tell this will not be like fucking a girl. Not a single fucking bit.

"I'm good. Push all the way in," he instructs, though his voice does sound strained.

I do, as slowly as I can, until I can't go any farther.

Holy fuck. Buried inside of him, it's so hot and tight and oh my God how have I not come already? I take a few steadying breaths.

"Okay?" I ask.

"Hell yeah." He pushes back against me and I take the hint to start moving. Our simultaneous moans might be the hottest fucking thing I've ever heard in my whole entire life.

"More," he begs. "I won't break. Need you so fucking bad."

I grip his hips tightly, using them for leverage. I withdraw almost completely, and then shove all the way back in immediately. Again. And again. He rocks on his knees, meeting my thrusts. I stroke his back, my fingers sliding in sweat. My legs are already getting shaky. It's too tight and so good. I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on the feeling of being inside him.

"Carlos," I moan. "Gonna come soon."

"Yeah."

He shifts slightly, and I open my eyes. His arm moves rhythmically beneath him, and I can tell he's jerking himself off. That's all it takes for that tightness to start, knowing that I've gotten him so turned on he can't help but touch himself.

I give a few last, hard thrusts, moaning his name as I fill the condom with wave after wave of come.

His own moans become unintelligible as he comes too.

I lean forward and rest my head against his back, trying to catch my breath. When I feel like I can lift my head without getting dizzy, I sit up and pull gently out of him. I drop the condom into the wastebasket under his desk and crawl into bed with him.

He curls up against me immediately and our lips meet in soft kisses. Mostly we're on our way to sleep.

“Tobias,” I say quietly into his hair. “Tobias Kennedy.”

He doesn't say anything. Maybe he's fallen asleep. I'm okay with that.

I kiss his forehead and drift off.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning when we wake up with our morning wood poking each other, I pull Carlos into my arms and kiss him and grind against him. A couple of blow jobs later and we're ready to face the world. Or at least take showers. I like being able to walk out of Carlos' room and not have to worry about who's seeing me. We behave in the shower, using separate stalls—I'm not up for public sex, in more ways than one—and get dressed. It's Saturday, so of course there's a party tonight. The pledges are in charge of prepping for it which sucks because I'd much rather hide out in Carlos' room and fuck all day.

We don't have to rush back, so we stop for breakfast at a diner. As we slide into the booth, Carlos' foot brushes mine. I jump a mile.

“Sheesh. Sorry.”

We're close to APK's house. Someone we know could walk in at any time. Considering I'd told Mikey I was spending the night with my hot *female* date, explaining breakfast with Carlos would be difficult.

After we order and the waitress brings our coffee, Carlos says quietly, “So, Tobias Kennedy, huh?”

“If you laugh, I swear to God I'll kick your ass, no matter how nice an ass it is.”

“I think it's nice. Toby. That'd be a good name for you, if you weren't such an asshole.” He throws a creamer at me.

“Toby? Really?”

“I like it.”

“It sounds so...” I stop myself just in time.

He looks at me for a long moment and then blinks slowly. “Gay?”

I fiddle with my coffee mug and sigh. “That's not what I meant.”

“Yes it is. That's exactly what you meant.” His voice is sharp.

“Look, Carlos, when you've been raised to believe one thing, it's hard to believe another. You know?”

“You haven’t even told your parents?”

“Man shall not lie with a man as he does with a woman,” I recite, the words spilling out as if it were only yesterday. “That’s what I was told when I asked why Uncle Billy wasn’t coming to Christmas dinner any more. After that, my dad...” I shake my head. “Everything was about becoming a man. Being strong and tough. Sports and hunting and working hard. Anything less is weakness and not acceptable.”

“Oh, T.K.” The sadness in his voice makes my chest feel hollow. I pick up a package of sugar so I don’t have to look at him. “You *are* strong. You *are* tough. That has nothing to do with being gay.”

I want to believe him. I want everything to be as easy as he says it is. But it just isn’t. I stare at the white packet in my hands, turning it over and over.

“Hey,” he says, nudging my foot with his.

Reluctantly, I look up.

“You’re most definitely a man. Trust me. I’ve seen the proof up close and personal.” He winks.

I lean across the table and say in a low voice, “And did you like what you saw?”

“Oh, hell yeah.”

Too bad we can’t go back to his dorm room.

When we get back to the house, I hang around the car after he walks in so it doesn’t look like we arrived together. By the time I walk by the lounge, he’s surrounded by a group of his pledge brothers, already discussing plans for the party. He takes a piece of paper and a pencil from one of the members of the group and writes a list.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Mikey calls as he walks down the hall toward me. “Look who’s finally home from his date.”

I can feel the color drain from my face. “What date?”

“With that girl you’ve been texting with that goofy smile on your face?” He looks at me oddly.

I cover up my relief with a waggle of my eyebrows. “Had a great night.” I raise my voice slightly and add, “Smokin’ hot sex.” Carlos doesn’t look up, but his pencil breaks.

Mikey claps me on the shoulder and laughs. Paulie joins us in the lounge. I pretend to follow their conversation, but I’m really watching Carlos. How did I forget my cover story? If I’m not careful, I’ll fuck everything up.

Paulie nudges me. “Doncha think so, T.K.?”

“Huh? Yeah. Sure.”

Mikey and Paulie crack up.

“Your girl coming tonight?” Mikey asks.

“Nah. She’s, uh, out of town.”

“Didn’t you just spend the night with her?”

“Right. She left this morning.” I offer a weak smile. “Why do you think I’m here instead of at her place boning her?”

He laughs and responds, but I’m too busy wondering if Carlos heard me and if he knows by *her* I mean *him*.

While Carlos and his pledge brothers prep for the party, I jot down notes for my essay about *A Million Faces*. Had I ever spent so much time in my room since joining APK? After I hear the music blasting—yes, two stories above the basement—I head down to the party.

I circle the large room, looking for Carlos among the crowd. I find him standing behind the music table, staring at a laptop and clicking away with the mouse.

“Hey,” I yell over the music.

He looks up and smiles. “Hey, yourself.”

“You playing DJ or something?”

“Actually, I *am* the DJ tonight.”

I must look shocked because he adds with a wink, “And yes, I know what I’m doing.”

He puts on headphones and goes back to work at the computer, not seeming to mind that I'm watching him. After a few minutes, I place my hand on his hip—below the table where no one can see—and give a small squeeze. He squirms with a laugh.

“I'll see you later.”

He nods and our eyes lock for a moment too long. I nearly lean in to kiss him before I remember where I am.

I go find the beer. Once I've had enough beers to loosen up, I join a group of sorority sisters without dancing with any single one in particular. They seem to appreciate the attention. Will they fight over me? Would Carlos join in the fight? If he did, would I let him win?

I study him as much as I can without being obvious. He's totally focused on his task. No surprise there.

The next song is slower and one of the girls—if she told me her name I couldn't hear it over the music—grabs my wrist. I guess she's the winner. She grinds against me something fierce, and I half-heartedly grind back. This is usually the point where I'd kiss her, pretend to be into her, trick my body into being aroused. Instead, I orient our bodies so I can see the DJ table. The next time I glance over, Carlos is staring at us and our eyes meet. The multi-colored lights flashing around the room make it impossible to read his expression. I wish I knew how to tell him with my eyes that I'm sorry this is the way things have to be. For the first time all night, he leaves the table. He grabs another pledge on his way out, motioning toward the DJ table.

“I gotta pee,” I say into the girl's ear.

“Right now?” she asks, annoyed.

I give her a goofy I-drank-too-much grin and untangle myself from her.

I push through the crowd to the steps, hoping Carlos hasn't gone far. I check the lounge and the two bathrooms on the main level. Before heading upstairs, I look out the front door.

Carlos is sitting on the porch with a red cup in his hand. He chugs the rest of it and then crushes the cup in his hand.

I open the door, startling him. When he sees it's me, he stands up without a word.

“Hey,” I say.

He glares at me. “I gotta get back.”

“Are you upset with me about that girl?” I step close to him and say in his ear, “You know I’d rather dance with you.”

I feel him take in a sharp breath. “So let’s dance.”

I shift the weight between my legs. “You know why we can’t.”

He huffs out a laugh.

I breathe in slowly. *Take a chance.* I kiss his cheek. Right here on the porch of the frat house. Right under the big Greek letters. Yeah, I’ve had too much to drink. When he finally looks back up in my eyes, his face is softer.

“You’re the one I want to be with,” I promise. “That’s what matters. C’mon. Let’s go back to your place.”

He considers, and finally says, “I gotta get someone to cover me on music.”

“I thought you already did?”

“For the rest of the night, I mean.”

I nod. “I’ll get my keys. Meet you at my car.”

He smiles. “Okay.”

He heads back downstairs and I run upstairs to my room. I reach my car first and lean against the hood to wait what feels like hours. I panic and consider going to look for him, but a few moments later he shows up. I toss my keys to him. “You’d better drive.”

On the way to his dorm, he says, “I didn’t like seeing that girl all over you.”

“If you don’t pretend to be into girls, the guys are gonna start asking questions.”

“Let them ask.”

I shake my head. “It’s not a good idea. Trust me.”

“Why should I trust you? You’ve never tried. You don’t know what will happen.”

“I’ve known these guys for two years. If I thought they’d be okay with it, I’d tell them.”

“No, you wouldn’t. You wouldn’t because you can’t accept the fact that you’re gay.”

I shrug. “I like guys. I like having sex with you. I don’t deny that.”

“But you still think there’s something wrong with it.”

I don’t have a response for that, and neither of us speak for the rest of the drive.

Once we’re in his room, I point to the computer on this desk. “You got any music on that thing?”

He brings up one of his playlists. I pull him tight against me and show him exactly how I would have danced with him if we could have. It only takes minutes before it turns more into vertical dry-humping than dancing. After a few songs, he takes a step back.

“T.K., how do you think your life would be different if you weren’t gay?”

He doesn’t wait for me to answer and ticks off each argument on his fingers. “You’d still play all the same sports you do now. Your dad would still have taught you to ‘be a man’ and all that shit. You’d have gone to the same college, in the same major, had the same friends. You don’t do those things because you’re gay. You do those things and you also happen to be gay.”

I smirk. “That’s actually kinda profound for a freshman.”

He sticks his tongue out at me.

“Hey, don’t be sticking that thing out unless you’re gonna use it.”

He grins and then launches himself at me.

Oh yeah, he uses his tongue. So very well.

On Sunday morning, we don’t sleep in. Carlos is on clean up duty with the rest of the pledges and if at all possible, we don’t want it to look like we left the party together last night.

The house is silent when we arrive. We ease the door open as quietly as we can. The main level isn't too trashed. The basement will be a mess though. One of the best parts of pledging—for the brothers, at least—is not having to clean up after parties.

We tiptoe past the lounge, where Mikey is passed out on the couch, to the kitchen. We wash down our Pop-Tarts with some orange juice.

“I'm gonna head downstairs and see how bad the damage is. If no one's up yet, maybe I'll crash.”

I nod. “A few more hours' sleep's not a bad idea.”

And, because the house is quiet in that morning-after-a-party way, I kiss him.

He responds right away with wrapping his arms around me and opening his lips. What was supposed to be see-you-later turns into god-you-feel-good-where's-the-bed.

“Holy fucking shit.”

We jump apart. Mikey stands in the door of the kitchen, looking like he's wondering just how drunk he got last night.

CHAPTER NINE

“Mikey, I...” I’m at a loss for words. I can barely breathe.

“You... he...” He rubs his forehead.

Carlos takes my hand. I’m in too much shock to pull away. “Why don’t we go to T.K.’s room and talk?” he suggests. Carlos leads the way upstairs. Once in the safety of my room, I feel like I can at least breathe.

“It’s not what you think.” I ignore the look Carlos shoots me.

“You guys were kissing.” He gestures between us. “Like, really kissing. Like... like...”

“Gays?” Carlos supplies.

“Yeah. Like you’re a pair of fags.”

Carlos blows out a breath, trying to stay calm I think. “I’m gay, Mikey.”

“For real?”

“Yeah.”

Mikey looks at me. “This pledge harassing you? Trying to take advantage of you? ’Cause I know you’re not gay, T.K.”

I want to laugh at the idea of Carlos taking advantage of me, but I realize this is it. Lying to Mikey now will mean the end of my relationship with Carlos. “Actually, Mikey, I, well...” I look over at Carlos. He’s watching me expectantly and gives a small nod. I look back at Mikey. I swallow hard. “I am gay.”

“Huh?”

I breathe. “I am gay,” I say, slower this time. Carlos’ smile is blinding.

Mikey forehead wrinkles in confusion. “The fuck? Since when?”

“Since always.” My voice is stronger now.

“But your girl—”

“I was with Carlos last night. And the night before that, too.”

He looks between us again.

Carlos nods. "It's true."

"My head is killing me." Mikey scrubs his face. "Like this is some kind of fucked-up hangover dream."

Carlos walks over to me, standing so close our sides touch. He wraps his arms around my waist. My arm automatically finds his shoulder. He leans over to kiss my cheek. "Nope. This is real."

"So you guys are like boyfriends or something?"

"Or something," I respond immediately.

"T.K. and Seven," Mikey muses, shaking his head. "All right."

"All right?" I ask.

"Just don't hit on me. I don't swing that way."

"You're not—You don't care?"

He shrugs. "Not really."

"Please don't tell anyone."

"Whatever. I need to get some coffee." He turns to head for the door.

"No, seriously. You can't tell our brothers."

Mikey turns back to us, puts his hand on my shoulder. "We're cool, bro."

He gives my shoulder a squeeze before walking out.

Carlos wraps his arms around my neck. "You did it!"

"Yeah. Don't know what the fuck I was thinking. I'm just glad it went okay."

"Okay? How much better could it have gone?"

"It's Mikey. I'm not sure how good at keeping secrets he is, you know? This could blow up on us."

"So let's take control."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's tell everyone."

"Everyone?" My eyes widen and my voice squeaks.

“The brothers, I mean. We can start with them and move on to the whole world later.”

He’s teasing me. I’m about to have a breakdown, and he’s fucking teasing me. “Are you kidding me? We dodged a fucking bullet today. Let’s not put ourselves in a shooting gallery.”

“Why are you so okay with being in the closet?”

“Why are you so okay being out?”

“This is who I am. What difference does it make if I like boys or girls?”

“Boys are supposed to like girls. Not other boys.”

“I guess I was sick the day they taught that.” He shakes his head. “What about all that shit about brotherhood and sticking together and lifelong friendships? Doesn’t that apply to us?”

“Of course. If a brother needs help, I’m there for him. And likewise if I needed something.”

“So what’s the problem? You’re already you. It’s just a little part of you they don’t know about yet.”

“What about you?” I accuse. “You rushed the frat, became a pledge, and you haven’t told anyone but me you’re gay.”

“Because it’s not something you put on a fucking resume. I’m also Latino, but I haven’t told anyone that either.”

“The point is, if there’s no reason to be in the closet, then why are *you*?”

“Because of you!” he yells. “I was going to come out. But then you and your ‘suck my dick but you can’t tell anyone’ made me stop and think.”

“Maybe you should keep thinking.”

“I have! All week, I’ve thought about why you’ve stayed in the closet. Why you haven’t told anyone, not even the people you claim are your closest friends. I thought, there must be a reason. And yeah, sure, the guys can be asses. But everyone’s an ass sometimes. Let’s show them how wrong they are.”

“You’ve spent two weeks here. I’ve known these guys two years. Who do you think has a better idea of how these guys will react?”

“You’ve spent two years—hell, more like twenty—thinking there’s something wrong with you. You aren’t broken. I’m not broken either. If you can’t accept that, what are we doing together?”

“I just need more time.”

Carlos shakes his head. “I can’t... I can’t put any more into this relationship if it’ll never go anywhere.”

“Relationship?”

He stares at me for a moment. His face changes before my eyes. He turns back into Seven. “Yeah. It’s time to cut my losses.”

“Carlos, wait.”

“No, T.K., I’m done. You can’t talk your way out of this one. This was a mistake from the beginning. I thought a friends-with-benefits thing would work, but it’s just not going to.”

“No, Carlos—”

Carlos begins a circle around the room, gathering his books and stray clothes he’s left around. “Just friends, T.K. That’s all.”

He walks out the door.

CHAPTER TEN

I stare in shock at the door Carlos just slammed. What the fuck just happened? I thought we made up from our fight and now he's all pissed off again. We were very clear in the beginning. Just sex. No one can know. He agreed to those terms. Is it my fault he changed his mind?

But what was his problem exactly? The secrecy or the just-sex part? Or both?

The look on his face when I told Mikey, like he just got a puppy. When I told him no way I was coming out? Like someone drowned the puppy. No. No, that look came when I reminded him it was just sex.

What did that mean? Was he falling for me?

I think back to all the little gestures he made over the weekend. Holding my hand. Public kisses. Shouldn't they have been little warning blinking lights?

I sit down on my bed. For some reason, the idea that Carlos has feelings for me—romantic feelings—seems impossible. And yet, I'd liked those little gestures. I'd liked being in a place with him where we could be free to look and touch each other, even if it was just holding hands or a quick kiss. The sex is awesome, sure, but *those* moments. The moments of just us in our own world, that's what I'll miss. Even now my hand feels empty without his.

Is there any way to make it right? If I tell him I'm ready for a relationship, but not ready to come out, will that be enough?

Am I ready for that?

Would it be any different than what we were doing already?

I'm not sure. All I know is I'm already missing him, even though he'd been here five minutes ago. He's in the building. He'll be a brother of the fraternity. He's not leaving.

Is that any better? Now that I know I have feelings for him, that I want to be his boyfriend?

He laughed in my face. Said that I was nothing but an ass to fuck. That I'd taken everything too seriously.

Shit. I'm no better than his asshole boyfriend. No wonder he's upset. I need to find him. Tell him. Beg him to wait until I'm ready to come out.

By the time I'm back from class Monday afternoon, I've called Carlos five times. After the third time he didn't answer, I stopped leaving messages. My texts have gone unanswered. He's not at the house. I didn't really expect him to be, and I know he won't be around for dinner duty.

I could go to his dorm, but maybe a cooling-off period is all he needs. He'll be here for dinner tomorrow night, if not sooner. Maybe by then he'll be ready to talk.

I'm messing around with the foosball table, practicing some shots, trying not to remember laughing with Carlos during our rematch.

Mikey jogs into the lounge and says breathlessly, "Yo, T.K."

"You all right, man?"

"Gotta talk. Private." He gestures for me to follow him. His room is right down the hall. He closes the door behind us.

"What's going on, Mikey?"

Mikey is usually so laid back about everything that I'm starting to worry.

"Did you know Seven came out to Chuck last night?"

"What? That stupid son of a bitch."

"Shut up and listen. You heard about the double secret emergency meeting tonight, right?"

"Of course, but—"

"Chuck plans to blackball Seven."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“But Carlos has class tonight. He can’t be there to defend himself.”

“I don’t think Chuck cares about his defense.”

I pull out my cell phone and call Carlos. “Dammit, Carlos, answer the phone.” He doesn’t. I want to throw the phone against the wall but settle for punching the wall instead.

“Hey!”

“We had a fight last night. He won’t answer my calls.”

“Him being here won’t make a difference to Chuck,” Mikey points out.

“He deserves the right to know what’s going on. To defend himself.”

“You know that’s not how it works.”

“Well, I’ve got to try something.”

Do Carlos and I even have a chance if he’s kicked out of APK? Hell, he’d probably think I kicked him out myself.

I run upstairs, grab my keys, and then race back downstairs. The clock in my car tells me I have less than an hour before the meeting. I head toward campus, but just before I turn onto the long, winding entrance road, a new idea occurs to me. What if I could show Chuck that having a gay brother was no big deal? I drive past the campus and turn down the next street. Half a mile ahead on the right is Sigma Tau Gamma’s frat house. I double park beside one of their brother’s cars and jog up to the front door. I knock on the door, and only then do I stop to wonder if this is a good idea.

Erik, SigTau’s president himself, opens the door. “T.K.,” he says, obviously surprised to see me. “What can I do for you?”

“Can I chat with you and maybe some of your members?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course.” He steps aside so I can walk in. He leads the way to the lounge.

“Thanks. I don’t have a lot of time. I... okay, I’m just going to come out and say it. Did SigTau really accept a gay pledge this year?”

His body stiffens as if he's preparing for a fight. "Yes, we did."

"And how's that, um, working out?"

"What are you getting at, T.K.?"

I huff out a lungful of air. "We've got a pledge that just came out. I was just wondering, you know..."

"No, I really don't know. He rushed. He looked like a good fit. So far, he's shown that he has what it takes to be a SigTau."

"And your brothers don't care?"

"That he's gay?" He shrugs. "They treat him like they'd treat you. No difference."

"Me?" I ask before I think about it.

He chuckles. "If you weren't an Alpha Phi Kappa brother, of course. Any straight guy, I mean. Gay, straight, doesn't matter."

My mind races. Like me, a straight guy. Except I'm not straight. I didn't need any special treatment or considerations. Sharing a room wasn't an issue. Sharing a bathroom. I'd never even been attracted to any of the brothers until Carlos came along, and that's all been mutual. So, what exactly was the problem again?

"T.K.?" he asks when I haven't said anything. "You have any other questions?"

"You know the other fraternities are laughing at you? Calling you the gay frat?"

Again, he shrugs. "They're just jealous 'cause we're the first one on campus to accept an openly gay brother. We're fucking pioneers. We'll make history books."

I consider this. Sounds like a bit of a stretch, but what if he's right? "Can I talk to him?"

"Andy? If you harass him, I'll kick your ass."

I shake my head. "No harassment. I promise."

"I'm not sure if he's here right now. I can maybe find his phone number for you?"

“Thanks.”

We head to his room where he shuffles a bunch of papers, looking for the one he wants. “Ah, here it is.” He reads off the number and I type it into my phone.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Nice to see APK following in SigTau’s footsteps.”

He laughs and claps my shoulder. I give a short laugh with him, but I’m really just thinking about what a pretentious ass he is. He walks me to the door. I get back into my car and head back to campus. As I do, I press the buttons to call Andy’s number.

“Hello?”

“Oh! Um, hi.” I’ve spent the last twenty-four hours being ignored by my sort-of boyfriend, yet this stranger answers on the second ring. “Is this Andy?”

“Yes. Who’s this?”

“My name is T.K. Rogers. I’m a brother with Alpha Phi Kappa. I wanted to talk to you about SigTau.”

He hesitates. “Yes.” His voice sounds cautious.

“How is... How are they treating you?”

“Uh, it’s pledging.”

I chuckle. “Yes, I realize that. But I mean, how are they treating you, specifically. Because you’re, you know...”

He sighs. “Gay?”

“Yeah. Gay.”

“They treat me all right. If you’re trying to get me to talk bad about my brothers, forget it.”

“No, no. One of our pledges has come out, and I just wanted to make sure... I just wanted to know if a gay brother could be accepted. Truly as a brother. You know?”

“Well,” he says slowly, his voice warming somewhat. “I can’t tell you how

Alpha Phi Kappa will respond, but SigTau has been very welcoming. Some brothers more than others, sure. But I haven't had any major problems."

By the time I hang up with him, I'm turning onto campus and heading for Carlos' dorm.

All of the short-term visitor spots are taken. No time for this bullshit, so I pull into a "no parking" zone. Glancing at the time on my phone, I realize Carlos may have already left for class. I text him.

Gonna be blackballed. Answer ur phone.

This time when I call him, it goes straight to voicemail. I run up the stairs, not waiting for the elevator. By the time I'm banging on the door of room 527, I have to catch my breath.

A guy I've never seen before answers the door. Must be Carlos' roommate. "Yeah?" he says by way of greeting.

"Is Carlos here?"

"I think he went to class."

"Do you know where his class is?"

"Really? What am I, his keeper?"

I push my way into the room.

"Hey!"

I ignore him and start searching Carlos' desk. If he's still got his schedule, it should be here.

"What are you doing? You can't go through his stuff!"

I get in his face and use the height difference to my advantage. "You gonna stop me?"

"I could call campus security."

I roll my eyes. "Relax. I'm just looking for his schedule to figure out where he is."

"Why do you need to know?"

“I’m his...” *Just say it.* “...friend. One of the brothers in the frat he’s pledging.” *Chickenshit.*

I open the next drawer.

“Is this part of that hazing stuff?”

“Classified.”

“Isn’t that illegal? I don’t wanna be, like, an accomplice or something.”

I find what I’m looking for. Noting the building and room number, I give the good-citizen-roommate a mock salute and let myself out.

I hear the elevator ding from the hallway and race to meet it. I get my hand in as it’s closing and push my way into the already-crowded elevator. I apologize to the person whose foot I stepped on.

By the time I’m running out the door, there’s a campus security officer standing next to my car, filling out a ticket.

“No, no, I’m moving, I’m moving!” I call as I jiggle my keys in my hands.

He ignores me and completes the paperwork. He slaps it on the windshield just as I reach him, and then walks away as if I wasn’t even there.

“Seriously?” I yell after him. “I’m right here.”

I drive around to the academics side of campus. None of my classes are in these groups of building, so I’m not sure which of two buildings it is. There’s only a handful of evening classes, not like there’s a ton of traffic at this time of night, so I leave my car in the circle with the hazard lights blinking. I try the building on the right. Nope. I jog across the courtyard to the left building. I find the room, a large lecture hall.

By this time, class has already started. I knock on the door, hoping the professor is the understanding type.

He opens the door. “If you can’t be on time, enter the classroom without disruption or don’t come at all.”

“Sorry, sir. I’m not one of your students. I need Carlos Castillo.”

“Lecture ends at nine. Come back then.”

“No! It’s a... family emergency. I’m, uh, his roommate and his mom just called. He needs to go right now.”

He considers me for a minute, then addresses the class. “Carlos Cas—” He looks back at me. “What did you say his name was?”

“Castillo,” I reply, and nod toward the other side of the room.

Carlos is already rising in his seat, staring at me with either humiliation or anger. Maybe both.

Seeing Carlos on his way, the professor heads back to his lectern. As Carlos passes him, he puts a hand on his shoulder, and tells him something.

Carlos shuts the door behind him. “What the hell, T.K.? Pulling me out of class?”

“Next time try answering your phone.”

“I turned it off. I can’t have it ringing in class with you calling all the time.”

“Maybe there was a reason.” I step up into his face, ready for the fight, then think better of it. “I’ll explain in the car. C’mon.”

“Like hell.”

I sigh. “Look, Chuck plans to blackball you. The meeting is already happening. We have to get back to the house.”

“What does that mean?”

“Do you still want to be a member of APK?”

“Of course!”

“Then move your ass.”

He finally does and we rush back to my car. I grab the ticket off my windshield. Goddamn campus security. Never around when you need them, but park in the wrong place for five fucking minutes...

“What the fuck were you thinking, coming out to Chuck last night?”

“I was thinking they’ve gotten to know me so it wouldn’t hurt anything.” He looks like he’s going to say something else but changes his mind.

I shake my head. “Chuck called a double secret emergency meeting. He wants to remove your bid, and he’s going to rally the rest of the brothers to support him.”

“He can do that?”

“Are you that naive? Technically speaking, you’re not supposed to be at the meeting. Hell, you’re not even supposed to know about it until the decision is made.”

He finally looks scared. “So what’s the plan?”

“I’m, well, I’m not sure yet. Somehow we have to convince the brothers not to go along with Chuck.”

“Will that work?”

“It’s just a vote. If the majority want to keep you as a brother, that’s that.”

“Why are you doing this, T.K.? Why do you care?”

I look at him. He’s studying my face with the same intensity as he did when he was standing in a line wearing only his underwear. The words are in my throat. *Just say them.* “It’s not right,” is all I can manage to get out.

He turns away and looks out the window.

I park in front of the house. I can’t think of anything to say, so we walk into the house in silence. The house is eerily silent as well. The other pledges have been kicked out for the evening, and everyone else is in the basement for the meeting. We head straight there.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It looks like all twenty-four in-house members are present at the meeting. A few of them have snagged seats on the various tables and couches.

“T.K.,” Chuck greets me from his place in the middle of the room. “Where’ve you—” He notices Carlos behind me and sneers, “What’s he doing here?”

“He should have the chance to defend himself.”

“Defend himself?” Chuck asks incredulously. “Okay. Pledge Number Seven, did you or did you not tell me last night that you’re a faggot?”

Gotta give Carlos credit, he keeps his chin up. “I told you last night that I’m gay, and I promised that my sexual orientation won’t affect my ability to be a good brother for APK.”

“Thank you,” Chuck says coldly. “You may wait upstairs while we discuss the issue.”

“He should stay,” I argue even though I know it’s pointless.

“T.K.,” Mikey warns. “He can’t be here.”

I turn to Carlos, pleading with my eyes. “Wait upstairs, but please don’t leave until we’ve had a chance to talk. Please?”

He sighs, but agrees.

“Chuck, we can’t kick him out just for being gay.”

“No? You want APK to become the gay fraternity? What would that do to our image?”

“Make us look progressive? Besides, SigTau’s already beat us to that.”

“Well, good for them. Let them be the gay fraternity. APK has a strong campus presence. Why risk that for the sake of one person? Shouldn’t we do what’s best for the frat as a whole?”

There are murmurs of agreement.

“Think big picture,” I say, holding my hands out wide. “If we blackball a gay pledge, in thirty years APK is going to look just like the frats that only accepted white pledges.”

“You can’t be serious.” Chuck’s voice raises in exasperation. “You’re comparing apples to oranges. You can’t predict the future. We need to focus on what APK needs *now*. Not what might happen in thirty years.”

“Fine. We’ll focus on what APK needs now. Carlos is good for APK. He’s proven to be a dedicated pledge. He’s done everything asked of him without question or hesitation. He takes it seriously. Can you honestly say that for every single one of the other pledges?”

“What are you saying, we should kick out every pledge that has second thoughts about pledging?”

“No!” It comes out more of a yell than a rational response. “I’m saying, until last night you believed Carlos was a great fit for APK. Nothing has changed since then.”

“Everything has changed! He lied when he rushed, by not telling us up front.”

“If that’s a requirement for membership maybe it should be part of the interview.” I say it sarcastically, but Chuck nods thoughtfully.

“That’s true.”

My heart hammers against my chest. “You’re missing the point!”

“What is your point, T.K.? Other than taking up our Monday night? We were just about ready to vote when you showed up.”

“Carlos will be an excellent brother. You should see the thought he’s putting into this year’s fundraiser. It’s going to be amazing. You’re judging him on the wrong reasons.”

“He’s a liability. A risk. Jesus, what if he tries to fuck one of us?”

“He’s homosexual, not a goddamn rapist!” Blood pounds in my ears and I clench my fists.

“Are you sure there is a difference?”

Paulie shoots to his feet. “Are you for real? You said yourself that you admired his leadership skills.”

My heart is pounding. Until Paulie joined in, I had the feeling this was a tennis match, and everyone was just watching the ball volley back and forth

between Chuck and me. Having him on my side gives me hope. He walks over to me and puts his arm on my shoulder. "I'm with T.K. This is bullshit, and y'all know it. Five minutes ago y'all liked the guy and now you're blackballing him? Why y'all letting Chuck make up your minds?"

A low murmur creeps around the room. A brother standing against the back wall steps forward. "I don't want a homo in APK. It's just not natural. That's not what God intended."

"APK will never have a gay brother," Chuck declares.

Mikey catches my eye. He gives a small nod.

"Chuck." I pause, unclench my fists, and try to calm my nerves. "Brothers." I look around the room at the faces of my brothers, wondering if this is the last time they will look at me without hatred. "APK already has a gay brother."

"What?"

"No way!"

"What the fuck are you talking about, T.K.?" Now Chuck's face is red.

After the initial shock, the room becomes still as they all wait for my accusation. Some of the brothers look between me and Paulie and his arm on my shoulder.

I suck in as much air as I can before my lungs feels like they'll explode. "It's me. I'm gay."

If the room had been silent before, it's a goddamn vacuum now. It's as if every single person in the room forgot how to breathe.

Finally, Chuck laughs. "That's a good one, T.K. This whole argument as set up? You almost had me."

A few other brothers join in the laughter. Paulie doesn't remove his arm from my shoulder. He just stares at me with wide eyes.

"I'm dead fucking serious."

"I've known you two years. All those girls. There's no way."

"Yes, I've slept with girls. Yes, it was all a cover. No, I didn't really enjoy it. Tits and pussy really aren't my thing."

Everyone stares at me like I've just said the most impossible thing. I shrug.

"If you want to vote Carlos out, you have to vote me out as well. None of you would accept your brothers treating your girlfriend in such a shitty way, and I refuse to tolerate it for my boyfriend."

It takes a minute for them to put two and two together.

Chuck points at me. "You see, brothers? That is exactly why we can't have gays in APK. In just two weeks, this pledge has convinced T.K. that he's gay. Just wait 'til it's one of you."

Before I can respond, Mikey says, "Oh, for Christ's sake, Chuck. Your homophobic ideas are just ridiculous. Is it a shock to hear that T.K. is gay? Of course. But it's T.K. Can you even imagine APK without him?"

He steps up to stand on my other side and holds out his fist. I bump it with mine and smile thanks.

"Have your vote. I'm leaving the room. You're voting on both Carlos and me." I wait for a moment, just in case Paulie has an announcement of his own. He remains silent. I give him a quick one-armed man-hug and whisper, "Thanks."

I head upstairs, hoping Carlos waited for me.

He's standing just outside the door to the basement. His face is tense. "So?"

"They haven't voted yet. I removed myself from the vote because they're voting on both of us."

"What?"

"I told them the truth. That I'm gay. That you're, well, that you're my boyfriend. At least, I'm hoping you'll be my boyfriend."

He opens his mouth but nothing comes out. "I can't believe you did that for me," he says finally.

"I can't hide anymore. I'm not ashamed of who I am. And, yes, I want a real relationship with you. No hiding. You're worth that to me."

The smile that lights up his face makes my heart skip a beat. "Boyfriends. I like the way that sounds."

I pull him into my arms and hold him tight against me. Our first real hug. And it feels awesome. The kiss that follows? Slow and sweet and for the first time, not a kiss that leads to or follows sex. No hurry, no frenzy, no burning need. It's just, well, perfect.

“Get a room!” Boomer yells.

Carlos and I break apart, chuckling nervously. We hadn't heard the door. He slips his hand into mine, weaving our fingers together.

Chuck stomps by, disgust covering his face when he sees us.

Mikey comes up and puts an arm around Carlos and my shoulders, making a three-person huddle.

“How'd it go?” I ask, anxious.

“Well, guys, I'm sorry to tell you this, but you're stuck with APK.”

Carlos lets out a whoop.

“You should know,” Mikey continues, now serious, “it wasn't a unanimous decision.”

That I expected. “Chuck?”

“Not just Chuck. I don't know what repercussions there might be, hopefully none, but most of us brothers have you guys' backs.”

“Thanks, Mikey,” Carlos says.

“Hey, man.” Mikey shrugs. “It's what brotherhood is all about.”

Eight Weeks Later

Mikey, Boomer, and I walk into the crowded community center with our one hundred and fifty dollars of funny money. A huge banner spans the doorway with the words, “Alpha Phi Kappa Casino Night” printed in bold black letters. More than twenty tables are set up around the room, designed to look like real tables from a casino. Carlos had told me the pledge class sold over two hundred tickets, but the line of people at the door, plus the crowd already inside, still shocks me.

Even Mikey is impressed. “I'm going to find the craps table,” he says before wandering off.

“Looks like your boy really pulled it off,” Boomer says.

I couldn't be prouder as I walk down the first row of tables looking for my boy. I find him behind one of the blackjack tables, dealing cards to three players. Like all the dealers, he's wearing black pants, a white dress shirt, and a black bow tie.

He catches my eye and smiles. “Got an empty seat here, if you wanna play.”

“Nah, blackjack's not really my game. Besides, I'm not sure I can trust the dealer.”

“Your loss.” He turns back to the game. The heavysset woman sitting on the end hits and he deals her a card.

I watch the rest of the hand, amused at the way he charms the ladies. He glances up. “I'm splitting shifts with Jonesy in about an hour. Find you then?”

I nod, and then head off to find the poker tables. Across the room is a poker table with an open spot. I take a seat and wait for the next round. Chuck is sitting at this table and though he sees me, he doesn't say anything. I don't bother to greet him either. Ever since Carlos and I came out, he's avoided us, only speaking to us when necessary.

After I've lost half my money on several hands of poker, two arms wrap around my shoulders.

“Doesn't look like poker is your game either.” Carlos laughs.

Chuck folds his hand and walks away from the table.

Carlos sighs. “He's never gonna come around, is he?”

I pull his hand to my lips and kiss his palm. “No, I don't think so.”

I lose another five dollars, and then stand up.

“Walk with me?” Carlos asks. “I gotta check in with everyone.”

We go from table to table so he can get his updates. He seems satisfied with everything he's hearing.

“Hey guys!” Paulie's sitting at the next table we come to. “This is my brother, Joe.” He gestures to the guy next to him. Then he nods toward the guy next to Joe. “And that's his boyfriend, Keith.”

We shake hands with Joe and Keith and stay to chat for a few minutes before Carlos starts pulling on my arm to get to the next table.

“You’ve done a great job with this, you know,” I tell him, but not before teasing him for being a workaholic.

“It was a group effort, believe me. Everyone worked hard. I just cracked the whip.”

“Oh really? I didn’t know you were into that kind of thing,” I tease.

His eyes go wide and he actually blushes. “I—uh, no, I mean—”

I laugh. “Don’t worry. I’m not into that stuff either. What I *am* into is you wearing that bow tie.”

He fingers the tie. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Wearing that bow tie and nothing else.”

A smile slowly grows on his face.

I kiss him. “Later tonight. Make it happen, tough guy.”

THE END

Author Bio

C.M. Walker lives in Maryland with her husband and two children. She read her first M/M romance story out of curiosity, decided that books were better with two men instead of one, and hasn't looked back since. When C.M. 's not reading or writing, she's either next to a bright light cross-stitching with fancy thread, at the computer digi-scraping, or at the sewing machine making cute clothes for her daughter.

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CAGED

By Skylar Warren

Photo Description

A battle-hardened warrior stares straight ahead with ferocity and a hint of confusion. He has black dreadlocks, bronze skin, and clothing of crude leather. Around him, a primitive room of concrete and metal holds him prisoner.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please help me. I woke up in chains and I hurt like hell, but I don't have a clue what happened to me. In fact, now that the pain in my head has eased a little, I'm coming to the conclusion that I don't remember anything. Not where I am, how I got here, or even who I am. The only other person I've seen is the pretty twink crouched over there.

Insert your own favorite twink image here, I'm not picky, long as he's cute and vulnerable looking... and has sad, dark eyes...

He's shivering in the corner, so afraid I can almost smell the fear coming off of him. He's dressed in rags and I can see bruises and welts on his pale skin... (did I do that?) Every so often he casts a furtive look my way, those dark, dark eyes silently begging me for something... but what? He hasn't spoken to me yet, and I'm not sure why. Am I supposed to know him? His eyes say yes, but his face doesn't do anything to my memory.

Are we lovers? Slaves? Enemies? Strangers?

Is it me he's afraid of, or just our situation?

Help me figure this out before it drives me out of my mind...

Dearest Author, I adore amnesia stories, so feel free to twist this up in any way you see fit. I would love it to be either fantasy or sci fi, post-apocalyptic

or dystopian is fine, and I don't mind me some hot slave-fic, either... Go ahead and make it as dark as you like—I'll be sure and wear my big-girl panties.

Sincerely,

Jaye

Story Info

Genre: postapocalyptic/dystopian

Tags: military men, sex industry, prison, captivity, amnesia, slave

Content warnings: violence and dubious consent

Word count: 18,241

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CAGED

By Skye Warren

CHAPTER ONE

Cor woke up in the pitch black, his heart racing and muscles tensed for a fight. He heaved back, away from an unseen opponent. His hands slipped on loose gravel. The wall met his head with a blow that clapped his teeth together. He struggled to hold onto consciousness, managing by a thread, slumped against the cool, damp stone.

He regulated his breathing, taking shallow, even sips of air. He heard nothing. No one. Slowly his eyes adjusted, sketching a rectangular room with bars making up two of the sides and tall concrete walls closing in on him.

A cell. He was a prisoner. How had that happened?

Confusion hammered his brain, making him wince. Even reaching for the memory pierced his skull with sharp pain. *Think, damn it.* He remembered his childhood in the slums of Talon province. He remembered joining the gang with no political affiliation but a penchant for stealing. And he remembered striking out on his own.

And then nothing.

Confused, he put his hand to his head and found a large egg-shaped bruise on his forehead. That explained it. Head wounds sometimes resulted in memory loss. Temporary, he thought. A passing weakness, an injury that would heal. It must be so, because he sure as hell couldn't deal with missing a whole chunk of his life.

He did a cursory pat down and found several other bruises and cuts all over his body, as if he'd been in a fight. Correction: as if he'd gotten the shit beat out of him. Which never happened to him. Partly that was because he was big, mean, and handy as hell with a dagger in an alley. But mostly it was because he stayed out of everyone's business. So who the fuck had attacked him and thrown him in a goddamned jail?

Scuffing sounds drew his attention outside the cell. He forced himself to stand, albeit leaning back against the wall. He squinted into the gloom. Two soldiers emerged from the base of a stairwell, dragging a smaller man between them. The stiff uniforms identified them as Ke'lan. Cor could even discern their rank from the stripes on the collar, though he wasn't sure where he would have learned such things.

They stopped outside the door, but instead of opening it, one of the soldiers pressed their prisoner against the bars. The action pushed him into the dim light, giving Cor a good look. A slender body, sandy-colored hair, and lips wide and full. The white shift he wore was dirty but thin enough to see his pink nipples and the dark triangle below his belly.

Pleasing, he admitted. Maybe in another time and place Cor might have spent a few hours in a backroom to find out just how pleasing he could be.

The soldier behind the boy grabbed his hair and pulled back, then snarled in his ear. "I bet you like that, don't you? So fucking hot for it, aren't you?"

A strangled sound escaped the prisoner. Cor assumed that was a *no*.

The soldier laughed. He reached around and fumbled at the space between the prisoner's legs, grasping and tugging at cloth and soft flesh. The prisoner's eyes glazed with pain, but he didn't object. He didn't even seem surprised.

Cor's stomach turned. He mostly didn't care about other men, and this one was a stranger to him, but the violation still bothered him. Cor would kill anyone who looked at him sideways. But he wouldn't rape. A man had morals.

The taller guard seemed to grow bored. "You've had your fun, now let's go. What are they serving for dinner, you think?"

The stocky guard seemed reluctant, but he finally relinquished the prisoner. He unlocked the gate. Cor tensed, wondering if he should make a move now. He was at a disadvantage—a major one—but it wasn't like he could wait around for an engraved invitation.

The second guard seemed smarter than the first, though. He pointed his weapon at Cor's chest.

"Don't move a muscle."

Cor's eyelids lowered in an impotent threat, but he remained against the wall as the other prisoner was thrown inside. The cell was relocked with a twist of the guard's fingers and a smirk. They stomped back up the stairs, debating the merits of stew over meatloaf. Cor's stomach rumbled gently, reminding him that he had no idea when he'd last eaten. Technically he had no idea when he'd last done *anything*. Which he found really fucking irritating.

The younger man scrambled away from him, huddling into a corner between bars and concrete. His expression, his every movement spoke of his fear. The slender body was shivering though it wasn't that cold. Terror? Shock? What exactly had the soldiers done to him before bringing him here? Cor pushed that thought away. He didn't want to know.

Cor's stomach pinched, but he chalked it up to hunger and some very old, half-dead bit of conscience. He felt sorry for this man—for his imprisonment, for the cruel treatment he'd received. Even for the lithe, pretty body that made him a target. But not sorry enough to leave him alone. Cor needed to get the hell out of here, and right now, the prisoner was the only tool he had.

Besides, the boy kept sending him terrified glances—glances laced with curiosity. How was Cor supposed to resist that? Wide eyes, dark and fathomless. Cor wished they were also vacant. The boy wouldn't mind his abuse so much, and then maybe Cor wouldn't either. Unfortunately, wary intelligence shone there. A flickering candle the K'elan would delight in blowing out.

“What's your name, boy?”

No answer.

Ten heartbeats passed. Cor considered what pain he could inflict with only his hands, if it came to extracting information the old-fashioned way. A lot of pain. The young man seemed fragile, folded up in the corner. Cor could break him in two.

“Lack. My name is Lack.”

Weird. Cor had never heard anyone named that before. But then again, he might not remember if he had. “How long have you been here?”

Another pause, shorter this time. “Sixty rotations, I think. I've lost track.”

Sixty rotations was a long time to get pawed at by randy guards. Hell, even once was too much. If they tried that with Cor, they'd find their balls dislodged from their body and he didn't care if they killed him for it. But Lack didn't have that kind of strength. Just silky hair that looked like it would be soft to touch. He'd hold onto it, Cor decided. Run his fingers through it and then clench, while the man licked and sucked where he needed him to.

In a fantasy, of course. A few hours in a backroom somewhere. Not on a cold night in prison, especially when, for all Cor knew, the man was his enemy. Being thrown into the same cell didn't make them friends.

"How long have I been here?" Cor asked.

Lack's eyes flashed with surprise. "You don't know?"

He shrugged. Information was leverage and he'd just given some away by revealing his amnesia. But he figured it would be pretty fucking obvious that he was clueless, especially when he didn't even know where they were supposed to take a shit around here. The boy would tell the truth or Cor would hurt him until he did. He hoped the boy told the truth.

"Answer the question."

"You... you just got here. I mean, you weren't here when they took me out earlier."

He supposed that made sense, with his injuries feeling so fresh. That still didn't give him much to go on. Why had he been taken? What were they planning to do with him? He didn't have to wonder that about Lack. It was obvious what they planned to do with him.

He approached the boy, who scooted up against the corner. Cor grabbed hold of his neck. A small squeak was the only response. So small beneath his hand, so soft within his grip. He could squeeze the life out of him in a second, with no one around to stop him. But he wouldn't.

Anyway, a dead body would stink up the cell.

"Do you know why I'm here?" He tightened his fingers just a fraction. "And don't lie to me. Do you know what they want with me?"

Lack swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down, up and down—a

strange and gentle caress on the callused skin of Cor's palm. Soothing him when Cor was well past comfort.

Met with silence, Cor leaned forward, using his bulk and height to intimidate as he towered over the other man. Some sweet, musky scent teased his nostrils, and he turned his face into Lack's neck, breathing in a lungful, enjoying the temporary reprieve from the moldy smell of their prison. He felt so small in Cor's embrace—no, his stronghold.

“Answer me.”

“I don't,” Lack said. His voice was thin, though it could have been from fear. Probably was, judging by the trembling in his limbs.

“You don't what?”

“I don't know why you're here.”

He almost sighed. The odds of Lack knowing anything had been slim, but he'd had to ask. He eyed Lack's face, looking for clues that he was lying. There was too much fear to see them if they were there. He supposed he could a little more aggressive, see if any other information came out under duress. But it was unlikely such a lowly prisoner would be privy to anything useful. Besides, the boy would probably piss himself and the place smelled bad enough.

Lack whimpered. “Please.”

Cor released him, a foreign sensation of self-disgust bundled in his gut. He hadn't enjoyed manhandling the smaller man—except when he'd enjoyed it too much. His body had stirred with the nearness. He put his hands on Lack's shoulders and gently slid him down the wall. Then he returned to his own corner and sat down.

The guards would have to come back eventually. When they did, Cor would find a way to kill them. Two armed men against one hungry, injured one was hardly a fair match, but he'd been found on a refuse transport as an infant. He was used to beating the odds.

Lack was a problem. His chances of getting free were drastically reduced if he had to take care of a weakling on the way. Even allowing Lack out into the compound to attempt his own escape would probably just draw attention to

Cor's. And locking him back up in the cell, knowing what they would do to him, just seemed cruel. He could always put him down on his way out. A mercy killing? He tossed a glance at Lack in time to see the man's eyes dart away. Too messy.

Well, he'd have to deal with the guards first, so he focused his thoughts there. On fighting, on inflicting pain and damage and death. Like well-worn leather gloves, these thoughts. Familiar and perfectly formed for him.

Lack woke up to daylight. At least, the closest approximation to day there was in this cell, but he appreciated it anyway. The darkness was so absolute in the cell at night—terrifying. Now light struggled through the small, high window. The window was technically outside the cell, but it was still lined with bars. As if he needed any reminders about his situation.

He sat up and then froze. The other man was still there, and his ink-black eyes were trained directly on Lack. In the brighter light, Lack could see the thick braids of hair that fell to his shoulders. His skin was dark—a pink-tinged brown that Lack had once seen on the inside of a shell. Some areas were darker, bruised, while other flashed red with recent cuts.

No surprise there. The Ke'lan weren't known for being gentle, especially with an enemy soldier. Lack was neither enemy nor soldier, and they were fairly brutal with him.

Cor, that was his name. And he'd attacked the Ke'lan, which, in Lack's opinion, meant he wasn't very smart. No one came up against the Ke'lan and lived to tell about it. But the Ke'lan... They could attack whatever they wanted. Whoever they wanted, like Lack's master. And take Lack home as the bounty.

It really shouldn't matter. One master was as good as another. Or as bad, depending on the way he looked at it. And Lack preferred to be optimistic, but that was easier said than done when he was locked in a cage with a man like this. A wild animal.

“When do they come back?” Cor asked.

Lack shrugged. “Not sure when. Sometime today, they'll come.”

“They must feed you.”

“Not much.” And he’d learned not to look forward to that, no matter how starving he became.

A low sound rumbled through the air, and Lack was amused to realize it was Cor’s stomach. The man was probably starving. It must take a lot of food to sustain the thick muscles of his arms, his thighs. The man was thick everywhere. Something fluttered low in Lack’s belly. Lust. He was well trained enough to recognize it, even if it surprised him. So maybe their impending intercourse wouldn’t hurt so much. He’d learned also that arousal could temper pain.

Cor stood and ran his large hands along the iron bars. “You ever try to escape?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Cor looked over, seeming to decide whether or not to be offended. His gaze slid down Lack’s body, sending a lick of heat into his groin. Unimpressed, Cor snorted and turned away. Lack knew how he looked. Weak. Useless. Because that was exactly what he was. He’d been bred and trained for one purpose. At one time he’d been good at it.

His old master hadn’t exactly been gentle, but he’d been fair. And more importantly, he’d had a large enough harem not to require his orifices every night. But now Lack belonged to the Ke’lan, who didn’t keep sex slaves. There were admirals and generals and foot soldiers, all without a harem to serve them. Only Lack, which meant they had a lot of time and energy to administer punishment if he failed.

Gathering his courage, he approached Cor. It was a testament to how nonthreatening Lack seemed, because Cor didn’t even move to defend himself.

“What are you doing?”

Lack smiled. “Since we’re sharing this cell, I can think of a better way to pass the time.”

Cor raised an eyebrow. “And what might that be?”

Cor was all muscle and dark, scarred skin. His eyes burned with a feral, cunning light. He was the beast, and Lack was the sacrifice. *Don’t be*

dramatic, he chastised himself. But it was true. He was held in thrall by his captors and by the violent whims of this stranger.

Cor slid down the wall, bending one leg and resting his elbow. His head was cocked at an inquisitive angle. There was no fear in his eyes, no tremble of his limbs the way Lack had shook the previous night when Cor had approached him. This man had no reason to be afraid.

Lack's heart beat an unsteady drum. He tugged the knot of his shift off his shoulder, letting the fabric drop to the floor. A sharp intake of breath rent the quiet. He wished there were music or other sex slaves around. The atmosphere then had been accepting, even playful at times. Sensual. The cell was cold.

Cor's eyes were like marble. "Why are you doing this?"

"You don't wish me to stop."

He knew Cor enjoyed his body. That much had been evident from the lingering glances and the hard line of his cock against Lack's thigh in their singular confrontation.

He ran his hands up his sides, ignoring the ridges of his ribs. He reached for his nipples, tugging lightly with dirtied fingers, rolling them into hard buds. Each twist sent a twinge of practiced arousal to his cock.

Practiced movements, practiced words. "How may I serve you?"

"I do not ask for your service."

But Cor did want it. The slightest shift of his hips where he sat. A flash of silver in his eyes. Oh yes. Lack would bet there was a heavy cock beneath the leather of his pants.

He fisted himself, stroking roughly. He didn't expect to come, unless Cor allowed it. And he didn't expect Cor to allow it. The tight grip was almost painful. It was a show, an enticement. A blatant act of submission so that the other man would take what he wanted, use whatever force he desired.

"We are alone here. I would pleasure you."

"That does not look like pleasure, young one."

His hand faltered. He had expected to work hard, to endure pain. But not a complete refusal. Had the man not understood his little show? Did he think

their caresses would be mutual, that Lack would expect to be serviced in return?

He fell to his knees.

“I’ll suck you,” he said bluntly. “Run my tongue wherever you wish it, swallow down your seed.”

Cor’s hips jerked slightly. Oh yes, he wanted that. But he made no move to open his pants. Lack reached forward. Bruising fingers grasped his wrists, and he was turned around, his back pressed up against the wall. All the air rushed from his body.

“I said no,” Cor growled. “Has their mistreatment confused you? It means I do not want this.”

Anger sparked within him. “You want me. I know you do.”

“As a lover.” Thick fingers ran artlessly down his side. “You would be sweet, but not as a sacrifice. When you come to me, I want you willing. I want you so desperate you’re fucking the air in anticipation of my touch.”

His eyes fell shut. “Tell me how to be, and it will be so.”

“Why are you so desperate for me to fuck you? Do you think I would hurt you if you don’t?”

Not you, them. “No.”

Cor reached down to Lack’s half erect cock. His large fingers wrapped the tender flesh.

“If you want this so badly,” Cor whispered. “You can have it.”

“No,” he gasped. He needed Cor’s pleasure, Cor’s trust.

But the hand on his cock had already sped up. Lack’s body responded like a thunderstorm, tossing reason like a ship in a storm. His hips pushed greedily into the firm circle of Cor’s fist, meeting each down stroke. A strange animal sound suffused the air—his voice, he realized. A moan of despair.

How long had it been since someone had touched him for pleasure and not pain? Since he’d been at the harem, putting on a show for his master. But this was different too, because instead of the soft, slender hands of a fellow slave, this was Cor. Cor, with a thick, meaty fist. There was no well-practiced flick

of the wrist, no measured pace carefully attuned to his breathing. He was firm and harsh, working an irregular rhythm that had Lack on the edge. Being used, being fondled.

He let out a gasp. A large hand covered his mouth, tilting his head back and muffling his cries. Tears leaked from his eyes and spilled onto the fingers that held him, but his captor never wavered. Never slowed. Just pumped the cock he held, faster and harder, so roughly it brought pain, so cruelly it brought pleasure.

Lack's whole body jerked once, twice, and then a spray of white foamy cum spilled onto the blackened ground beneath them.

Slowly, awareness returned to him. He realized he was being held in a tight embrace—a chokehold without the pain. They were both breathing hard, and he could feel Cor's erection at his hip. He started to turn, but the grip on his shoulders and waist tightened. He was turned, and for a moment he was sure that Cor would take him to the ground and fuck him.

Instead, Lack was unceremoniously shoved to the ground. Alone.

Cor picked up the shift from the dirty floor and tossed it on him. Lack winced as the wet cloth slapped his chest.

“That will teach you to flaunt yourself,” Cor said derisively.

Lack yanked the shift back on and scrambled back to his corner. He needed to think, to plan. It hadn't gone as he'd expected—not at all. Though what *had* he expected? For the man to fuck him and suddenly spill all his secrets? There were worse plans.

And it wasn't as if he had anything else in his arsenal, all alone in this cell. Only sex. His only currency and this man wasn't interested. No, Cor was interested. He just wanted... What had he said? A lover. Not a sacrifice. Lack had no idea what that meant. He'd spent his whole life training in the art of sex, but now he was finding there was so much he didn't know.

He kept his eyes on the ground for the next few hours, trying to think of how next to approach his enemy. Despite his anxiety over the task at hand, he was bored. He missed the chatter and music of the harem. Not that he expected Cor to fill such a role. He looked indisposed to anything fun.

Except for the hand job he'd just given Lack. That had been... well, fun. Also terrifying and mildly painful, but the most sensual experience he'd had in a long time. Maybe ever.

Watery beams of light appeared in the afternoon, highlighting the dust that floated in the air. Cor stood and rattled the bars, restless. When no one appeared, he sat back down. Finally dusk settled, bringing a cooling breath of air through the cell.

A shuffle of footsteps came from the stairs. Food. Water. Lack was starving for both of them. Dizzy with it. But his stomach clenched. If there'd been anything in his stomach, he would have emptied it. He hated the guards the worst. Even more so than the corpulent generals. The lowly soldiers were men of violence without extensive training to check their instincts. Men like Cor.

He felt Cor tense, though the large man didn't move from his position. Lack had no doubt he was keenly observant, that he would take any advantage that was opened to him. But the Ke'lan were too careful for that.

They were all smiles today, setting down the canteen and food rations by the wall. Where they would stay until Lack had performed. The taller one grinned and waved him over. Lack blinked, stalling for futile seconds. The grin slipped away.

The other one was stockier. Shorter and thicker everywhere, even his cock. He sneered, banging on the cell door with his baton.

“Come, boy.”

Lack pushed himself up and crossed the cell, feeling the weight of Cor's gaze. He wished Cor would not see this. A strange thought, since Lack's goal here was to debase himself. If anything, seeing the guards' use of him might finally spur Cor to use him as well. But his humiliation ratcheted higher.

“On your knees.”

Lack sank down, eyes lowered.

“Now beg.”

Practiced actions, practiced words. “Please, sir, may I service you?”

The rustling sound of belts undone and clothing pushed aside. In some ways their role was as practiced as his own.

“Go on.”

“I’m so hungry. So... so thirsty for your cock. Please may I have a drink?”

Soft chuckles met his question.

There was an erect cock directly in front of his face. He could see it through the bars. Clean enough, the tall soldier was. His cock was pink, its veins less visible than his comrade’s. The tip glistened golden with precum. The cock would be in his mouth soon, so why was Lack thinking instead about *Cor? Lovers. Not a sacrifice.*

“Come on, boy,” he beckoned. “Have a drink.”

CHAPTER TWO

Cor's stomach clenched, desperate for the rations the soldiers had brought with them. But the soldiers were being bastards again, using Lack. It was damned annoying. Not his business, of course, unless they tried to make *him* suck their cocks. Then they'd find out exactly how sharp Cor's teeth were.

Not Lack, though. He sucked on the taller soldier's cock, making slurping sounds that made Cor's own cock take notice. How good would that warm, agile mouth feel on his member? Heaven, he imagined. The soldier's expression was ecstasy. He grunted softly, thrusting into the head he held steady through the bars. A final, louder grunt and the man found his release.

Cor's empty stomach turned over. He felt aroused and... offended? It bothered him to see Lack used poorly even more than yesterday. He would have to be careful not to grow a conscience. More and more of his life was coming back to him.

Disjointed pieces, not enough for a full picture, but it was clear at least that he wasn't an upstanding citizen. He killed. He stole. And as of this morning, he held an unwilling body still and caressed it to climax. So much for morals.

The second soldier was meaner. He was taunting Lack, making him beg and other demeaning things. That was another thing that bothered Cor, how hollow Lack sounded when he said *How may I serve you?*

This was ridiculous. Cor needed to be concerned with a lot of things. Like the fact that he was a prisoner. That he didn't have his full memory back. That he was hungry and thirsty.

He did not need to concern himself with a weak young man. The soldier began slapping Lack's face with his erect cock. *Ignore it*, Cor told himself. He gritted his teeth. The soldier drew lines of precum of the younger man's cheek, laughing evilly.

Cor's whole body tensed involuntarily. He tried to rationalize it. This was a form of warfare. It was fighting. The same thing Cor did only this was with sex.

Then the soldier bent down. He spoke lowly but Cor could hear him clearly. “You’re nothing but a warm hole to us. And when we’re done with you, you won’t even be that. But I’ll still use you once more, for old time’s sake. We’ll leave your body for the birds with my cum cooling on you.”

Distantly, Cor saw the reactions. Lack flinched. The other soldier looked mildly scandalized. But Cor was already halfway across the cell, all the way to the door. He pushed Lack aside and grabbed the thick, grubby cock. The soldier squealed in pain, and Cor squeezed tighter.

“Let him go.” The taller soldier had a weapon pointed at Cor’s chest through the bars.

Cor narrowed his eyes at the man whose cock he held. “Your friend here is disgusting.”

“That may be so, but you’ll release him or you’ll die in that cell.”

A long moment passed. Cor imagined ripping the cock off this body. He would be killed to but in a way that would be a relief. Like he’d thought to do for Lack—a mercy killing. He wondered if Lack would also pay for this incident.

With a sigh, he released the soldier. The man stumbled back, grasping at his cock with both hands and whimpering steadily. He turned to the taller soldier.

“Give me the food,” Cor ground out.

The weapon lowered slightly. He seemed to be unsure... but hell, there were two inch iron bars between them. Even Cor wasn’t that strong. Finally he set down his weapon and handed a canteen and canvas bag out. Cor snatched them and looked inside. A few lumps of stale bread. Some cheese. He shook the canteen. A goodly amount of water, at least.

The taller soldier wasn’t particularly gentle as he pushed his friend up the stairs. When they were gone, their sounds faded from the stairwell, he took a hearty swig of the water. Then he handed the canteen to a wide-eyed Lack.

“Drink,” he said gruffly.

He took the larger piece of bread for himself, then passed the other piece of bread and part of the cheese to Lack. Lack reached out gingerly, as if he

expected Cor to change his mind, as if maybe Cor would eat it all and let the boy starve. Now there was an idea. Still he'd already decided not to kill the boy, today anyway. That meant he'd have to stay fed.

The meager rations did illuminate things. He needed to get the hell out of here. But how could he do that? The soldiers came two at a time, heavily armed. And they were very cautious around him, the last incident notwithstanding. They would be even more cautious now.

He needed a distraction, an opening. He needed a weapon. He glanced sideways at Lack. And all he had was a cowed young man. His only possible use in a fight was as a human shield, his lithe body too small to even be used as a human shield. Pathetic... and intriguing.

How had he survived in this harsh environment? Cor might be an enemy of the Ke'lan but he was built the same. Tough. Cruel. But Lack was not cruel, though thinking back on how he'd accepted abuse from the soldiers, perhaps he was tougher than Cor had given him credit for. And besides, the sexual appeal he wielded was a type of weapon. The same thing that made him a target gave him power over the men around him.

Lack shivered. He supposed this was the closest he could come to contentment in his current situation. His stomach was not full but neither was it empty. No guards harassed him.

Not since his cellmate had practically twisted the balls off one of them.

He supposed there would be retribution for that, but no worry quickened his pulse. His eyes didn't dart into the shadows, his ears didn't strain for a whisper of their return. As stupid as it surely was, he felt safe around Cor.

Which gave a different meaning entirely to the job he'd been sent here for.

The Admiral had been very clear on his instructions. He was to ingratiate himself with the assassin and learn his target. Ingratiate himself with sex, he meant.

"Why don't you just kill him?" Lack had asked. He normally wasn't one to talk but he didn't relish the idea of being placed in a cage with a trained killer. And it just made sense to him. If they had him prisoner, he could do no harm to them.

“Because they’ll just send someone else,” the Admiral answered, his jowls quivering against his neck. He lay on the gray sheets, his turgid body exposed. Pale skin sprinkled with silver hair. “If we know who they’re targeting, we can protect them.”

Lack’s head lay on the man’s thigh, while the Admiral stroked his hair. He was kindest after he’d come. His cock lay limp on his other leg. Lack’s mouth was thick with the old, salty flavor, but at least he wasn’t being beaten. His legs were curled up to his chest. The Admiral batted them apart, grabbing hold of Lack’s semi-erect cock.

“What is this? You want to play too?”

Humiliation heated Lack’s face. He’d always responded to the sexual stimuli around him. It didn’t matter whether he enjoyed it.

The Admiral stroked his cock in his beefy fingers. Steady at first, and then nothing. Lack pumped into his hand, whimpering softly. The hand lifted.

“Get yourself off, boy.”

Tears leaking from his eyes, he reached down and jerked himself quickly. In a matter of minutes, he was spurting over his hand and the sheets. The Admiral laughed, looking down at his own cock, now erect from having watched.

“Looks like you’re not finished here after all. You’ll suck me one more time before you go into the cell. And you’d better get the answers I’m looking for, boy, or I’ll send you into the barracks to service the guards. I doubt you’d make it out alive.”

The Admiral put his hand behind Lack’s head and directed his mouth to the sticky cock.

In the present, Lack sneaked a glance at his cellmate. In a way, he and the Admiral were opposites. While Lack had been willing to give him a show and to service him, Cor had insisted on jerking Lack off. Cor had given pleasure, of a sort, and taken none in return.

As twilight fell over them, Lack began to shiver, discomfited by the utter black of night. Finally, he drifted off into an uncomfortable sleep. He woke with a start, as if he’d heard something. When he listened, only the soft sound

of birds wafted in from the small barred window outside the cell. They never made sounds during the daytime, as if they knew better than to attract the attention of the Ke'lan. Smart animals.

A whimper came from the corner, startling Lack. He peered into the darkness, making out the large shape of Cor's body huddled against the wall. Cor whimpered again and jerked, but he was clearly in a dream. Lack shouldn't wake him. He should mind his own business.

But that was the problem. His business was getting to know Cor. The man put up a cold, dangerous front during his waking hours. Maybe he would be softer during sleep. Besides, Lack wouldn't mind the company. He hated the dark.

Lack crept over to him, wincing slightly at the moan Cor emitted. The hair on Lack's arms raised, some animal side of him recognizing suffering. The sound of danger, a sign that he should get away. But the true danger lay outside these bars so he scooted closer, placing his hand on Cor's arm.

With a roar, Cor lunged, shoving his forearm to Lack's throat. The crumbling wall ground against the back of his neck but the pain was nothing compared to the burn in his lungs as he struggled to breathe. His arms clawed uselessly at the immovable bar blocking his air. Cor's eyes were wild and distant. He was still lost to the dream world while Lack was running out of time in this one.

Desperate, Lack forced his remaining strength into a blow to the side of Cor's head. Cor blinked. His cat-like eyes cleared of their nightmarish haze... and then widened. He abruptly leaned back, and Lack fell to the ground, coughing and wheezing.

"What were you doing?" Cor demanded roughly.

Lack shuddered where he knelt on the floor. He'd caught his breath, but his body was still cramping. A large hand came to rest on his back. His body tensed, braced for another attack. But the hand only stroked gently from the top of his spine down the length of his back. His muscles calmed by degrees. After a few stuttering coughs, Lack fell back against the wall. His movement forced the hand that had caressed him away and for a moment he regretted the loss.

Lack's voice was still hoarse. "You were dreaming."

"I remember something. A task. A mission." Cor's expression turned dark. Not angry. Almost sad. "That's all. I can't remember the rest."

He couldn't remember his past or his dreams. How terrifying that must feel, like being adrift with only the waves to keep him company. Lack had no one to rely on, but at least his memories kept him warm. Memories of laughter and sexual play. Of friendship.

"It will come back to you," Lack said, though he didn't know if it was true or why Cor's memories had left in the first place.

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Thank you for waking me. I'm sorry I almost killed you."

"Of course." Lack paused uncertainly. He felt ashamed that he'd even considered leaving Cor in his nightmare. Hadn't Lack wanted friendship? Well, he would have to practice it, apparently. It had come naturally to Cor, when he'd protected him earlier. Even setting the Admiral aside, Lack owed this man.

"I can sit with you," Lack offered. He expected to be rebuffed like his sexual advance had been.

Cor considered him with a guarded expression. "I suppose if we are to share a cell, it wouldn't hurt to become more intimate."

Lack felt his eyebrows rise. "Yes, of course," he said faintly.

But Cor merely sat beside him, his legs bent in front of him. After a moment, Lack crossed his own legs, reminded of how he had explored the palace of his youth, where even the slave children were given the freedom to roam. They were serenaded by the quiet sounds of their own breaths and the night birds outside. The urge to prod at Cor's memory rose up in him... and then faded away, like a shape seen in a cloud that could not be found on a second glance.

"How did you come here?" Cor asked.

"I was a pleasure slave in the lands known here as Carpathia. My master's home was raided... all the jewels and things of value were stolen. As was I."

“The Ke’lan do not keep pleasure slaves.”

“I suppose they’ve made an exception. Just my luck,” he said dryly, even though it probably was lucky. He closed his eyes in remembrance. Other servants were slaughtered in front of him. Men and women he’d grown up beside cut down because they served the wrong man. And Lack, kept alive because he knew his way around a cock.

“A hard life,” Cor said evenly.

“It’s different there,” Lack said, his voice low. “Pleasure slaves are respected for what we can do. We are given room to play. It’s deeply ingrained in the culture. Here I’m just...” He was just an animal. A warm, wet place for a man to release.

A tool for extracting information from amnesiac assassins.

Cor turned his head. “You miss it, then.”

He swallowed. “The palace was destroyed, its owners killed.” *Assassinated*, something whispered inside him. “I enjoyed my time there but it was the past. It no longer exists.”

“Then we have that in common,” Cor said. “My past no longer exists also. Although that is mostly in my mind.”

“You have no memories at all? How you came here or what happened before?”

“What I do recall is drinking in pubs. Living alone. Nothing to miss or feel nostalgia for. I don’t know how I came to be here.”

But Lack knew how. *You tried to kill a high-ranking Ke’lan official and were caught. Once you tell me who it was, you’ll mostly likely be executed and I’ll go back to serving blowjobs at the military planning meetings.*

How depressing.

CHAPTER THREE

Cor tried to ignore the chill in the cell. It wasn't much colder than during the day—the climate was temperate these days. Always cool and dry no matter the season or the time of day. Besides, he knew this cold came from within.

The dream had rattled him more than he'd care to admit. A fight, a mission. There'd been a moment, as he snapped back to the waking, that he'd thought he was in battle. Lack had been a fallen soldier, crying out for him, dying in his arms. Kind of creepy, when he thought about it. So he tried not to think about it. Lack was a decent distraction with his warm presence and soft voice.

It was a pleasant way to pass the time. More pleasant than sitting alone at the bar would have been, more pleasant than a drunken fight spilling into the street. Would it be more pleasant than a detour behind the pub with another man? Considering Lack had been a sex slave, he assumed so. Strange, to find more pleasure in confinement than freedom.

“What did you do for work?” Lack asked. He added hastily, “If you recall.”

Mostly illegal smuggling. Cor had never felt ashamed of that, but for some reason he didn't want Lack to know. “Transport,” he said curtly.

This answer seemed to puzzle Lack. “Hmm. You weren't in the resistance?”

“No. Never. “He'd done work for them, but that was unavoidable. Anyone who wasn't Ke'lan was considered resistance these days, anyway. But he'd always kept himself clean. Move the goods, get paid, and get out.

That face again. It swam in front of his eyes, wavery and ghost-like. He still couldn't place it.

“Perhaps your family's lands were taken by the Ke'lan?” Lack asked.

“My family was gypsy. They had no land.” Now that was a lie. He couldn't remember his family at all, but he found the gypsy thing worked better for warding off questions. In the beginning, men would rag on him for his lack of roots. That was before the Ke'lan had taken all the land, making everyone a drifter just like him.

Lack was insistent. “There must be some reason for you to be angry with the Ke’lan.”

“I am angry with the Ke’lan. They’re keeping me in this cell.”

“And you’re not curious about why they’re doing that?”

Cor shrugged. “I find curiosity to be a waste of time. When there’s an opportunity to escape, I’ll take it.”

“I see.”

“Don’t worry. I probably won’t leave you here.” Unless that figured into his escape plans.

Lack frowned, seemingly displeased with the idea of freedom. “Do you really think escape is possible? How would that even happen?”

“I find guessing to be—”

“A waste of time,” Lack finished for him.

Cor felt a smile tug at his lips. If he were forced into captivity with a stranger, he could have done worse. Lack was sexy, all right. Fun to look at. He also knew how to carry on a conversation when he wasn’t trembling with fear like a rabbit. Unfortunately, Cor had a tendency of scaring people, but he’d try to restrain himself for now. Just to make the time pass more comfortably with his cellmate.

“Are you tired?” Cor asked.

“Not really. Why?”

Because now he could do this. He put a hand behind Lack’s neck and pulled him close. Cor’s lips were already parted, his tongue ready for the kiss. Lack kept his lips together. At first Cor thought he was resisting and he was ready to pull back. But then he realized that Lack *was* kissing him back, even though his mouth closed.

Cor was experienced. Counting all his partners? Made his head hurt. But they usually skipped kissing altogether. And when they did kiss, it was with lips and tongue and even teeth all mashed together, their mouths fucking along with their lower halves. But hey, Lack was the expert, right? A bonafide pleasure slave, at his service. So maybe Cor could try something new. And

yeah, there was something about this. Not outright stimulation but something... sweeter. He felt every contour of the smaller man's lips, felt the soft puff of his breath against his face. His taste was only a hint, making him hungry for more.

Eyes closed felt like some sort of dream—a soft, plush place where Cor had never been. But eyes open was a game changer. He met Lack's gaze. Wide eyes, long lashes. Soul deep. Cor felt his own eyes widen. He broke the kiss and wrenched his head away.

“Gods,” he said, panting lightly. “You got lessons on how to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Kiss.”

“Yes,” Lack said seriously.

Well, shit. His whole chest felt hollowed out and raw. As if he'd been carved up, spilling his guts onto the floor. A messy picture. He should probably avoid this pleasure slave. Wasn't nothing his hand couldn't do if the hard-on didn't subside in a few minutes.

But he found himself reaching for Lack again, pulling him close by his neck. Lack responded with the same gentle, nibbling kisses. Impatient, Cor pressed his tongue inside, exploring the unique flavor of this man and imagining his cock making a return trek here later. Lack was well schooled in this more carnal type of kissing as well. He accepted Cor's invasion with eager surrender, offering placating caresses with his tongue and soft moans that vibrated the wet slide between them.

He put his hand on Lack's thigh, as he shivered in his arms. Cor wondered whether he minded the touch. Was he as bad as the guards who mauled him? Did Cor even care? He had stopped being the kind of man who did the right thing a long time ago. He'd never been that man, in all the time he could remember.

“Say no if you don't want this,” he muttered.

Lack shivered again.

“I won't beat you if you ask me stop.” One of the few promises he could make.

“No, I—” Lack paused, and disappointment filled Cor. One sip of heaven and it was over. But Lack said, “I’m thankful for what you did. I want to... to please you.”

Cor paused. Gratitude wasn’t the same thing as lust, as mutual attraction. Neither was it as bad as coercion. The middle ground, a gray area. Cor could live with that. He pressed their lips together before working his mouth downward, along the smooth jaw, down the soft skin of his neck. Meanwhile his hands worked their way from the bottom, sliding up along Lack’s legs and beneath his shift. Lack’s legs fell open, giving him permission to explore.

Cor pushed the fabric to his waist, feasting his eyes on the erect cock beneath. At least Lack’s body would find pleasure in this. And what a body it was.

It fascinated Cor. The smooth velvet encasing his cock. He was used to cocks more like his own, thick and veined, dark-skinned. Slightly bent when erect. But this was a pale ivory, almost the same as the skin on his thighs. And though rather small—especially compared to Cor’s own—it was perfectly circular, a uniform width down to where it flared at the head. Cor explored every crevice with his hands and his gaze. The skin did change color at the head, an enticing pink. Cor’s mouth watered. *Not yet.*

His fingers looked impossibly thick against the cock he held, as if he were some sort of freak, a monster. He glanced up at Lack’s face to see if he minded. Lack’s eyes were unfocused, his mouth open. The picture of lust. Cor would have accepted boredom, so this was a bonus.

He gave himself permission to explore lower. The sack was a tan color, closer to the skin of Lack’s fingers. It burned hot in his palm when he rolled the balls gently. Then lower, to the tight pucker beneath. Lack tensed but he curled his hips up, giving Cor more access.

“You get fucked here?” Cor asked, even though it was a stupid question. Of course he got fucked there.

“Yeah, yeah,” Lack murmured, although Cor wasn’t even sure he’d heard the question. The words sounded more like a chant of pleasure, of wanting. That was good. Arousal would help ease the way.

“I don’t have any grease.”

“Just spit,” Lack gasped. “It’s okay.”

He still wasn’t sure about that, but the idea had merit. He allowed a portion of saliva to gather, then opened his mouth over Lack’s cock. Saliva dripped from his mouth onto the pretty cock. Cor used it to as lubrication, stroking more forcefully. Lack threw his head back and gasped.

“Please. Please.”

“What are you asking for, little slave?”

“So good. Please, master.”

“I’m not your master. And I don’t know what you want unless you tell me.”

He moaned. “Can I come? Please?”

“No way. We’re just getting started. I like the begging, though. You can keep that up.”

He dribbled more spit onto Lack’s cock, working it down over his balls and pushing some into the crack. He slipped his forefinger into the hole, measuring the resistance. Gods, that was tight. It would feel so damn good. No, he decided. He wouldn’t fuck this ass tonight. As randy as he felt, he was liable to tear something.

Cor stood and removed his pants, sighing in relief as his cock sprang free. Lack stared at the bobbing member and licked his lips, his pink tongue darting out over a plump lower lip. Cor groaned.

“Show me how thankful you are.”

Thankfully, Lack knew exactly what he meant. He knelt in front of Cor and took his cock in hand. His mouth followed, and Cor’s cock was engulfed in hot, wet heat. His tongue was the most skillful Cor had ever encountered, more amazing than Cor could have imagined. He was lost in a miasma of pleasure, fighting to hold it in.

“Hands behind your back.”

Lack obeyed readily. Cor liked the way it thrust his chest out, and he couldn’t resist tweaking the small nipples. Then pinching... twisting. He was a

bit of a bastard. The men he slept with figured that out pretty quickly. They selected him for that reason. Something held him back with Lack. Maybe a concern about consent, a lingering worry that the man wasn't a willing participant even though his talented tongue and firm cock spoke otherwise. Or maybe Cor didn't really want to see the pain in his face, knowing he'd suffered already.

So he dug his nails into the pebbled brown skin until Lack winced, and then he let go. Again and again, a rhythmic tug until Lack's hips jerked in tune. The pleasure slave was well versed in pain.

"Hold still," Cor ground out.

Lack stopped moving, his cheeks still hollowed out around Cor's cock. Cor grasped the back of Lack's head and pushed in. Then pulled out. In again and then out. Deeper each time, faster every thrust, until he was fucking Lack's mouth like the smoothest of asses. Yeah, this was what he'd needed. To fuck something, to just let go for a little while. He pushed deeper and Lack gagged.

A pleasure slave with a gag reflex? Cor raised an eyebrow.

Lack looked apologetic, at least it seemed that way. He tried to say something, too, mumbling something that might have been *I'm sorry* but came out only as *mm fmmm*.

"Try harder," Cor said.

He pushed deep again, until Lack's nose touched his belly. Again and again. The third time Lack gagged again. Disgruntled, Cor released him. Lack lunged for him, trying to take him deep again. He wanted to take Cor's whole cock, but he couldn't. Well, that was okay. They'd just have to find a new position.

Cor lay down on his back, ignoring the cold concrete and pebbles beneath. He patted his chest.

"Get on."

Lack looked at him suspiciously.

"Come on, little slave. Either you're on top or I am, and I weigh a hundred kilograms."

Lack scrambled onto him, slinging a knee over his chest. Cor pushed him off.

“The other way.”

With a bemused expression, Lack sat on Cor’s chest again, this time facing Cor’s feet. Really, for someone with professional training he seemed a bit innocent at times. Cor grabbed his legs and dragged them up around his shoulders. A little maneuvering and he slipped Lack’s cock into his mouth. His eyes fell shut at the first taste. Smooth, salty. Sweet.

Cor sucked the cock in his mouth and used his hands to hold Lack’s legs down, to caress his balls. Lack gave soft, hoarse cries from above him. Between the angle and the comfortable size of Lack’s cock, it slid all the way inside his mouth, bottoming out at the base.

He pulled away long enough to order, “Suck my cock.”

Lack scrambled to obey. He bent across Cor’s chest and took the cock in his mouth. They were bound together that way, Cor’s mouth on Lack’s cock and Lack’s mouth on his. A strong suck provoked a deep moan, and the vibrations of that sound delivered pleasure to the cock it surrounded. Neither of them worked in that old rhythm. They just pleased one another and took pleasure in their tasks. Time stretched. Minutes, hours. It all fused together in one sensation-soaked night.

Finally Cor held back no longer. The taste was too good, the feel of Lack’s mouth too enticing. He gripped Lack’s thighs and pulled him down tight. With a low grunt, muffled by Lack’s cock, he came. The orgasm, too, was endless. A burst of lights and a falling of stars, a peak, and a tumble into the inky black depths. His cock still twitched in the aftermath when he slipped his finger in Lack’s ass, finding the small nub that would give him release. Lack sobbed quietly around Cor’s softening member as he spurted a watery ejaculate into Cor’s mouth. Cor drank it down, licking up the excess from around the head.

They took their time cleaning off their cocks, licking and suckling with leisure as their breathing and cocks returned to normal. Finally Lack slumped over Cor’s body, exhausted and sated. His breathing was even, his weight rather heavy for a small man. Cor stared up at the pale curves and puckered

balls that rested on his chest and realized Lack had fallen asleep. On top of him. His ass facing Cor's face.

What an intimate and vulnerable position to be asleep in. And somehow, it pleased him. A little strange, sure, but it showed how much Lack trusted him. How thoroughly he'd been pleased and worn out. Besides, the warm weight was kind of like a blanket, and there were no other blankets in the cell. Cor closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Lack was in the courtyard. McKenna and Rory stopped to kiss in an alcove, their hands roaming, bodies writhing together in the shadows.

"Come on," Lack called. "McKenna, you just came in my mouth a few moments ago."

McKenna pulled away long enough to laugh. "I'm not trying to come, Lack. Just messing around."

Lack snorted. Oh, he'd come again. So would Rory. What else was there to do, anyway? He watched them for a moment, his cock growing heavy at the sight. But inside he felt hollow.

"I'm going back to my room," he called.

Rory flicked him a dirty hand sign, presumably for not joining in. Lack returned the sign, but they were too engrossed to notice. He headed down the dirt path, thinking of a warmed bath and a nap before the night's festivities.

Sunlight streamed through the leaves, dappling the flowers that bordered the walkway. Birds were singing. That was strange. He didn't remember that particular call from the birds around here.

Time slowed as he heard a scream. He ran back the way he'd come. The alcove where McKenna and Rory had been was now empty. But he found them soon enough, lying on the path to the palace, bloody and gasping.

Rory's eyes were glazed with pain and shock. Lack knelt beside him, shaking.

"Run," Rory gasped. "Run!"

Lack stumbled back, his hands sticky with blood. He ran. Away from the palace, toward the annex where the pleasure slaves lived. There was nowhere

else to go. If there had been more warning, he could have taken the boats. The caves were hidden, impenetrable, and well-stocked. They were heaven, if only they'd had the time.

His small room contained only a sleeping mat and the chest with his clothing. He squeezed his body between the silks and, holding his breath, lowered the lid.

Darkness. Complete darkness that sucked all the air from his lungs. He was going to suffocate. He put his face against a beaded veil and panted, wishing he could pass out. His heart pounded in his ears for what felt like an eternity.

He tensed as he heard the sound of booted feet on the floor. The lid was lifted. Light spilled over him. A face blackened with dried mud leered down at him.

“Look at this, boys. A real treasure.”

Rough hands pulled him out. They pushed him to the ground. They invaded him, they violated him, and for the first time, Lack learned that sex could be a form of torture. But even under the weight of degradation, he felt relief to be in the light again.

He woke up, gasping. His eyes slowly cleared of the images of his old home and the pain of his last days there. He was in Ke'lan territory now. A Ke'lan slave now. And he was in a cell, with Cor. Morning again.

Cor slept on, unaware of Lack's disturbing dream. A sleepy snuffling sound came from him, incongruous on such a large and fierce man. Everything had changed yesterday. When Cor had defended him, he'd bound them together. Lack owed him loyalty, though he wasn't sure how he could ever repay it. And their sex had only strengthened the strange connection.

The sound of booted feet came from the stairs. Cor scrambled to sit up, wiping the sleep from his eyes. Their guards had returned. Lack tensed. Would they deliver retribution for what Cor had done to them? The guard who'd been attacked glared at Cor, clearly well recovered.

“Come on.” The other guard held open the door and gestured to Lack.

Lack spared a quick glance to Cor before scrambling to obey.

“Where are you taking him?” Cor asked. He stood but remained in the corner, rightfully wary of the weapon pointed at chest.

The guards ignored him and dragged Lack away.

Cor shouted after them. "If you touch him again, you'll answer to me."

An empty threat, but it lightened Lack's heart. He had a friend. A protector. And from such an unlikely source. Whether they were truly concerned about Cor's threat or whether it was just too early in the morning, they dragged Lack through the hallways without incident. Their grip was too tight, their pace a bit fast considering Lack had subsisted on crusts of bread for the past few weeks. But they didn't touch him anywhere but his arms.

The Admiral stood when Lack was tossed into the room. He approached, wearing an expectant expression. "So, have you found out who he was after?"

Lack's stomach hollowed out. So much for making a new friend and protector. Now he was the disloyal one. "No, sir."

"Do you at least know who he was working for?"

"No, sir."

"Well, what did you find out?"

"He hasn't told me much, sir. Just that he's lost his memory."

The Admiral looked annoyed. "You've had days, boy. Or didn't I explain how important this was to your health?"

Fear panged alongside the guilt. "I'm sorry, sir. He told me he's lost his memory."

"A lie. He told us the same thing. That's why I sent you in there."

"I tried to get him to... to open up. To trust me."

A bushy eyebrow rose. "Did he fuck you?"

"Uh, not exactly. I mean, we... I used my mouth."

He smirked. "I bet you did."

Anger flared in him. Wasn't that what he'd been told to do? Trained to do? So why did he feel ashamed? Maybe because for once he'd enjoyed it. Their encounter had felt unlike anything in his wide expanse of experience. Not lighthearted play... not dutiful application... not suffering forbearance. This had been something else. Something mutual.

“I don’t know how to make him tell me anything.”

“I suggest you figure it out quickly, son. I’ve already had a request from a soldier who wants to purchase you instead of sharing you with the group. You have one more night.”

Fear knotted his stomach. He could guess who had made such a request. Yes, retribution would come. It would be painful... and lethal. The guard leered at Lack as he was escorted back to the cell. His animosity was as strong as ever, yet he made no attempt to touch him. To hurt him. Was he really so wary of Cor, even though the man was locked up? Then again, all the guard really needed was patience. Once Lack failed, he could buy the right to punish him. To kill him.

So Lack shouldn’t fail. Yet he couldn’t succeed either. How could he convince Cor to tell him his deepest, darkest secrets—ones that would get him killed? Especially considering Cor might not even remember them. It was an impossible task.

And even if Cor confided in him, how could Lack rat on him, knowing it would lead to Cor’s immediate execution? Cor was coarse and crude. He was the only man who’d ever treated Lack like a human being.

Cor was pacing the cell when the guards shoved Lack down the last few steps. He stumbled and fell before they dragged him the rest of the way. Cor had retreated to the corner again, by now aware it would be demanded under threat of a weapon before the gate would be opened. However, the rumbling growl that resonated throughout the chamber made it clear how he felt about that.

As soon as the guards retreated again, he picked Lack up like he was a doll. A quick inspection proved he hadn’t broken any limbs. A smile threatened to break Lack free from his worries. It felt good to be worried over, even if the hands doing so were rough and harsh. Especially when the hands were rough and harsh. Cor’s hands.

“Did they hurt you?”

“No.”

“Did they touch you?”

“No. Not like that.”

Cor growled again. “I’m sick and tired of these fucking games they’re playing. The fucking Ke’lan think they own everything.”

As far as Lack could tell, the Ke’lan did own everything, but he kept that to himself. “Maybe... if you tell them what they want to know.”

Cor grunted. “I can’t even remember how I got here. What information could I have?”

He still felt torn about giving information to the Ke’lan, about betraying Cor, but he had to at least try and live. Survival was all he knew. Besides, he was curious. They couldn’t remain in this stalemate forever. If Cor could remember something, maybe it could help them both find a way out of this.

“Try to think. What’s the last thing you remember?”

Cor seemed thoughtful. “A mission. It sounds stupid.”

A mission could be the assassination he was supposed to do. “Maybe you already tried?” he suggested.

Tried and failed. And was captured instead.

Cor frowned. “I’m not sure. It feels more like a compulsion. Something important I need to do.”

He was definitely touched in the head if he thought he’d get a chance to kill a Ke’lan official while being held prisoner in their cell. “Can you remember anything else, like someone you knew before the mission?” *Like a rebel commander who gave you a suicide mission?*

“No.” A cloud passed over Cor’s face.

Unexpected tension spiked through Lack. Something like fear. What if he remembered? What would happen to them then?

“Thinking about the past may tax you,” Lack said gently. “Try not to think about it anymore today.”

“Tell me something about you.”

He was nothing. A coward. A weakling. “I’m... I’m afraid of the dark.”

“I’m here with you. Close your eyes. Just feel me.”

Lack obeyed, letting his eyes fall shut.

Cor covered him with his body, touching him everywhere so that Lack's mind was consumed with the sensation of rough fingers and a heavy, warm body. Wrapped him up in a smaller, tighter cage where Lack didn't need to break free, because he was safe.

A gilded cage was nice and all, but all he'd ever wanted was a tight one. Cor obliged him with a natural, easy possession. He arranged Lack's limbs spread eagle on the concrete. He explored him, every nook and shadow, with crude hands and a hungry gaze.

Cor trailed his sandpaper fingertips over Lack's calves, stroking upward along his thighs. He tensed, eager for contact, but Cor was cruel and cold as he looked, bypassing Lack's cock in favor of his abs, his chest. Cor's body followed his touch, and he straddled Lack's chest. The head of his cock nudged Lack's lips. He dutifully opened, accepting the invitation of service.

As he sucked, he looked up into Cor's eyes. Black brown eyes. A hard expression. No outward sign of the pleasure, no signal of impending rapture. Except for the sweat that beaded his tanned brow. Lack pointed his tongue at the slit of Cor's cock, desperate and eager to extract a little more.

Silver flashed in his eyes, light trapped in the dark. Cor pulled back, leaving Lack's mouth open and empty. He rolled onto his back, tugging Lack onto him.

“Ride me.”

Lack positioned himself but his body was tense, no give at all. He spit on his hand, working himself to ready. Luckily, a lifetime of spontaneous sex had prepared him for this. What a strange thought. All that training just so he could fuck a prisoner on the floor of a Ke'lan jail cell.

A sharp slap on the inside of his thigh. He gasped at the sting.

“I said ride me. If you wait any longer, I won't let you come.”

Lack's eyes widened. He positioned himself and sank down on the thick cock, wincing at the pain. Not enough to really hurt himself, just enough to burn. He pulled up again and pushed back down. He didn't know if Cor was

serious about not letting him come. They had played denial games, but everyone always got their pleasure in the end. He wasn't sure Cor was so egalitarian about orgasms.

Cor's eyes were slitted as he watched his cock disappear into Lack's body. Lack found a smooth and fast rhythm. His mouth fell open at the exquisite friction. Cor adjusted Lack's hips, hitting a certain point deep inside him. Acute pleasure vibrated through him to the tip of his cock.

As if he knew that, Cor grabbed Lack's cock, prolonging the ache.

Lack shuddered. "I'm going to..."

"Yes. Do it."

A few more thrusts and he was coming, spilling over Cor's hand and abs. His body began to slow, growing uncoordinated. Cor gripped his thigh, holding him down as he fucked up into him. With his other hand, he scooped up the come on his abs and forced three fingers into Lack's mouth. Moaning, Lack sucked off his own ejaculate as Cor spurted deep inside his body.

When Cor's face smoothed out in the aftermath, Lack fell to the side. He scooted up against Cor, a little uncertain. Cor opened his arm and gathered him close. Lack sighed and closed his eyes in pleasure.

Booted steps shattered the fragile peace. Cor stood, and Lack scrambled up beside him. They held food and water again. Tension weighted down the air... after what happened last time. Would they make Lack fuck for his food? Would Cor let them?

One of them threw the canteen of water inside. It rolled to Cor's feet. He didn't move. The meaner guard held up the bag of food and swung it, taunting.

"Do you want this?"

The other guard sighed. "Not again."

"Shut up, Joseph. What can they do from inside there?"

"You were limping for two days."

The mean one sneered. "So why the hell should I give them this?"

"Orders," Joseph reminded him.

“Fine.” He threw the sack inside, hitting Cor square in the chest. Cor still didn’t move as it fell to the floor beside the canteen. The guard snickered. “Have fun, Corinth.”

They turned and headed up the stairs. As soon as they were out of sight, Cor stumbled back. Had they actually managed to hurt him?

“Oh fuck,” Cor groaned.

“What’s wrong?” Lack asked.

Cor put a hand to his head. “I remember. Gods, it hurts. But I remember.”

“What is it?”

He looked up. The expression on his face was shock... and devastation. It must be bad, whatever it was. Really bad.

“Tell me,” Lack murmured.

“I can’t.”

He almost vibrated with tension. A large man, a strong man. He could inflict so much pain. A flick of his hand and Lack would go flying across the cell. But he wouldn’t. Lack trusted him now. He gently pulled Cor’s hands into his own. Such a contrast, dark against pale, scarred against smooth.

“You might feel better if you tell me. Unburden yourself.”

And whatever he said, Lack wouldn’t share it with the Admiral. He already knew that. Had decided that at some earlier point without conscious thought. He couldn’t betray Cor.

Cor looked up. His eyes were haunted. Sadness and something else. Something strange. Understanding.

“It’s okay,” Cor said, as if he were comforting Lack. “I’ll make it okay.”

Confusion kept him silent. He searched Cor’s expression for a clue. Cor returned the gaze, looking him over as if he were memorizing Lack’s face. He brushed his knuckles over Lack’s cheek.

Suddenly Cor stood. He banged on the bars with his fists, shouting for the guards. “Come back, you bastards. You fuckers. Get back here.”

Lack’s heartbeat raced. What was happening?

Then it hit him. Cor was going to confess. Maybe not with remorse, but he would expose his identity with whatever rebel faction he was with. Maybe he'd even expose his target. Would they torture that information out of him? Either way, Cor would not survive the encounter. Lack had failed to retrieve the information and now Cor would die.

He grabbed Cor's arm. "Wait. Don't do this."

Cor gave him a strange look. Then he brushed him off and yelled again. No matter how Lack begged and pleaded, Cor called until his voice was hoarse. The guards came down and took him away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cor stood at attention in the Admiral's office. He was still wearing the civilian pants along with a few days' worth of dirt and grime. Not like usual. Not his uniform neatly pressed. Not his boots. And he preferred to be clean shaven.

He disgusted himself, but it wasn't only his physical state. It was what he'd done. Exploited a prisoner. Fucked him under false pretenses—which was rape, almost. All under orders by the man in front of him.

“I won't do it,” Cor said.

The admiral turned back from the window. “What did you say to me, Sergeant Corinth?”

Now that his memory had returned, the weight of that day struck him full force. He'd received the orders to extract information from the prisoner. Normally he would use torture, deprivation, that sort of thing. But the admiral wanted the prisoner's body left intact. It wasn't hard to guess why. So they had settled on this plan, to gain his trust. Cor would stage a break out and Lack would lead them to the treasure.

“I said I won't use him that way.”

The admiral didn't yell or throw anything. He was calm. Contemplative. That disturbed Cor more than his temper would have. The admiral was not known for taking bad news well. Which meant he had a trump card.

“Would you care to elaborate on *why* you are aborting your mission and disobeying a direct order?”

Cor stifled a wince. He prided himself on his professionalism. His work ethic. And—something he had in common with Lack—his obedience, at least when it came to military matters.

“Lack isn't a soldier, sir. He's just a pleasure slave.”

The admiral smirked. “I know that. I've used his services enough to confirm his position. No soldier would be that well trained. Or that pretty.”

Rage tightened his gut. He forced it back, deep beneath the surface where it couldn't be used against him. Or against Lack.

Something else had surfaced with the full memory of his identity. He remembered the briefing before he was to go into the cell. The admiral had suggested he get roughed up, so as to appear more authentic. A few bruises, scuff marks that would prove he was a prisoner. He'd let Ames take a shot at him. Then another. And another, until Cor had ground his teeth against the desire to fight back. Finally, he'd fallen to the ground, losing his pride and his memory in the quest to be a good soldier.

This was why the Ke'lan liked to pick their academy recruits from the gutter kids. They were tough and desperate for even a gram of fucking approval. Knowing that hadn't kept Cor from falling for the same shit. But he saw it now, and he didn't want any part of it.

“Did you intend for me to lose my memory?”

“Not even I could have planned that. It did make things more... interesting. You were supposed to pretend to make nice with him, not actually do so. No matter, we can break him anyway.”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, adding “sir” as an afterthought.

The admiral's eyes bulged. “I don't need a reason, but if you insist... Because I can. Because I am the Ke'lan. Because I am strong and he is not. Because he is one of the few left alive after the raid of that palace and he knows something.”

“What if he doesn't?” Cor asked quietly.

The admiral shrugged. “Then he dies. He's a good fuck, but the upper levels want blood. The raid was an embarrassment.”

The fucking raid. What was the excuse for it again? He couldn't even remember. They were encroaching on Ke'lan territory, but were they? They hadn't seemed like invaders, playing their goddamn lutes and fucking each other when Cor and the other soldiers barged in. No, Cor had been the invader.

“We returned with two ships full of treasure. Jewels and sculptures. Silks.”

“Where was the gold?” The admiral shed his aplomb. “That ship should have come back full of *gold*. Not fabric and a fucking pleasure slave.”

At least he was being honest now. “I won't help you do this.”

The admiral smiled a sickly smile. “Oh yes, you will.”

Lack paced the cell, walking the same tracks in the dust that Cor had made. Night had fallen. He despised the dark. He huddled in the corner that had been Cor’s, trying to soak up the residual heat from his body. He hadn’t realized how much Cor’s presence had made him feel safe. He dozed in fitful slumber, dreaming of gilded treasures and coarse, scarred skin.

Dawn broke none too soon. Lack stood at the gate, holding the iron bars in his hands, wishing he had the strength to rattle them like Cor had done. Cor, who still hadn’t been returned. What were they doing to him?

Heavy footsteps signaled the guards’ return. For once Lack felt anticipation. At least then he might find out what happened to Cor. He might be taken to him. Neither guard met his gaze. These men had no compunction beating him, using him sexually, but now they were shrouded by guilt. Whatever had happened to Cor, it must be very bad.

The mean one unlocked the gate and held it open. “Come on.”

“What have you done with him? Is he—?” Lack couldn’t say the word. *Alive.*

The taller one’s eyes were soft. “We’re taking you to him.”

They were the most gentle they had ever been for Lack, and it terrified him. They led him through the hallways, passing the one that would take him to the admiral’s bedroom. They continued down a long corridor. He squinted as the light above them flickered. The air felt heavy, somber, and laden with foreboding.

A large metal door was coated with rust—or some dark substance. Ames rapped on the door. The sound of shuffling came from inside and then the door creaked open.

Lack felt himself pushed inside. He stumbled at first, lost in the dark. He blinked, then gasped at what he saw.

Cor was there, strung up in the center of the room. Chains bolted him to the ceiling by manacles on his wrists. His body was covered in bruises, glistening

with blood and sweat. He looked up, eyes fierce. Ripped fabric was forced between his lips, serving as a gag.

They had treated him like an animal. Lack tried to go to him, but Ames held him back. His expression was impassive now, devoid of any of the sympathy Lack had glimpsed earlier.

The admiral strolled out of the shadows. He walked up to Cor and ran a hand over his sweaty brow in a parody of caring. He looked sharply at Lack. “I understand you’ve come to care for our mongrel.”

Anger surged inside him. Empty, pointless anger. He jerked against the hands that held him.

“Let him go.”

“Tell us where the gold is. We’ve searched the whole palace.”

The gold? They meant the caves. “It’s not mine,” he ground out.

“No, it’s not,” the admiral agreed pleasantly. Suddenly he snapped a blow to Cor’s temple. Cor’s whole body jerked in the manacles that held him up. He slumped down again.

The admiral strolled toward Lack. “You’re right about that, boy. It’s not yours. It’s mine.”

It was his master’s. He was given the codes for the caves for the same reason all of them knew it—so they could come and go as they pleased. The trust was implicit. None would take what didn’t belong to them.

The admiral swung back, striking Cor with an elbow to the chest. A cough and rattle of chains.

Then again, his master was dead now. And maybe there was a way Lack could use them... the caves were a cunning weapon all on their own. He’d have to be careful, making sure that he and Cor were not killed in the process. It was a risky plan... but the only one he had.

“Do not hurt him,” Lack said quietly. “I will take you to it.”

The admiral smiled.

The ship departed that very night. It was only a day's trip to the palace by sea, and the winds were favorable. They didn't bother with chains for Lack, rightfully assuming there was nowhere for him to go, no way for him to escape as the vessel raced along the open waters.

Cor was a different story. He wore the bruises they'd given him, as well as the chains they kept him in. He was dragged to the center of the ship and tied to the mast, his arms hugging the rough beam.

The admiral kept Lack busy that night in his quarters. When the admiral drifted off to sleep, his snores loud and regular, Lack peeked outside the door. No guard was stationed. He crept down the hallway and climbed the rope stairs that swayed gently in tune with the water beneath.

Lack glanced around the deck, finding no one. He suspected someone manned the lookout far above them, but he couldn't see anyone and the roar of the wind offered a modicum of privacy. He knelt by Cor's side, his heart sinking at the state of him. His body was soaked with sea spray. His bruises were purple and swelling. His wrists were bleeding from the chains.

The cloth that pried Cor's lips apart was blackened with blood. Lack gently pulled the cloth down. Cor stirred slowly. He looked up, his eyes glazed with delirium.

"I'm so sorry," Lack whispered.

Cor licked his lips. His mouth opened and closed. He was clearly struggling to speak after having been gagged for so long. After having been beaten.

His voice was hoarse, like gravel. "No. It's my fault."

Hot tears filled Lack's eyes. How had he ever thought this man was cold? He was hot, passion and loyalty, sexy and true. Like a mirage in that dark cell. Even now, the moon offered only a faint, pale light, but he felt safe with Lack.

"Listen to me," Cor said, finding his voice. "You can't give them what they want. They'll kill you after. Or just... just hurt you. You need to escape. Right now. This is your best chance."

"I can't leave you here with them."

“That’s not important. Lack, I’m serious. You need to go now and—”

“I wish I could untie you. It must hurt so much.” The weather, the chains. The beating. He traced a line of tanned skin around the bruises, landing at the waist of Cor’s pants. He met Cor’s gaze. “I can’t do that, but I am good for one thing.”

One and only one thing. Sometimes it sucked to be a pleasure slave, having only one function to serve in the world. Other times it sucked in the best possible way. His fingers made short work of Cor’s pants.

“What are you—”

Lack’s fingers closed around his cock. His eyes glazed over. He stuttered a breath. Cor’s member was still soft, sweetly so. He didn’t want to harden it with his hands first, knowing they were cold and less nimble now anyway, stiff and slippery from the damp ocean air. He bent his head and sucked the flesh into his mouth. Because Cor didn’t say no, and if he really didn’t want this, he would have.

Or maybe he wouldn’t have. He seemed a little dazed. A little lost. Lack wanted to ground him with this earthly pleasure. He wanted to feel grounded in the familiar act, to imbue it with all the words he couldn’t say. *I’m sorry you’re hurting. I’m sorry we’re going to die. I’m sorry, I’m sorry.*

An apology fuck with his tongue and his lips, only it felt more like gratitude. Like worship. Like kneeling at the altar of this man, this ship, of the strange and terrifying vortex that swirled around them, menacing and black.

Lack was a pleasure slave. Meaningless.

His only value was his looks and his use, like one of the silks he used to wear. But here he was, leading a whole ship of soldiers across the sea. A lodestone. It seemed important, but then a compass could do the same thing.

He was still an object.

Something to be seen and used. Cor looked at him through slitted eyes. He shuddered with the pleasure from Lack’s mouth. Seeing him, using him. Just like the others.

Until Cor murmured, “Let me. Stand up. Let me touch you.”

His hands were lashed to the mast of the boat, his wrists raw and bleeding, but he wanted Lack to use him anyway. To fuck himself in those hands that must be aching, and then he knew it was different. Cor saw him as a person. There was so much they didn't yet know about each other, but Lack wanted to give him pleasure and Cor wanted to give it back—and that made this different from any relationship he'd never known or seen before.

Lack locked his lips around Cor's cock, determined to help him ride out the storm on the wings of an orgasm. To soften the pain of his injuries and the harshness of his captivity through the blurring lens of pleasure.

A soft groan came from Cor, rumbling through his chest and to the muscular thighs beneath Lack's palms. He bobbed his head, sucking Cor's cock in deep before pulling back to tongue the tip. It was wholly erect now, hard, and pulsing in the vein underneath.

“Please,” Cor gasped. “I need... I need...”

Lack grasped Cor's balls, fondling them gently before reaching back and slipping his forefinger between the slick cheeks of his ass. He rubbed it gently, then more forcefully, sucking harder until Cor bucked and let out a strangled groan.

“Touch yourself,” Cor gasped.

Lack put his hand on his hard cock. It only took one flick, two, and then he was coming even before Cor had let go, at the very same time, because Lack let out a moan around Cor's flesh and Cor spilled hot seed into his mouth. Lack swallowed it down three times before his mouth was emptied and he could lick Cor's cock clean.

“What is this?” The admiral's booming voice came from across the deck.

Lack righted Cor's pants and scrambled back, heaving in the rain. “It was me, sir. I did it.”

Attracted by the admiral's shouts, the deck soon swarmed with soldiers. Some were in full uniform dress, thundering across the glistening deck, while others wore only their pants, clearly wakened from sleep.

The admiral gestured to his erstwhile guards. “Sergeants, hold him.”

They grabbed Lack's arms and dragged him away from Cor. Lack struggled, unable to feign obedience any longer.

"No," Lack shouted. "It was me. I was the one who... Punish me!"

His words were lost on the wind, his struggles feeble and impotent against the rigid arms that held him.

"Fifty lashes," the admiral announced.

"No," Lack shouted. "Why? I was the one who..."

"Shut up, Lack," Cor ground out. His voice was low, almost a growl, but Lack heard it.

A whip was produced, a thick handle with three long cords made of leather and barbs. The admiral had whipped Lack before, in the privacy of his bedroom, but nothing like this. Even that had hurt so much, but this would kill him.

"Please. No." Lack was pleading now. Crying, he realized.

The barbs glinted in the air, reflecting light off the droplets in the air before it landed in three red stripes on Cor's back. His body remained rigid on impact and then shuddered in the aftermath. The whip was pulled back before it struck again, crossing three more lines. The beating continued, opening skin and raising welts, while salty rainwater fell onto Lack's tongue. He was open mouthed in shock, wide-eyed in horror.

The admiral wandered over to Lack and slid his thumb into Lack's mouth.

"Suck," he said.

Lack wanted to bite down. But he had learned his lesson now. His disobedience would be taken out on Cor. He sucked.

The admiral grinned, keeping his thumb just inside Lack's mouth. "Don't worry, this wasn't just because of you. There are consequences for soldiers who disobey their commanding officers."

A chill ran through Lack, more acute than the rain could have done. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you know? Sergeant Corinth here was one of my best soldiers. I

recruited him myself. Pity it's come to this, but you know what they say. You can take the rat out of the street..."

The admiral wandered back to Cor, leaving Lack to struggle for breath. Cor was a Ke'lan soldier. How was that possible? The cold wind carried no answers, but the viciousness of his fellow soldiers was even more chilling. Why had he been in the cell with Lack? Any way he twisted the puzzle in his hands, it still looked like betrayal.

Lack clenched his teeth against the lingering flavor of Cor's cum and the admiral's skin. He closed his eyes but the slice of the whip still coursed through him. He lived each agonizing strike vicariously, feeling the lashes inside him. In the small, tender place that had trusted a man who had lied.

Cor struggled to remain conscious. He'd slipped in and out of fevered dreams the rest of the night. Land had been sighted early morning. Whatever happened, this would end today. Hopefully he'd at least be awake for it.

The ship groaned as it butted up against the anchor's lead. The next few meters were traveled in fits and starts as the heavy iron dragged along the shore before hooking onto something solid. The whole boat swayed slightly before settling into the gentle rhythm of the waves.

Ames untied Cor from the mast, making sure to knee him in the back before allowing him to stand on shaking legs. They didn't bother to tie his hands behind his back. It was clear he had no strength to do anything, and with ten armed soldiers in the landing party, no chance to succeed if he did.

Two boats carried them to shore. Cor sat between Ames and Joseph while the admiral sat opposite them, keeping a firm hand on Lack's nape. Lack refused to meet his gaze. The admiral's eyes gleamed with anticipation.

They were close. Even Cor could smell it after years of bounty hunting. They were supposed to be peacekeepers, the treasures they found a small recompense for their work. But he understood now that they had been nothing more than thieves. Violent, underhanded thieves. Powerful ones.

They stepped out into the shallow water. The soles of his feet slipped on the sharp rocks, tearing the skin and leaving ribbons of red behind them. Once

on the pebbled beach, Lack pointed up a steeply inclined cliff. It was basically pure rock dotted with the occasional resilient weed.

Their procession started up, headed by the admiral and Lack. Ames and Joseph dragged Cor between them, almost completely supporting his weight because damned if he could do it himself. The rest of the party fell back, slowly picking over the unstable ground.

Lack pulled to a stop beside a rockface. He pushed aside heavy brush, revealing a door. It was the same color as the rock and stained with the same moss as its surroundings. No one would have stumbled upon it here.

“Stand clear,” Lack murmured.

The men holding him shuffled back along with the procession of other soldiers. Only the admiral remained near Lack, perhaps worried he would try something. Most likely, he was damned excited to see what was behind that door.

Gold.

For Lack’s sake, Cor hoped it was gold. Otherwise the admiral was going to be pissed. And Cor wasn’t really in a good position to kill anyone. His breathing was labored, his vision occasionally blurring and then focusing again. But if it came to that, he’d give it his best shot. There were worse things he could do with his dwindling life.

The surface of the door was etched with an elaborate decoration of curls. Lack slipped his nimble fingers through the designs, like playing an instrument with no sound. Cor realized it was more than a sculpture, it was a locking mechanism.

A loud click came from the door. The whole frame seemed to shudder as some of the curls twisted in place.

Laughing, the admiral shoved Lack aside, right into Cor’s chest. The admiral pushed at the door, so lost in his eagerness that he didn’t see the glint of the swords before they thrust into his belly. A high gasp cut off abruptly. From behind him, Cor could see the bloody tips. How had he been stabbed... by a door? He must be delusional. Five blades jutted out from the door, forming a star, though only two made it through the admiral’s body.

A rumble came from above, and rocks began to rain down on their heads. He looked up to see boulders tumbling down the mountainside above them, ready to land on them. The soldiers holding him let him go and ran back. Gods. They'd never make it in time. They'd be crushed. He glanced back in time to see a large chunk of rock clock Ames in the head. He stumbled and fell. Joseph made it a few more steps before a rock slammed into his back.

Cor stumbled, reaching for Lack. He tried to cover him with his body, shielding him. But he was still weak. For once, Lack was stronger. He dragged Cor into the alcove of the door.

"No," Cor mumbled. However the hell the demon door worked, it was dangerous.

Ignoring him, Lack reached across the admiral's gurgling body and drew another design through the curls. This time the door swung open. Lack dragged Cor's body inside and slammed the door shut.

Cor fell clumsily to the ground, heaving dry, dusty breaths against the ground. He didn't know how long the avalanche would keep them at bay or how long the demon door would hold. Consciousness was fading fast. Who would protect Lack? He felt himself turned over.

Lack's face swam in front of him. He was laughing with a kind of jubilant relief. "We made it."

"Run," he gasped.

Sudden grief flickered in his eyes, startling and intense. The smile faded. "You're safe now."

His body lolled against the dirt, finding relief in the coolness of the rock at his back. He was burning up. He was falling down into the fiery pits, unable to keep his eyes open. Darkness claimed him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Cor woke up to a muted light, as if the lamp was strained through a glass of clear, clean water. Beneath him, he felt plush cushions and soft furs. Jewels and mirrors glittered from the walls. The last time he'd ever been this comfortable was... never.

He struggled to make sense of it. Was he dead? His whole body hurt like a motherfucker, so it didn't seem likely. Then again, what did he know about metaphysical shit?

Lack bustled into the room, bearing a tray. Colorful silks draped his body, and his hair shone like golden wheat. The broth smelled delicious, savory with a hint of spice.

So, probably dead.

Which he wasn't really too broken up about. What could he do about it, anyway? Except he was worried about Lack. The real Lack, not the fake dream one. Who would protect him now?

Dream Lack set down the tray and glanced over. "Ah, you're awake again," he said cheerfully.

"Have I woken before?" His voice was gravelly.

"Yes. Your memory appears to be spotty." Dream Lack looked thoughtful. "I wonder if you'll always be like that or if it will fade with time. I hope you don't decide I'm an enemy one of these days and strangle me."

Dream Lack laughed. It was fucking weird.

Cor narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "What's going on?"

"You're healing. And so am I, though I didn't have near as many injuries. But I guess we'll both be right as rain in a few revolutions."

"The admiral. The Ke'lan. That was all real, then?"

Now Lack narrowed his eyes. "You don't remember that either?"

"No, I do. I just wondered if maybe I'd... never mind. So what happened to them? How did you... how did *we* escape?"

“The door took care of them.”

“The door?”

“Yes. The message I entered was one of danger. That was why it didn’t open regularly. But once we got inside, we were safe. The avalanche continued into the night. The door is well covered, and even if they managed to get through it all, they’d never open the door.”

“They?”

“All the doors.” Lack gestured at the large room. “We’re in a series of caves. There are several exits, though each one is secret and requires a special trick to get in.”

“We are safe?” What a strange concept for a soldier. Even stranger for a boy who’d grown up on the streets of Ke’lan territory.

“Drink,” Lack said, lifting the cup of broth to his lips.

Cor obediently swallowed the warm liquid down. It was either that or panic. He couldn’t believe he was actually free of the Ke’lan. Refused to believe. Hope meant disappointment. Lack may have held the title of a slave, but Cor’s life had been one of servitude. There’d been no playful sexual pleasure to offset the wounds, no silks or jewels to pretty it up. Only boots and belts. Leather and metal forged to kill.

“We should get going.” He struggled to sit, wincing at the sharp pain in his head.

Lack rolled his eyes. “They’re not coming back.”

“You don’t know that.”

“They wouldn’t even find it again without my direction.”

“You can’t be sure. We have to leave now. Get to a safe distance.”

Lack stroked gently along Cor’s forearm. The gesture brought him up short. Lack’s smile was a little sad—and indulgent.

“How long do you think we’ve been in here?” Lack asked.

Cor rubbed his eyes, trying to remember. He glanced down, disconcerted to see the bruises on his legs had faded. His back hardly stung and they’d whipped it to shreds.

He cocked his head. How long *had* they been in here?

“A month,” Lack said softly. “They aren’t coming back. They won’t find us. We’re completely safe here.”

Cor shut his eyes, overwhelmed.

“We have enough supplies to last us some time,” Lack continued. “Clothing, food stores, and a natural spring with a well for water.”

It was a form of dying, this paradise. Like being reborn. He was still having a hard time believing it, but it sounded like they had more than enough time for him to come around.

Except there was a snake in this garden, something that could ruin everything. It would be so easy not to tell him. All he had to do was say nothing. They’d never go back to Ke’lan territory and Lack would never have to know.

Lack was humming a small tune, straightening the tangled bedclothes around Cor’s feet. And Cor couldn’t go through with it. His whole life he’d stolen what wasn’t his. Food when the shopkeepers weren’t looking. Then gold and land as a soldier. He wouldn’t also steal this.

He put his hand on Lack’s wrist to still him. “There’s something I have to tell you. I’m one of them. The Ke’lan.”

Lack gave him a droll look. “Yes, I figured that out, Sergeant Corinth.”

He frowned. “How did you know?”

“Your admiral was kind of enough to inform me. I’ve decided to forgive you for that. I know what it’s like to follow orders.”

Cor thought about that. And about the battles, the raids, the lives he’d taken. The metallic scent of blood and smell of fear and despair. He’d thought he’d found a place to belong in the Ke’lan. The most fucked up part was that he had. He’d grown up a thief and a bastard, so he’d fit right in.

“I’m not sure I can forgive myself.” He also wasn’t sure how to live without fighting.

Lack’s eyes brimmed with understanding. “There’s time to figure all that out too. But I’ll be with you.”

He ran his knuckles along Cor's rough, battle-scarred cheek, mirroring the caress that Cor had once given him. He was accepting him, the touch said, the same way Cor had accepted him back in the cell. Cor sighed, letting his eyes fall shut.

“Are you sure you're ready?” Lack asked. He'd seen Cor pause in pain just two days ago when lifting something and he just didn't know if—

“I'm fine,” Cor murmured, continuing his exploration of Lack's collarbone. He drew lines with his tongue, teased with his teeth.

Lack's body responded with sudden and intense heat, having gone so damn long without relief. He'd rubbed quick ones out behind the privacy screen when Cor was sleeping. At first Cor had slept a lot, his body still healing. Now, though, he was healthy. Restless. And, apparently, horny.

“We can wait,” Lack gasped as Cor's hands roamed lower. “I can... I can service you.”

A low growl emanated from Cor's chest. “Will you strip for me? Will you take me in your mouth and not come yourself? Because we're both stuck in here, so we might as well be friends. Isn't that what you told me that first day in the cell?”

His heart clenched. “Don't be angry. I never meant to...”

He'd never meant to hurt Cor. Only Cor had gotten hurt and it was all his fault.

Cor's eyes softened. Not with emotion or anything sappy. They just got less angry, the ice thawing just a little. “I'm not blaming you for what they made you do,” he said. “But this was never what I wanted. Not then and not now. I want your participation or nothing. I want you—” He grasped Lack's cock in a firm grip, and Lack gasped. “I want you begging to come.”

Lack groaned. He was moments away from that point. “At least lie back. You must be tired.”

Cor snorted. “Tired? We've been cooped up here for... forever. If you think a few cuts on my back are going to make me an invalid, you obviously have a lot to learn about me.”

The whipping had been more than a few cuts. It had been inhumane. Even now, the thought made his breath catch. But Cor wouldn't appreciate his sympathy. So Lack smiled. "If I have a lot to learn, I'm sure you can teach me."

Cor raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

"That's flirting. Why, you don't flirt either?"

"No." He reared back and flipped Lack onto his belly. His lips hovered by Lack's ear. "I don't flirt, young one. I fuck."

Heat raced through his body, and he rutted against the sheets. Cor slapped his ass, and he yelped at the shock of pain.

"Control yourself or I'll have to restrain you. I'm sure we can find some silk ties around here."

Gods, there was an entire room full of sex toys that Lack hadn't even showed him. Anal beads and glass cocks. Rings to hold the orgasm in and metal tongs to squeeze erect nipples. He groaned at the thought of Cor using them on him.

But later. Now he needed more than glass. He needed Cor's cock inside him. That hot, pulsing member large enough to make him burn every time. He thrust his ass against Cor, testing his resolve.

"Hands behind your back," Cor snapped.

Lack rested his cheek against the bed and reached back. Cor grasped his wrists and held them against the dip of his lower back. The other broad hand skimmed Lack's inner thighs, teasing him, skating up the sensitive skin and down again.

"Please, please."

"Please what?"

Cor reached underneath him and pinched his nipple. Lack gasped in pain while his cock twitched. Maybe they wouldn't need that room after all. Cor seemed to have things well in hand. Lack cried out again as his other nipple was tweaked and twisted.

The broad palm skimmed over Lack's abs and grasped his cock. A sudden thrust had Lack almost spilling too soon. He gritted his teeth.

“Not yet,” Cor warned, while his hand played dirty tricks down below, running up and down Lack’s cock. His forefinger swiped the slit, damp with precum.

Lack moaned, his cries muffled by the bedclothes. Cor was above him, restraining him, fondling him. Lack felt surrounded, unable to move or breathe or come like he so badly wanted to. And yet he would change nothing. This was what he’d craved and he could do it anywhere, as long as Cor was there.

“You were wrong before,” he gasped out.

Cor paused. “About what?”

“About being trapped here. As if this was a cell, like before. But it’s not.”

Cor flipped him over, “And where should we go?”

The inquiry was too polite, like asking what they’d have for supper.

Lack smiled. “You didn’t think that was the only door, did you? There are tunnels leading out in every direction. One leads onto a private dock with a ship. We can sail to places even the Ke’lan could not go.”

“Oh fuck. I thought I was going to go crazy in here.”

“I thought you were going to drive *me* crazy.” Cor wasn’t an animal meant for captivity, he realized. Lack was more flexible that way, but he could go anywhere if he wore the shackles of Cor’s control. “All that pacing.”

Cor looked sheepish. “I don’t like being closed in.”

“We’ll find land,” Lack promised. “Wide open spaces.”

He smirked. “There is one small space I like to be inside.”

Lack grinned. He started to turn over, but Cor stopped him. Instead Cor was the one who turned, straddling Lack’s face while he pulled Lack’s cock into his mouth. It was the same position they’d used before in the cell only now the tables had turned. Now Cor was on top. He kept most of his weight on his elbows and knees, but Lack still felt the heft of him, the gravity. He sucked Cor’s cock into his mouth and bobbed his head up and down, bracing himself by holding on to Cor’s thighs.

Below, Cor applied his tongue to Lack’s slit, teasing more than sucking, playing more than fucking. Lack moaned around Cor’s cock and thrust his

hips up, asking for more. Cor obliged him, swallowing him deep. Lack shuddered, almost coming right then. He probably would have but Cor's fingers were wrapped tightly around the base of Lack's cock, keeping his orgasm at bay.

Lack sucked on Cor's cock eagerly, relishing the salty precum that flooded his tongue. Suckling him was heaven while down below was a sort of hell, needing to come so badly it hurt.

"Come on," Cor muttered. "Make me come and then you can."

Lack moaned again, his whole body rendered helpless and shivery under the imminent orgasm. He tugged on Cor's legs, pulling him down farther, until he could swallow Cor's cock to the hilt.

Cor's body went rigid inside and around him. Salty jets hit the back of his throat and he gulped them down. Something shifted below, a loosening of Cor's fingers and then the warm suction of his mouth returned. Gasping for air and finding none, he came into Cor's mouth, still gulping down the creamy liquid and crying out his pleasure around Cor's cock.

Cor remained on top of him, licking Lack's cock in lazy strokes. Lack did the same, cleaning the essence of his pleasure from his softening cock. From this angle, Lack had a prime view of Cor's ass. The bronze cheeks and darker pucker. So pretty, though he'd never tell Cor that. He wondered if Cor would let him put something inside. The beads, perhaps?

He was still smiling when Cor lifted from him and turned around.

Cor raised his eyebrow, "What were you thinking about?"

"Just something I'm going to show you."

"The path leading out of here?"

"Fine, I'll show you that too. But there are some things you're going to want to pack. Trust me."

The corner of his lips tipped up in a smile and erstwhile salute. "Oh, I do."

Lack did show him the pleasure room and all the instruments they had used to prolong and heighten the experience. But Cor was already ready to give back as much as he took, inventing new ways to apply them and unabashed in his pursuit of Lack's torment... and eventual climax.

Their journeys carried them to lands of whimsy and hardship, of pleasure and pain. Cor, ever eager to break free of this cage and move on to the next. And Lack, grateful for the leash that let him follow. And together, traversing the world and finding a home between them.

THE END

Author Bio

Skye Warren writes unapologetic erotica, where pain and sex and love collide. She has been called “a true mistress of dark and twisted erotica.” Her books have been Amazon Erotica Bestsellers and been a Night Owl Reviews Top Pick.

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DANCE WITH ME

By Aubrey Watt

Photo Description

Two shirtless men, both wearing jeans and straw cowboy hats, are dancing together while the livestock looks on. The one with his back to the camera is blond, and blocks a clear view of the other man. They are well-matched in height and build.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The only thing I can think of that might be sexier than two men dancing is two cowboys dancing.

What did they overcome to become bold enough to dance whenever they want to?

Sincerely,

Melanie ~ ~

P.S. HEA please. Would love sweet and sexy, with or without much erotic action—your call. One of my favorite sex acts is a hot dry hump. No incest/twincest or hard core, but intensity and/or angst would be fine. The need/desire to dance with each other should be important within the story.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: cowboys, first time, enemies to lovers, in the closet, coming out, homophobia

Word count: 6,667

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DANCE WITH ME

By Aubrey Watt

Jake Carroll wanted—no, needed—to dance. Specifically, he needed to dance with Daniel Stapp.

There were just a few things standing in the way. One was the fact that Daniel Stapp proved to be just as much of a ladies' man as his dad had been in his time, and there was less than a snowball's chance in the desert that he would ever reach a hand out to Jake, or any man for that matter. Daniel's brilliant green eyes and white-blond hair attracted the attention of all of the single women in Hartville, and some of the married ones. Jake couldn't blame them—he, too, had fallen prey to the hypnotic fever that those emerald eyes could produce. But Daniel would never turn those eyes to Jake, except in anger.

Second was the fact that the young, fair Daniel disliked—if not outright despised—the idea of sharing his inheritance with a grimy ranch hand like Jake. That Old Man Stapp had left half the acreage to Jake Carroll was a surprise to everyone in town, but a direct affront to Daniel himself, the sole offspring and rightful heir to his dad's ranch. Or so Daniel thought. Never mind that the man had no idea how to run a ranch, and without Jake's help, would likely as not run it into the ground by the time the frost melted in the spring. Never mind that Daniel hadn't bothered to come to his dad's side all these years, hadn't bothered to learn one damn thing about ranching. In Daniel's mind, Jake's share of the ranch should be given back, and he never let Jake forget it.

The third thing standing in the way of Jake's desire was that, for all his ranching skill and agricultural knowledge, for all his dexterity roping a steer and jumping his sorrel over fences, Jake Carroll did not know how to dance.

He sat at May's every Friday night, nursing a beer and scowling at the dance floor, his dark hair hanging down over his darker eyes. Everybody thought he hated to dance—why else would he turn down all the pretty young girls who asked him brightly if he would come out on the floor? He was

strong, tall, with a firm jawline and hair that got cut when he remembered, and he didn't remember often. Not unhandsome, if a bit scarred from life and weather; Jake looked the picture of health and manliness, and plenty of girls would jump at the chance to dance with him.

Of course, some people whispered about Jake behind his back, told rumors of the one Mexican boy who'd helped Jake on the ranch too closely, but Jake was so hard-working and dedicated and generous with his time and advice, few people wanted to make a big deal out of his abstinence from dancing or dating, no matter the cause.

Jake sat and sucked at the bottle in his hands, watching as Jenny Ruth, Susan, and even squat, stolid Betty Ann took turns dancing with the dashing Daniel Stapp. If Daniel was bad at ranching, he was terrific at dancing; he twirled around the dance floor, his blond hair darkened with sweat to a deep golden brown, and his eyes flashing in joyful motion.

Jake imagined himself in Daniel's arms, being turned around on the burled oak floor by the younger man, held tightly in his embrace. Perhaps they would play a slow song, and Daniel would rest his head against Jake's shoulder. Perhaps he would come up to Jake, hold out a hand. "Just for fun," he might say. "Just for a laugh." Perhaps—

But of course Jake never danced. He sat and waited and needed, with everybody in the happy, loud bar around him blind to what he really wanted. Sometimes he needed to dance with Daniel so intensely that he thought the emotion might color the air around him, shimmer a dark red all over him as he yearned, even though he knew nothing would happen.

Even though he knew it was impossible.

The sun rose on a cloudy, hot Friday. Jake and Daniel had been working in the barn together all morning, and Daniel was in one of his moods. For the most part, Jake could handle any issues with the boy by reason alone, but sometimes Daniel's eyes turned hard and irritated, and nothing Jake told him would stick.

"The second one," Jake said, reaching across to point out the correct bale for Daniel to fasten down. It was the second time he'd had to correct Daniel,

and if the friction straps weren't fastened right they could snap, sending the bale and possibly Daniel flying from the top of the ancient machine. "Reach the strap across."

Daniel grunted and adjusted the strap he had in his hand. The wrong strap.

"The second bale," Jake said. "Second from top." Daniel never irritated him so much as when he failed to listen to Jake's orders out of spite.

"I know how to do it!" Daniel insisted.

"Then do it right," Jake said, exasperated.

Jake was done walking on eggshells. If Daniel wanted to mess up feeding the chickens, that was one thing. Old Man Woods hadn't been able to afford new machinery for what seemed like decades, and the standing baler's friction straps were as dangerous as they were old. As much as Jake wanted to see Daniel brought down a notch, he didn't want the man to be injured.

"Do it your own goddamn self, you're so smart," Daniel said. His face flushed dark with frustration as he threw the strap across the bales and jumped off the side of the machine. He strode toward the door, his blond hair a white halo with the sun shining through it. Jake hit the emergency stop just in time to avoid snapping the strap.

"Fucking hell," Jake muttered.

Daniel left in a huff, slamming the barn door behind him. Jake took a deep breath and turned back to the baler, clearing out the track that had gotten clogged with hay. As he pulled the strap tightly over the bales, he dreamt about laying Daniel down on top of the hay. He dreamt of tying the young man's wrists above his head, and having his way with him. Daniel would twist and writhe, his taut muscles straining, his green eyes wide. Jake smiled at the thought.

Another hour passed. Jake had just finished stacking the last bale when the storm clouds rolled in. To the inexperienced eye, the clouds could've heralded just a rainstorm, but Jake noticed the dark pressure areas, the electricity in the air, all indicators of danger.

Daniel wasn't in the main ranch house, and Jake looked in every cabin before realizing that he must have gone out in the fields to work with the

cattle. If there was one thing Daniel liked to do on the ranch, it was ride his horse.

Jake slung himself onto his own sorrel mare and rode out, his eyes glancing up to the dark clouds that roiled above. Wind whipped out his dark hair as he rode, and when he reached the main herd, his mare sidled and snorted nervously.

“Easy, girl,” Jake said, patting the sorrel’s neck.

His eyes caught sight of Daniel on horseback across the field. Wisps of clouds were already beginning to twist down toward the earth as the wind whistled over the restless herd. All of the classic signs of a twister were evident, but Daniel didn’t seem to notice.

Jake urged his horse into a gallop, and rode around the herd toward Daniel. There was no time to waste. Above them, the clouds were circling into the beginnings of a funnel, and it looked to be a big one. By the time he reached Daniel, dust and tumbleweeds already skimmed the ground around them, pulled into a cyclical motion by the wind, and a low roar filled the air. Daniel’s horse reared as Jake approached, and Daniel tumbled off, sliding out of the saddle and falling to the ground. A hard fall.

Jake’s heart sank, but Daniel quickly leapt up from the ground, grabbing for his horse’s reins and swearing. The high scream of the wind grew louder and louder, the circling clouds above making it clear that the twister would touch down, and soon. The sky curled into itself, the clouds roiling, and Jake saw wisps of darkness come twisting down to lick the ground.

“Daniel!” Jake yelled. “Come on, we have to go!” He dismounted and ran to Daniel, who was still struggling to get his horse under control. The clouds whipped into a whirlpool above, the wisps growing bigger, stronger, into arms that reached down to the earth and became larger as they ate the dust. Jake grabbed Daniel’s arm. “Come on!”

“Get off of me!” Daniel shoved Jake backwards.

“Look!” Jake grabbed Daniel and spun him around, pointing out a hundred yards away where the twister’s main funnel had just touched down.

Daniel stood, slack-jawed in terror. The twister had sucked up all the dust on the ground, and for a moment the funnel was white, with streaks of orange

and grey; the sky still showing through in parts. Then it locked onto the ground with a growling noise, chewing up divots of earth and ripping out brush. The funnel turned dark with soil, starting at the bottom and widening to the top as it ate more and more.

“Come on!” Jake pulled at Daniel’s arm.

“Holy Jesus save me,” Daniel said, the only prayer Jake had ever heard him utter. He stood rooted to the ground, frozen in fear. The twister turned and dipped, curling in on itself in a deepening roar. It moved toward the herd.

“Run!” Jake screamed, and Daniel finally listened, turning away from the growing monster of a tornado. They flew through the herd, dodging cattle as best they could. The tornado whipped back and forth, and Jake had no idea where it would go next. His only thought was to get away from the cows—having one of those land on top of you would kill you as easily as anything else.

The tornado bore down on them, the dark funnel growing ever wider as it zigzagged closer. The mouth of the funnel twisted south and picked up part of the herd, flinging cattle onto their sides and backs. Jake could hear their lowing underneath the hot roar of the wind and he turned to see one of the larger steers slam into another cow, the sharp cracking of bone on bone as the twister ground over the helpless animals.

They reached a gully and Jake pulled Daniel down into the low ditch. The small gully stretched out only six feet or so wide, and only a few feet high, but it was better than nothing.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Daniel screamed. Jake could barely hear him over the wind and fury.

“We have to get down!” Jake said.

“Run! We need to run!” Daniel’s eyes flashed wild with terror, and for one hideous moment Jake thought he would bolt out of his grip and onto the open plain. Jake shook his head no and jerked Daniel down by the arm, just as a thicket of brush whipped overhead. Daniel’s eyes widened.

“Down!” Jake yelled, and Daniel nodded, crouching low on his heels. Jake looked over the edge of the gully at the dark funnel barreling toward them. It

was too big. They would never make it. A stray piece of fencing blew through the gully and scratched Jake across the face as it blew up and out, sucked into the air by the twister. God, this thing was massive. They had to get down, as low as possible.

Jake knocked Daniel over, shoving him face first into the gully and stretching his own body out over the younger man's. Daniel's hand reached up and clutched at Jake's arm, and despite the fear of the moment Jake felt himself respond to the touch, a desirous heat radiating through his body.

He pressed himself closer to Daniel, letting his body drape over the other man's. Jake's face nuzzled down into Daniel's neck, his lips touching the man's skin, one arm over him in a protective embrace, the other curled back to protect his own head. Who cared what kind of trouble he would get into, or what Daniel would say afterwards? The wind tore through the air above them as the twister moved in, and the low pressure sucked at their bodies.

Daniel clasped his fingers even tighter around Jake's bare arm. Oh god, such ecstasy that a single touch could bring. If Jake died now he wouldn't even mind. Blood dripped down his face and onto Daniel's head and neck, leaving a trail of red that shone bright against the white-blond of his hair. A spray of grit made Jake clench his eyes shut.

The twister came closer, it was there, it swept over the gully and over the men. Daniel tensed his muscles underneath Jake, his body hard and beautiful and oh-so-perfect. The wind tore around them, and brush and sand whipped through the air, stinging Jake's body, his hands.

There came a sudden quiet. Jake squinted up and saw the whirl of the tornado above them. The eye of the twister. Sunshine filtered through the top of the clouds and the deafening roar of the wind softened to a low murmur.

"Oh my god," Daniel said. His body shifted under Jake's, causing Jake to twinge with desire in the worst way possible. "Oh my god." His voice sounded like a lover's would, amazed and wondrous.

The wind started up again, and Jake bent his head back down as the twister arced across the low gully, ripping out the sides of the ditch and flinging dirt and sand across the men's backs. More roaring of wind, the pull of the sky, and branches scraping their bodies. Then it was gone.

Jake rested a moment on Daniel's back, not wanting to move an inch for as long as he could. The roar of wind lessened as the twister moved away. After a few moments, he pulled himself up reluctantly and peered out over the edge of the gully.

The tornado had shredded the plain, pulling up the earth and leaving a dark track where it had passed. The herd of cattle wandered across the empty plain, lost and lowing. Some lay where they had fallen and did not get up.

Jake whistled for the horses and was surprised when all that came out was a hoarse whisper. He wiped the grit from his lips and coughed up moisture into his mouth, then whistled again. The obedient sorrel came out of the herd and cantered over, shaken but not obviously hurt. Daniel's horse took another whistle before skittering out of the herd towards the men.

Jake caught their reins and handed Daniel's horse to him. Daniel stood shakily, his legs atremble from the shock of the twister.

"Got to get the herd back in the corral," Jake said. He swung up onto his mare. "Help if you like."

Daniel didn't say a word, and Jake clucked at the sorrel, riding toward the confused and damaged herd. It would take some time before he could wrangle all the cattle back to the main ranch. It surprised him pleasantly to see Daniel come around the rest of the herd and help lead them back. And after such an ordeal as that. The man must have something worthwhile inside his bones.

A pleasant surprise, indeed.

Neither man spoke a word even as the last head of cattle came through the corral gates. Daniel seemed to have something brewing in his mind, and Jake hoped to god the man hadn't sensed his thoughts while they were stretched out in the gully, their bodies pressed against each other. Just the thought of it made Jake's groin twitch uncomfortably under his stiff denim.

Before either of them broke the silence, Jake turned and rode off, leaving Daniel to lock up the gates. Let him wonder. Let him stew. There was nothing he could say.

Jake sat alone at the oak table in his small cabin. The main ranch house had been taken over by Daniel as part of his inheritance, and although Old Man

Woods had always let his ranch hand stay in the more comfortable quarters, Jake really didn't mind the cabin off the side of the house. He had made the hard cot more palatable with a straw pallet and a worked-leather headboard he made himself; and having less space to live in just meant he had less space to clean, as far as he was concerned. A table, chair, sink, bath, and bed. All you needed to live, really. And Jake liked the quiet solitude of the cabin.

A knock on the door interrupted Jake's thoughts and startled him enough for him to jerk upwards in his chair. Daniel had never come by the cabin, made it a point to stay away. Now, though, Jake opened the door to see him standing in the doorway, a bottle of whiskey in one hand. Daniel hadn't bathed yet; dust still coated his face and a streak of blood—Jake's blood—was smeared red on the side of his neck. The top button of his shirt was undone and it was all Jake could do not to stare at the man's hard chest, the light hairs tufting out of the cotton fabric.

“Don't mean to interrupt,” Daniel said. “Just wanted to stop by and thank you, and bring a little something. To celebrate our survival.”

The speech sounded rehearsed, but Jake didn't care one whit.

“Come on in, then,” he said, waving Daniel into the room. Standing awkwardly at the head of the table, Daniel looked around with guilty eyes at the cramped living space.

“Sit down,” Jake said, motioning to the only chair in the room. He went over to the sink, grabbed two spotted glasses from the drying rack and wiped them on a towel before setting them on the table. He leaned against the edge of the table, trying to look casual and relaxed as Daniel poured them both a whiskey. Two ample doses.

“You aren't kidding with your liquor,” Jake said, raising his nearly full glass in salute. “To a hell of a twister.”

Daniel clinked his glass against Jake's and drank quickly. Jake's eyebrow raised in astonishment as the fair-haired man drained the cup, and, without missing a beat, poured himself another glass. His green eyes were tinted golden in the dim light of the cabin.

“You see those often?” Daniel asked. His voice trembled, and as he raised the glass to his lips again Jake could see his hand shaking slightly.

“That one was the biggest I’ve seen yet since I was a kid,” Jake said. “There was a bigger one, knocked over our barn when I lived in Tennessee.”

“Shit,” Daniel said. “That thing scared the bejesus out of me.”

“You don’t got to tell me. I would have pissed my pants if I hadn’t just pissed.” Jake chuckled.

Daniel looked down at the table. His fingers tapped at the oak nervously. “I wanted to thank you,” he said. His voice caught on the last word, and he had to cough to get it out.

“Hey, no problem,” Jake said. He reached over and slapped Daniel on the shoulder. Too much? He was feeling risky today. Luck seemed to be floating all around him. Any other day and he would have been told off for acting too presumptuous. But today—today was different.

“You saved my life.” Daniel’s eyes pooled wet with tears, and Jake froze, unsure of how to react to the display of emotion.

“Wasn’t nothing.”

“It was my life,” Daniel said. He looked up at Jake. Jake thought he could see something in those green eyes. Something confused, something scared.

“Out here’s a hard place,” Jake said. He took a sip of his whiskey. “Got to stick together. Help each other out. You woulda done the same.”

Daniel opened his mouth as though he was going to say something, but then closed it.

“Anyway, this is great whiskey,” Jake said, swirling the whiskey in his glass. “Where’d you get it?”

“It was my dad’s. He left me a collection of the stuff.”

“Generous man,” Jake said.

Daniel looked up at him, a frown on his face, as though expecting some evidence of malice or sarcasm. The expression melted as he saw neither. “Yeah, he was,” Daniel said.

“He told me a lot about you.”

Daniel looked up sharply. Jake thought there was fear in his eyes, but he couldn’t understand why.

“Like what?” Daniel asked.

Jake leaned back casually. “Just what you were like. He talked about how smart you were, at university. All those classes you were taking.”

“See how much good they did me.” Daniel laughed bitterly.

“They did you fine,” Jake said. His voice was meant to be kind. Daniel huddled in his chair, and Jake did not know where all the easy confidence had gone to that the boy normally possessed. Daniel seemed like a frightened animal.

“Why didn’t you ever come back to the ranch?” Jake tried to ask the question like he didn’t care, but he was curious.

Daniel shook his head. “We had a falling out. Me and dad. He didn’t like me all that much.”

“Didn’t sound like it, the way he talked about you.”

“We fought over a lot of things,” Daniel said. “One day it got to be too much, and I left. Maybe he changed his mind about me once I was gone.” Daniel put down his glass and laughed weakly. “Guess I’m easier to get along with when I’m not around.”

“Sorry to hear,” Jake said. “He was a good man, and he seemed to be proud of you.”

“He told me he was leaving half the ranch to you,” Daniel said, his voice suddenly serious. There was a slur to his words from the whiskey, and Jake tensed up to hear it. “Before he died. Said it was the right thing.”

Jake said nothing, just murmured a small hum of assent. It was obvious that Daniel had been hurt by his dad’s decision.

“He was right about one thing,” Daniel said. “He said I needed you.”

Jake’s heart leaped in his chest, even as he smiled and sipped at his whiskey casually. “You’re damn right you need me. You’re dumber than a cow in a twister.”

“Only when I’m in a twister.”

The two men chuckled. Daniel poured them both another shot of whiskey. That shot turned into two, then three, and then Jake forgot to keep track

anymore. It was wonderful to sit with Daniel and shoot the shit and crack jokes with each other. He had always imagined them like this.

Jake had gotten up to rinse his glass, and was letting the water run halfheartedly over the spotted surface when Daniel idly asked him a question.

“Why don’t you dance?”

Jake paused. Daniel sat right behind him, and Jake made a show of rinsing the glass once more, carefully. The question cut to the center of his heart. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Why don’t you dance?” Daniel said. “I even asked Linda to ask you to dance last time, and you told her no.”

“Yes, I did,” Jake said. He hadn’t known that Daniel was behind Linda’s hopeful query on the dance floor. How strange.

“Why?” Daniel asked. “Seems like a mean thing. She was so hopeful. And so put down afterwards.”

“Not so put down that she couldn’t dance with you three times that night,” Jake said. Immediately after saying this, he felt the blood rise to his skin. What was he saying?

“Do you count all the girls that dance with me?”

“Better than counting the sips left in my bottle,” Jake said. He dried the glass on a dirty rag next to the sink, pretending an interest in the lime-spotted rim.

“Why don’t you dance?”

Was he never going to stop asking?

“I can’t.” Jake’s fingers clutched the rag whitely, and scrubbed at nonexistent residue on the glass.

Jake heard the screech of the chair legs across the floor as Daniel got up. He felt his whole body tense as the younger man walked towards him.

Daniel reached across Jake’s arm to set his empty glass into the sink. “Can’t?”

Daniel turned and crossed his arms, leaning back against the sink. Jake could smell him, he was so close. The smell of cologne, sweat and leather.

“Can’t dance.” Jake began to wash Daniel’s glass, his hands running across the surface tenderly, carefully.

“The hell you mean?” Daniel sounded incredulous.

Jake wiped at the clean glass with the rag. “I mean I never learned.”

“Well, it’s not like it’s hard.”

Jake set Daniel’s glass next to the other. Before he could respond, Daniel caught his wrist and pulled him out to face him, and god, oh god, the angel was facing him, fingers around his arm.

“Look, I’ll show you.”

Jake froze as Daniel reached out and pulled Jake’s arm to his waist. He could feel the other man’s skin hot under the fabric of his shirt, and the smell of him was overpowering, so close. Jake felt dizzy. This was a dream.

“You okay?” Daniel stopped suddenly, and Jake saw a real fear in his eyes under the whiskey glaze. He felt the man tense under the palm of his hand. “We don’t got to.” Daniel released his grip on Jake’s wrist and Jake felt like reaching out to pull him closer, to keep that closeness between them.

“No, show me.” He coughed the words through the lump in his throat.

Daniel looked up at him, his face tentatively hopeful. “Okay, well it’s real simple. Just watch me and do the opposite with your feet.”

Daniel’s hand was still wrapped around Jake’s wrist, and Jake’s other hand was planted steadily on Daniel’s hip. As the man moved, Jake moved with him, feeling the muscles under his palm.

“Forward, back, rock step. Forward, back, rock step.”

Jake tried to follow the moves as Daniel called them out, and quickly got the hang of it. He had watched Daniel on the dance floor so many times that it was easy for him to catch the gist of the steps.

“Okay, now you gotta spin me.” Daniel moved his hand up and then their hands were clasped together and god, oh god, Jake didn’t know what was happening. His entire body burst into desire as Daniel’s fingers slid across his palm and intertwined with his own fingers. Skin on skin, he let Daniel guide him around into a slow turn under Jake’s hand. The motion made Jake’s

nerves burn with longing. This wasn't all he wanted, no. He wanted more, so much more.

As Daniel turned back to face Jake, Jake reached out and clasped his hip easily, as he had seen Daniel do so many times. Daniel's hand rested on his shoulder, the other hand still pressed against Jake's, and he finished the turn in a closer position than before. Jake could feel the man's hot breath between them.

They stopped moving, and Jake was only dimly aware that it was inappropriate, standing there holding Daniel's hand and staring intently down at his feet. His groin ached and he needed to get away, to hide before it became obvious to Daniel that his ranch hand wanted something more than simply dance lessons.

"Jake."

Jake lifted his gaze to see Daniel's deep eyes only inches away from his. There was a questioning look in them, and... fear? Jake inhaled the man's scent, feeling another rush of desire sweep over him. Whiskey wafted off Daniel's lips. Jake's mouth opened slightly enough to feel the cool air over his tongue.

"Jake," Daniel said again, this time a whisper. He was looking at Jake's lips, and before Jake could say a word, the younger man leaned forward and pressed his mouth up hard against Jake's own. He tasted like whiskey, his tongue soft and hot. Jake froze. It couldn't be. Daniel?

The kiss was over before Jake could begin to realize what had happened. Daniel pulled back sharply.

"Sorry," he said. He pushed himself away from Jake and stumbled back to the table. His fingers shook as he tried to cap the bottle of whiskey.

Jake pulled himself out of his stupor. "Hey, no, Daniel." He stepped over to where Daniel was fumbling unsuccessfully with the whiskey bottle.

"Sorry," Daniel repeated.

"You don't gotta—"

"Fuck it, you can keep it." Daniel tossed the cap down onto the table. "Thanks for helping. For saving me, I mean." His words were slurred. "Sorry."

Jake reached over and took hold of Daniel's arm. "Hey, I didn't know—"

"Well, now you do!" Daniel threw off Jake's hand. His voice rang out in the small cabin, his throat hoarse with whiskey and sorrow. "A fucking queer, that's why my dad didn't leave me the whole fucking ranch. There, now you know."

"Daniel—"

"Now you know!" Daniel turned menacingly at Jake. He looked like nothing more than a cornered animal, and a cornered animal was dangerous.

Jake reached a hand out cautiously. "Daniel—"

Daniel's green eyes spilled over with tears, and he pushed Jake away even as Jake moved closer. "Don't," Daniel said. "I'm sorry."

"Daniel." Jake wrapped an arm around the younger man, pulled him close into an embrace.

Daniel's hands came up to his chest, balled into fists, pushing him away. "I'm sorry," he said again, his voice weak. "About everything."

Jake couldn't take it. He reached his hand up, grabbed Daniel's chin and tilted it into a kiss.

Daniel's fists dissolved against Jake's chest as Jake deepened the kiss, letting his body move against Daniel's. Letting him feel the hard desire against his hip. His tongue pushed tentatively against the man's hot lips, probing, and then Daniel opened up and Jake felt his arms come up and around, clutching at his back.

"Jake, oh god, Jake," Daniel said when the kiss broke. His breath was heavy.

"Thanks for the dance lessons," Jake said. He took ahold of Daniel by the waist, spun him around toward the table and set him atop it, pressing forward into another deep kiss. Daniel's legs came up around Jake's hips and Jake could feel the other man's erection stretching his jeans. He moved one hand down to touch Daniel there, and Daniel let out a sigh that melted Jake's heart and set his body aflame with desire.

Fingers scrabbled at buttons and zippers as Jake pressed himself between Daniel's legs, leaning further in and kissing his cheek, his neck, his shoulder.

Daniel tore Jake's shirt while trying to get it off, and Jake pulled off the younger man's pants without ceremony, lifting him up bodily to do so. They crashed together in another kiss, their pent-up desire no longer willing to wait for anything.

Jake quickly pulled away to help Daniel shrug out of his shirt, and then shuffled out of his own jeans. Finally, they were both stripped to their underwear, their chests hot and pressing against each other. Daniel's erection bulged out from under his briefs, making Jake's mouth water with anticipation. He stroked the man's cock through the fabric and was rewarded with a moan that nearly made him explode with yearning.

"Jake, oh god, Jake." Daniel whispered. Jake pulled off the last of his clothes and stood naked. Daniel's hands scrabbled at his hips, the long fingers gripping his cock, stroking his balls. Jake gasped as Daniel slid off of the table onto his knees, and took Jake into his mouth. His tongue was hot and wet against the tip of Jake's cock, and he circled the head with long slow swirls.

Jake's hand came up automatically, running his fingers through Daniel's golden-white hair. His cock throbbed as Daniel licked the length of it, his hands cupping Jake's balls. He flicked the tip with his tongue and Jake swallowed a gasp as Daniel took him whole between his lips. Beads of sweat tickled Jake's upper lip, and he wiped his mouth with one arm.

"Oh, fuck," he said, his fingers gripping Daniel's hair. He couldn't help but rock his hips back and forth as Daniel sucked and bobbed, one hand gripping the base of his shaft, the other still fondling him lower. His tongue was everywhere, licking and sucking and teasing. Wave after wave of pleasure swept through Jake's body, but as he was on the edge of exploding Daniel pulled away.

"Christ," Jake gasped. His cock was rock hard, throbbing in the cool night air. His entire body shone with sweat, his breath hard and fast. "Don't stop. Jesus, please don't stop."

Daniel stood quickly, stripped of his briefs and turned his back to Jake, bending himself over the table. His lean body rippled with muscle, and he tilted his hips back, offering himself to Jake. He turned and there was a glint of mischief in his brilliant green eyes. No. It couldn't be. Jake's mouth went dry.

“Daniel...” The word was halfway between a whisper and a moan. Daniel smiled.

“Take me,” he said. He brought his fingers up to his own mouth and sucked on them. As he turned his face away, he reached those wet fingers back and plunged them into his hole, slicking the way for Jake. Jake’s cock twitched at the sight.

“Oh lord,” Jake whispered. He moved forward as though in a dream, his cock pressing between the curves of Daniel’s ass. Daniel’s fingers gripped his cock and guided him to his entrance.

“Slow, now,” Daniel said.

Jake eased himself forward into the tight flesh, pausing as he heard Daniel gasp for air.

“Slow... oh god, you’re so big.” Daniel’s hips shifted underneath him. Jake pushed forward slowly, steadily, and felt himself slide into the tight ring of muscle. God, it felt so good. It felt like heaven. He had to stop himself from plunging in completely. Every inch sent another wave of sensation such as he had never felt before, the slick tightness making his brow wet with the sweat of desire.

“Fuck yeah,” Daniel said. Jake began to rock back and forth, working his swollen cock in farther and farther. He spit on his fingers and slicked himself to ease the entry. Daniel was so tight. Jake leaned over, bending his body to press against the other man’s, and kissed the back of his neck.

“Ohh,” Daniel moaned, his body writhing underneath Jake’s. Pushing his cock in deeper, Jake reached around and clasped one hand across Daniel’s chest. Skin slicked against skin as he rode the younger man, thrusting furiously into a faster tempo. Daniel’s hair grew dark with perspiration, and he emitted a low moan each time Jake thrust his cock forward.

God, he felt so tight. As Jake reached with his free hand to grip Daniel’s hard cock, the sweet pucker of flesh clenched around his own shaft. Jake was surprised to feel how hard Daniel was under his palm. Daniel’s fingers scrabbled against the table for purchase as he twitched and twisted under Jake’s hold.

“Fuck me harder,” Daniel hissed. The whispering breath was all Jake needed to push him over the edge. One hand stroking the other man’s hard shaft, he thrust himself deeply into the dark, tight hole, his breath panting all the while. As the tempo increased, he felt the hard want inside him push closer and closer to the edge of ecstasy.

“Yes! Yes!” He heard Daniel’s gasping breath as he jammed his cock even deeper into the man’s body, the ache of desire spiraling up inside him. Under his palm Daniel’s cock jerked upwards once, then again, spilling hot seed through Jake’s fingers.

“Ohhhhhhh!”

It was too much. With a groan, Jake felt the surge of pleasure crest inside him and he arched into the man, thrusting once more to the hilt before he released his own ecstasy inside Daniel’s sweet ass. His every nerve pulsed together as he erupted, moaning, his chest pressed hard against Daniel’s back.

They rested for a moment like that, Daniel’s heart beating hard through his skin. Then Jake released Daniel, eased himself out, and collapsed backward onto the small cot next to the table. Daniel pushed away from the table and sat carefully on the edge of the cot, his eyes cast down toward the floor. It wasn’t until Jake reached out and drew him into an embrace that he relaxed, letting Jake pull him close into a soft kiss. Jake caught his breath, his skin turning cool in the night air after the exertions of their lovemaking.

“Some dance lesson,” he said, once he could breathe easily again. Daniel laughed, and then both of them were laughing uncontrollably, the tension between them dissipating entirely. Jake wiped tears from his eyes.

“Did your dad know?” Jake asked.

“About me?” Daniel shrugged, an oddly endearing gesture. “Yeah, he figured it out. That’s why I left.”

“Oh,” Jake said. His fingers played with Daniel’s light hair.

“What about you?” Daniel asked, his eyes downcast as he leaned against Jake’s shoulder. “Did my dad know? About you?”

“I don’t know.” Jake had never given it much thought. “Maybe.” He had

the sudden thought that perhaps the old man had left him half the ranch for another reason.

“I did need you,” Daniel said, looking up at Jake.

Jake reached over and took Daniel’s hand. He couldn’t say anything. He had always needed Daniel, and now a rush of warmth swept through his heart.

“Come sleep in my bed?” Daniel asked.

Jake nodded.

“In a minute.”

He pressed a kiss to Daniel’s forehead and rested his head against the man’s chest, listening to their hearts beating in the quiet night air. Daniel’s body rose and fell under his cheek. In Jake’s mind, he could see all of their dances together in the future, could see them falling together into rhythm, and, for the first time in a long time, he let himself smile.

THE END

Author Bio

Aubrey Watt thinks that the best western is a gay western. All the cowboys she writes about are smoking hot with a soft, emotional side to them. When she's not reading or writing spicy m/m erotic romance, she likes to swing dance and do jigsaw puzzles.

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Other Works by Aubrey Watt

His New Ranch Hand—FREE Erotic Romance

Be Not Lonesome—A Gay Cowboy Erotic Romance Novella

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LOVE ON A WING AND A PRAYER

By T.A. Webb

Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: In the foreground, a man in a desert-tan digital camo fatigue blouse and a flight deck helmet stands with his back to the camera. He is in sharp focus, while the fighter jet and the man climbing out of it is blurry and soft.

Photo 2: Silhouetted against a deep turquoise sky with sunset-pink clouds, two men stand on an F-18 Hornet, framed by its dual tail section.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Even with the repeal of DADT, it is not commonly known that I am gay. Living on an aircraft carrier, surrounded by so many men in such close quarters, I worry that if my sexuality is known, most of them will subscribe to the narrow thinking that I am attracted to all of them. But there is one who has caught my eye and driven my senses into overload. The problem is that he is a fellow pilot. I don't want to cause any issues in our working environment, and I don't even know if he is gay, but I am drawn to him and cannot stop thinking about him. What I wouldn't give for a stolen night together, but I long for even more than that because I am attracted to his personality, sense of humor, and strength of character as much as I am attracted to his physicality.

And then one day, his co-pilot gets sick, and I am told to fly with him. Will this time together possibly lead to something? I can't help but hope that it does.

Dear author, I would love to read a story about these military pilots, and I would love to see the twilight pic in the story - maybe a rendezvous on a jet that leads to an incredibly sexy night. No BDSM please; angst and explicit sexy time encouraged; HFN or HEA please. :)

Sincerely,

Leigh

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: military, coming out, friends to lovers, HEA, pilots

Word count: 10,008

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LOVE ON A WING AND A PRAYER

By T.A. Webb

CHAPTER ONE

Somewhere in the Pacific

The sky was so blue, I almost always got lost in it. Between the endless carpet of the sea and the way it looked like I could just aim the plane for the horizon and fly and fly and fly. Ever since I was a kid, I'd wanted to be up there, high above the home I never quite fit into.

It wasn't that there was anything wrong with my parents and brother. They loved me and I loved them. But as early as I could remember, there was something different about me, and I instinctively knew not to talk about it. It was just a feeling, but then as I got older and my brother and all my guy friends started noticing girls and wanting to date them, I was able to put a name to it.

Gay. Faggot. Queer.

All the boys used those words to put down other boys, not knowing what they really meant. They didn't know it cut those of us who *were* to the bone, and we learned to deal the best we could. I was blessed with good genes; as a child I had long legs and arms, and a gift for running and endurance for the long distances. When I hit puberty, the rest of my body caught up and I sprouted up, finally stopping a couple of inches over six feet tall.

Since I never had the desire to play team sports—I left that to my brother—I joined the track team. The long distances were my specialty and I especially loved the cross-country events. My mind was free to fly even if my body wasn't. I worked hard as hell, and my goal of being noticed came true when I was appointed to the Naval Academy (oh yeah, I had the brains *and* the brawn). I ran track and was, it turned out, a damned good fit with the mental and physical toughness required to make it in the service. And it didn't hurt that my dream of being a pilot was possible there too.

Now, ten years after high school, I was United States Naval Aviator Lieutenant David Perkins, assigned to the USS *Georgetown*. I fly an F/A-18

Hornet, have my eye on a slot with the Blue Angels, and yeah, I'm damned good at it. I'm respected as an officer, as a pilot, as a compatriot.

And my fellow servicemen don't know all of me. Because despite the repeal of DADT, I haven't come out. Don't get me wrong, I came to terms with my sexuality years ago. The desire to fly, to serve my country and to be a part of something bigger than myself was so great that I was willing to shelve that part of me that didn't fit in. It made for a lonely life, but honestly, there wasn't anything I wouldn't trade or do to be able to climb in the cockpit and touch the sky.

Living on ships for months at a time, mostly with men, might sound like a gay man's hottest fantasy. God knows I'd seen enough porn built around it, but the reality was nothing like what you might imagine. Cramped quarters, regimented life and schedules, straight men with women on their minds... it wasn't nirvana. Far from it. It was just easier to keep my sexuality to myself and not risk the sidelong looks, the subtle snubs and the whispering. I wasn't looking to find a partner, so why advertise that part of myself, right?

Oh yeah. And it worked until I met Chuck Wilder.

Fellow aviator, same squadron, Chuck transferred onboard two months before, and from the moment I saw him I knew I was in trouble. He stepped off the transport and my eyes were drawn to him immediately. About my height, jet-black hair a tad longer than it should be, and a wicked smile that, I was to find out, very seldom left his face. Aviator glasses hid his eyes, but I knew they had to be chocolaty brown. His fatigues hid a lot, but the T-shirt stretched across his pecs didn't hide a goddamned thing.

I must have looked like an idiot, standing across the flight deck, frozen to the spot. A loud whoop beside me snapped me out of my haze, and I quickly turned back to the group of men hunched over a laptop, *ohhing* and *ahhing* and making comments about the Miss America webcast.

“Georgia. And Texas. You can't go wrong betting on a southern gal.” My wingman, Giordi Monroe was predicting. He glanced over at me, looking for my agreement and must have seen something on my face. “Hey, Davey-boy, you okay? You look a little... glazed over or something. What's goin' on?”

Forcing a smile to my face, I shrugged. “Nothing. Just thinking. Can't

remember if I finished that checklist for the exercise or not. Think I want to go over it one more time before chow.”

Gio slowly nodded, his gaze never leaving me. It was a puny excuse—I never *ever* screwed up a checklist or forgot anything—but he gave it a pass. I broke eye contact and leaned in so only he heard me. “Not feeling great, buddy, and don’t want to make a big deal out of it. Let me go hit the head and maybe wash my face off and I’ll be fine.”

That got me a quick nod, and he turned back to the laptop and was making his bet on the winner even before I turned and headed for our quarters. The new men, and that one man, were gone when I looked back, and I heaved a sigh of relief and headed below deck to my bunk. When I got to the common area, I ducked into the head and avoided looking at myself in the mirror as I turned on the faucet and caught cold water into my hands, then bent and splashed it on my face. The shock seemed to reset whatever fucked-up part of my brain was frozen on the memory of that man, that smile and teeth and arms and...

The door banged open and in he stepped. I caught his eye in the glass and his smile was open and friendly. “Afternoon. How’s it hangin’?” He nodded and moved to the row of urinals, and I thought God must really hate me today. Because in about twenty seconds, it wasn’t going to be hanging at all, and I needed to get the hell out of there.

“Good, man. Welcome aboard,” I managed to croak out. I dried my face and hands with a paper towel and got the hell out.

Only to run into Mr. Handsome again about five minutes later, when he passed by my open door with his duffel and opened the stateroom directly across from me. I watched as he tossed his bags onto his bunk and put his hands on his hips, appearing to survey the small room, and I jumped up to close my door before he saw me looking.

And almost made it. My hand on the knob, I was ready to close it between us when he turned and that damned smile rooted me in place. “We gotta stop meeting like this or people will talk, man.” Now my blood ran cold, and I knew, just knew, he’d read me like a book and could see every dirty little thought I’d had about him. He stepped across the hallway and stuck out a hand. “Charles Wilder. Chuck to my friends. Saw you on deck—you fly too?”

I looked down at the offered hand, then back up and mechanically reached out to shake. “David Perkins. Lieutenant. Naval Aviator. Uh... Davey to my friends. Welcome aboard.” The words made it out, and I was thankful I wasn’t blabbering. Or drooling. His hand met mine, and I swear sparks flew at the contact. Some kind of direct line went from his firm grip to my cock, and all I could think of through the haze of my stupidity—fear he’d figured out what I was, arousal at how fucking good-looking he was, dread that I’d given something away and excitement that maybe I had—was how good those big fingers would feel wrapped around my shaft.

“Looks like we’re gonna be part of the same squadron then. Just got transferred to this billet, and damn, I know the name. They already are talking about you being in line for Blue Angels before long.” Chuck stepped back and looked me up and down, sizing me up. I swore my skin felt on fire where that gaze lingered, and a slow red flush went up my neck. Fuck, but I hadn’t blushed since Gary Graves checked me out after a track meet when I was fifteen, shy and a virgin.

I stepped back into my stateroom and regrouped. “Well, that’s a little premature. But yeah, it’s good to have goals. And a five-year plan.” I smiled and felt some of my normal self-confidence—some called it cockiness—returning. “Of course, if it only takes four... so much the better.”

Chuck threw back his head and laughed, a gut-deep bass sound that made my balls tighten up. Shit, but I wanted this man. I had to get my lust under control, or it was going to be a long couple of months before I got leave. Next port call was home base in San Diego, and I was already making plans to spend my leave taking a flight up to San Francisco and hitting the bars on Castro and fucking as many men as I could get through. It would have to last me for another six months, and I planned to make the most of it.

“You and me are gonna be good friends. I can tell.” He grinned and damned if my mouth didn’t go dry again. I just smiled back and nodded, and he stepped back into his billet and threw up a hand. “Catch you later, Perkins. Maybe you can show me around later, and we can grab some chow together.”

“Sounds great, bud. Later.” I closed the door, leaned back against it, and had my fatigues down and my cock in my hand before I even heard the click

of his lock. Closing my eyes, I spit into my hand and stroked my shaft quick and hard, and pictured that mouth of Chuck's on mine, our tongues locked in battle and those big hands of his on my ass. The suddenness of my orgasm slammed through me, so quick and powerful, and I gasped as white streaks of cum splattered my shirt and abs. My legs gave out, and I slid down to the floor in a satisfied, quivering mess.

I was so fucked.

CHAPTER TWO

Later that evening, I made my way to the officers mess and filled a tray with food. I'd hit the gym and done a full hour of reps on the free weights, followed by another hour on the treadmill. My iPod full of high-energy rock and roll, I pounded out mile after mile, the incline slowly ramping up and the speed increasing until my hamstrings screamed and my pulse raced. The cool down began and I stumbled off the machine, grabbing a towel and allowing the endorphins to take over my body. After a cool shower, I was starved and ready to eat.

And there he was, sitting with Giordi and the rest of the crew. Already making himself at home and fitting in. I didn't know whether to be grateful or pissed. The fact my partner was hitting it off with Chuck was a good sign; he could read people like no one else I knew. If Gio was joking around with him, and it looked like they were, then it was a *very* good sign.

"Hey partner, Chuck here says he's in the stateroom across from you and you guys already met." Giordi slapped Chuck on the back and pointed at me as I sat down with them. "Don't hold anything this jerk says against me, my new friend. Davey can be an ass—he's all about the flying and the planes and... well, just don't take it personally if he talks more about specs on the new prototype than about chicks or anything important. You get used to it."

I raised a hand and flipped him off. Chuck glanced between us, and a small smile ghosted across his lips. This was an ongoing back-and-forth with me and Gio, and he evidently could see it was nothing serious. "Not everybody thinks with their little head. And I *do* mean little."

I had to smile a little myself as Chuck choked on his water, his coughs a nice counterpoint to Gio's mock outrage. The quickest way to get him started was to talk shit about his cock. The man was hung like a horse, and was the butt of any joke involving dick size. He loved the attention, and I more than once chewed over the irony that the man I loved like a brother was famous for something I pretended didn't matter. Gio was a good sport about it, though, and Chuck seemed to go along with the joke.

The conversation switched back to the Miss America netcast, and the swimsuit competition. I zoned out, and nodded my agreement when a direct question came my way. Chuck was engaging, and the guys liked him, so I figured I'd just have to add him to the list of look-don't-touch men on the ship. Not a problem, there were a dozen guys who made my hands itch to get hold of them and explore their hard bodies. The flat abs. The strong pecs, and the light dusting of hair I was sure ran down to a treasure trail ending in...

I jerked my attention back to the here-and-now, and glanced up to meet gazes with Chuck. Fuck. I didn't know how long I'd been staring, and I could feel my cheeks burning with embarrassment. He held my gaze as a slow, easy smile spread over his face, and he winked and turned back to Gio to agree with whatever he was spouting, something about Texas sized hooters.

Was I busted? If so, it didn't seem to bother the man. But I'd worked too damned hard to garner the respect of every sailor on this ship, and I wasn't going to lose it over a pretty face and a hard body. I muttered something about needing to check e-mail and rose to carry my tray to the trash. Chuck stood at the same time and fell in beside me.

"Been a long day, men. The transport kicked my ass, so I'm going to catch some shuteye. What time's assembly?"

"Oh-six-hundred, and don't be late. We'll set up on rotation, and introduce you to the rest of the crew. Need anything, just knock on Davey's door. He'll take care of you." Gio shot me a sideways glance, and I flipped him off. Again. The man lived to yank my chain. But there was something about the way he looked at me, then Chuck, that bothered me this time.

I dumped my tray off with the mess crew and turned to head back to my stateroom when I felt Chuck move in beside me. Not knowing what to say, I kept walking, trying to ignore the slight brushes he made against my arm, and once, when we met sailors coming towards us in the hallway, he fell in behind me so close I could feel his body heat against my back. I almost moaned, wondering how he would feel skin-to-skin, his chest against my bare back. Soon enough, we were back at our quarters, and with a quick *g'night* I had the door closed and was flopped down on my rack.

Forcing my body to relax, I gave my cock a stern talking to and reminded it of the five-year plan. The one that didn't include outing myself, mooning

over some straight flyboy, or getting a discharge for fraternization. That calmed me down, and blood flow reversed. I stripped down, set my alarm, and finally managed to doze off to dreams of brown eyes and a killer smile.

It was like that day after day, week after week. Chuck was a good guy, dependable, smart as a whip, and the second best pilot I knew. The only flaw I could detect was his wingman. Alex Dale was one of those guys who talked a good game and had absolutely zero skills to back it up. Oh, let me give him credit for one thing—he could kiss brass ass with the best of them, and the only thing Gio and I could think of to explain his presence in the squadron was that either he was the son of some bigwig, or he had the goods on somebody higher up.

The man grated, and nobody could stand him. Which was especially fucked up since we had to have his back, and depend on him to have ours. Someone, somewhere must have been watching out for him because his pairing with Chuck was the only thing saving him from being heaved overboard. And Chuck tolerated the asshole. Which made me seriously wonder about the guy. Had we all misread him, and he was a kiss-ass? Giving him the benefit of the doubt, me and Gio kept watch, and to our surprise, we slowly began to see Alex's attitude undergo a subtle shift. Where he was arrogant and mouthy, he began to catch himself in the middle of shooting his trap. And when he did let loose with some shit, he would wince and look over at Chuck.

When, just the day before, he actually apologized for making a mistake on the pre-flight checklist, something he did frequently but never acknowledged, it was too much. Gio threw his hands up in the air. "What the fuck? Did Wilder beat you over the head and knock some sense into you, or did the pod people come and swap your brain out? I mean, really dude. *You?* Saying you're sorry? Did hell just freeze over?"

Alex had the good grace to redden, and glancing at Chuck, mumbled, "Yeah, man, I know. I'm a fuck-up. You know it, I know it, everybody knows it. But fuck, Gio, I just want to be part of the team. I thought if I came out balls-to-the-walls, you guys would respect me. And by the time I realized it was the worst thing I could do, it was too late. You guys all tagged me as an

asshole. So I figured I might as well keep acting like one. But,” and he glanced up, eyes shiny, “Chuck came on board and he didn’t know me. He gave me a chance, and shit, I just want to be a part of the team. He was willing to try, and goddamn it if I will let it go south this time.”

We all stood there, taking in his words. Chuck came over and slapped Alex on the back. “Never too late to do the right thing, buddy. And each minute, you can choose to do the best you can. I believe in you, Alex.” He looked at us. “And these guys, they want to believe in you too. Give them something to hang their hat on, that’s all they ask for.”

I caught Chuck’s eye, and nodded. Moving over to Alex, I stuck my hand out. “Welcome to the team, Dale. Now, you and Gio get us ready for flight. Right, Monroe?”

Gio shook himself out of the daze he was stuck in, and jumped. “Right, Davey. Let’s rock and roll, Alex.”

I don’t think I’d been so goddamned hard in years. The fact this guy took the time to see past the dickwad exterior and made a difference with Alex got to me like nothing else. Two months I’d been fighting my attraction for this guy. Two long, cock-teasing, unsatisfying sons-of-bitches months.

Something had to give.

CHAPTER THREE

I was up and at the gym at oh-four-thirty, and on the treadmill pounding the miles, and my frustrations, away. At this time of the morning, no one else would bother me and I could get in some quality thinking time. I did my best work alone, and as I pictured being back home, out on the farm and running the back roads before the sun was up, I felt a pang of homesickness. God, life was so much simpler when I was a kid and didn't have to worry about life and love and what the fuck? Love?

The tension between me and Chuck was almost more than I could bear. I wanted him, but it was more than just wanting to fuck him through the bulkhead. He was a funny, generous, kind and giving hunk of a human being, and ninety kinds of sexy to boot. I was so sure he was straight—he hung out with all the other guys and played all their reindeer games. But then he would give me a look, and every fucking hair on my body would stand at attention. Or he'd brush up against me, and I swore he would suck in a breath same as I did.

Something was going to have to give. I was two weeks away from shore leave, and it couldn't come quick enough. As the *Georgetown* made its way into port, we would be flying in the day before to have the jets checked out and upgrades made to electronic systems. The whole flight team was looking forward to it, and Gio's girlfriend was planning on meeting him there so at least he would be out of my hair for two weeks. I doubted the two of them would leave the hotel room he'd arranged. Especially when he got down on one knee and made the proposal she'd been waiting for, and he was so nervous about.

But what to do about Chuck? Then, as if he heard me somehow, the door to the gym opened and in he walked. I almost stumbled and fell off the damned treadmill. A body like his was sinful, especially in a tank top and gym shorts. Tight, package-hugging, ass-clinging gym shorts that left very little to the imagination. Darkly hairy, perfectly muscled legs. And arms that made light work out of the free weights he pumped daily.

His smile lit up the room. "Fancy meeting you here." His voice was cheery and he grinned, coming over to stand in front of where I ran, seemingly

oblivious to what he did to me. He leaned against the front bar of the machine, and slung a towel around his neck. “Looks like it’s just the two of us this morning. You about done here? I need a spotter.”

I nodded, not wanting to lose my rhythm. Reaching out, I hit the button making the cycle slow down and the ramp decline. As my pace slowed, I felt his eyes on my body. This wasn’t a full workout for me, so I was lightly sweaty, my skin dewy-wet and my breathing under control. When the machine slowed to a fast walk, I allowed myself to straddle the sides and step off. Bending over from the waist, I stretched out my hamstrings, wrapping my hands around my ankles and pulling.

The touch of a hand on my ass almost made me fall over. I looked up and caught Chuck, a shocked expression on his face. He looked at his hand, then at me, then blushed. Actually fucking blushed. I knew then, goddamn it, that I’d been right, he *was* checking me out. And all my self-confidence came rushing back.

“See something there you like?” I stood, reaching my hands back over my head and working out my obliques and abs, bending slightly sideways and back and showing off my body at its finest. His eyes traveled down my torso, and I wanted to take this further, so damned much further. But now wasn’t time or place for it. Before he had a chance to answer, I inclined my head towards the steam room. “Come on in, let’s talk. Not out here.”

With a quick gulp, he nodded and followed. We both kicked off our shoes, and I stripped down, wrapping a towel around my waist, flashing Chuck a quick view of my ass, before stepping into the sauna. I hit the control to turn the mist on, and steam began pumping into the room. Settling on a bench, I turned and watched as Chuck entered and sat a few feet away.

“So...”

“Yeah. I’ve been wanting to do that for a long time. Since I saw you standing in the doorway to your stateroom that first day I came on board. Wasn’t sure you were interested, but I hoped.” His voice was almost wistful.

I sighed. “Honestly? I wanted you when you stepped off the transport and flashed me that fucking grin. You know what those lips of yours do to me,

man? I've been jacking off for two fucking months thinking about them wrapped around my cock."

Flopping backward, Chuck groaned. "Shut up, man. I'm raw from all the self-abuse." He laughed. "So, the question is, what are we gonna do about it?"

Although it was tempting to toss my towel aside and jump the man, I wasn't ready to throw everything away on a quickie when anyone could walk in on us. And to be honest with myself, I wasn't sure I wanted just a one-off with this man. He was a friend now, and as far as I was concerned, had the potential to be more than that. And wasn't that a kick in the ass? David Perkins, the man so far back in the closet his mothballs needed mothballs, was thinking about a relationship. With another man.

"What do *you* want to do about it?" I prayed it was the same thing I wanted him to do.

"I want you. I want to get you alone, strip you down and take my time. I want to taste you, spread you open and find where you are ticklish, find what makes you moan. I want to make you mine." When I glanced over, shocked, his eyes were closed and he had a serious, almost sad expression on his face.

I swallowed, trying to decide how to answer him. "I want the same thing. But Chuck, I'll be honest. I'm nowhere near being out. This scares me. I've never been the type of guy that wanted a relationship, and it's usually a one-night stand for me. But with you, I can see myself wanting more. This shit is scary, and if you aren't looking for something more than a quick fuck, tell me now. We can do that, but I like you too much to ruin a good friendship over sex."

His expression never changed, and I felt like I'd blathered and probably spewed out too much twelve-year-old girl unicorns-and-puppy-romance novel shit, so I quietly stood and made my way out of the steam room. I glanced back before I let the door close, and he still had his eyes closed. Well, that was that.

CHAPTER FOUR

When I got to the flight deck later that morning, Gio was all over me. “Did you hear? Alex is in the infirmary, some kind of reaction to fucking peanuts. Who the hell’s allergic to nuts for God’s sake? Anyway, the roster’s been shaken up for the day, and you and Wilder are flying together. I’m with Winkler, flying lead.”

Fuck. I wasn’t in the mood to deal with all this today. I’d thought I’d be able to get in the cockpit and escape up into the clouds and let the sky soak up all my problems. That’s where I felt the most at home anyway. Maybe I was meant to be alone, and this was just a sign. But no, now I had to share my holy of holies with the guy who probably thought I was a lunatic. I mean, what kind of man talked about forever without having at least one date?

And oh, shit! I almost missed the last part, and it was the most important thing of all—they were going to let Gio be point! I grabbed him in a hug, ignoring his squeals of protest, and spun him around in circles. “Dude! I am so fucking proud of you. Point! See? I told you that if you hung around me long enough, the gold would rub off on ya!”

Gio laughed, pushing away from me. “Fuck you. And it felt like you rubbing off on me. Although,” he flashed me a shit-eating grin, “I bet you’d rather be rubbing off on Wilder.”

What. The. Fuck?

When I just stood there, in shock, Gio’s face fell and he looked upset. “What? Did I say something wrong? You do like him, don’t you?”

“Wha-what do you mean? Like him? He’s a good guy, and a good friend.” My face must have shown my horror at his words, and he grabbed me and pulled me away from the tarmac. When we were away from everyone else, I calmed down enough to try to make some sense out of what he’d said. “Gio, I’m not sure what you meant. I—”

“Davey, buddy, it’s okay. I thought you knew I knew. I swear, I wouldn’t have said anything if I thought it would upset you so bad.”

Oh hell. "I'm not upset. I just don't understand what you mean."

Gio met my gaze, his face open. "Davey. Man, I know you're gay. I've known since, well, remember when we all went out that first time together in Singapore? To that strip club and everyone got shitfaced?" I nodded, and he continued. "I wasn't as drunk as the rest of those goons, and I saw you eyeing the waiter, and when you disappeared with him and came back looking like the cat that ate the canary, well, it didn't take a rocket scientist to put the pieces together."

I was fucking shocked. He'd known for *four* years? And never said a word? "Gio, why didn't you say anything?"

He shrugged and looked away. "I figured if you wanted to talk about it you would. And you never did, so I let it go. Didn't make a difference to me. And you aren't the only one on the ship, hell, even on the crew, that's gay. Now it's okay and you can't get discharged for some bullshit you have no choice about. It was called Don't Ask, Don't Tell for a reason, you know."

This man had been a much better friend to me than I'd ever been to him. Damn. I didn't know what to say. But I had to say something, let him know how much his honor and friendship meant to me. "Yeah."

"Yeah? What, yeah?"

"Yeah, I want to rub off on Chuck." I looked around, and leaned in. "He's the first man I've ever thought about doing more than fucking, Gio. I like him. A lot."

His eyes grew wide. "You mean, you *like him* like him? You wanna go steady? Go to the prom with him and wear his letterman jacket?"

A burst of laughter escaped before I could stop it. I reached over and slapped his head, smiling at the howl that he let out. He jumped me, knocking me down on the flight deck and holding my hands over my head, straddling my waist. "Careful, Monroe. You got a nice ass and all that, but your girl might not like it if you showed up and had to explain why you were wearing *my* ring."

"Fucker. As if I'd let you top me. With this cock? Man, you know you'd put that shiny white ass up in the air and beg for it."

My jaw dropped. “Who the hell are you and what have you done with my wingman?”

“It’s time you got over it, L-T. Nobody cares. Especially me. And lookie there, here comes your boyfriend now. And he don’t look so happy. Hmm, wonder if I do this what will he think?” Gio leaned back and sat on my groin, letting his hands slide down from over my head and pinched both nipples through my flight suit. My hips bucked up involuntarily, and he leaned down, that troublemaker smile firmly in place. “Bingo. He’s pissed now.”

Rising to his feet and offering me a hand, Gio pulled me up and turned to leave just as Chuck stopped and glared. With a wink, Gio took off towards the plane he was to pilot, leaving me alone with Chuck. I opened my mouth to explain when he cut me off. “So all that big talk about wanting more than a one night stand was just that, huh. Talk. Should have known.”

Anger flared through me, and I thrust my jaw out at him. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. That was just... you know what? Never mind. It doesn’t matter. We have a job to do and this shit isn’t part of it.” I turned on my heel and started towards the plane. Stopping for a moment, I threw back over my shoulder at him. “They are pairing us up today since your wingman is sick. You’re my second. I expect you in place and ready to go in fifteen. Don’t be late.” Not waiting for a response, I went to grab the pre-flight checklist and make sure we were going to be ready for takeoff.

I could see him off my wing, and now that the anger had burned out of my system all I felt was sad. This was why I didn’t try relationships, especially with men I worked with. Too much drama. I’d seen it with straight couples—one wrong word and the whole squadron would end up taking sides, or one person would transfer out and we’d be short a hand. Not worth it.

It was better, me alone. Just me and the sky.

My helmet beeped, letting me know my wingman was sending me a private signal. I sighed, sure this would be as unpleasant as the last exchange. Flipping the privacy channel open, I stuck to protocol. “Echo Charlie Tango Niner, over.”

There was a pause. “Davey, I’m sorry. That was a dick move on my part, classic Chuck Wilder fuck-up, and you didn’t deserve it.”

Well now. “I’m listening.”

“I saw Gio with his hands on you, and it pissed me off. I don’t share well. And I thought you were asking me to—well, to see if you and I couldn’t try to see if there was something between us. And then he was touching you and I was... jealous. Okay? I didn’t like it and I was jealous.”

“You do know he’s proposing to Lena next week, right? And he’s straight as they come.” I couldn’t help the snark in my voice. Damn, when had I gone back to high school?

He heaved a sigh. “Yeah, and I also know you and he go way back and that half his weight is in dick. And honest to God, why someone hasn’t snatched you up already is beyond me.”

I grinned, wishing I could see his face. “Half? More like three quarters. Have you seen that thing hard? It’s one of the seven wonders of the modern—”

“Do we really have to go there?” he growled.

“No, sorry. Listen, I’m sorry too. I was a prick. This is all new to me. Three months ago if someone had asked me if I would ever consider asking a guy from the squadron on a date, I would have told them they were crazy. And as to considering a relationship? Fuck no. But now, I don’t know what’s changed, but yeah, something has.”

There was silence, and I wasn’t sure what he was thinking. Then, “So are you going to?”

“Going to what?”

“Ask me on that date.”

I was really, really glad no one was in the plane with me to see the grin I was sure that took up half my face. “Chuck Wilder, will you have dinner with me next Friday night?”

“I would be honored. And Davey?”

“Yeah”

“Make reservations somewhere nice. I have the feeling you might get lucky.”

“Woohoo!” I went off into a barrel roll, flipping off the com channel and alerting base I was headed back.

CHAPTER FIVE

Keeping my hands off Chuck for the next week was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. Alex felt better a couple of days later, and Gio was back being my wingman, but I felt... freer than I had ever been. I wasn't ready to come out to everyone on the team, and Gio assured me only a couple of guys knew and the rest wouldn't care. But I wasn't ready. Plus, if this thing crashed and burned, I didn't want to deal with the drama of the homophobes making both our lives miserable.

By the time we flew out and into home NAS SDO and took a commercial flight up to San Francisco, I'd worn my right hand out thinking about all the things I wanted to do with Chuck. But the best part was, we were taking it slowly. We took rooms at a nice hotel off Union Square, and met in the bar for a cocktail before heading up to get some sleep. Alone.

Somehow, Chuck had never been to San Francisco, so the date we'd planned for Friday night stretched into an all-day affair. Visiting Alcatraz, taking the trolley cars, and walking through the Castro, then a taxi ride to the Embarcadero and more of the sights of the city, we made our way back to the hotel to shower and change for dinner. We'd agreed to meet back in the lobby, and take a taxi over to Fior d'Italia, the oldest Italian restaurant in the United States.

What I hadn't counted on was the sight of Chuck in black wool dress slacks and burgundy banded-collar shirt. His black hair shone like raven's wings and his brown eyes made me a little weak, and the sight of him did funny things to me inside. I never considered myself to have even a little bit of poetry in me, but something about this guy did it for me. Made me want to be more, think deeper, try harder. He was... magic.

Evidently he liked what he saw too, because we stood there, staring at each other. Goddamn it but why did we have to go out again? Then I remembered. This guy, he deserved something more than a quick roll on the mattress. He deserved someone who deserved *him*. And if I had any say in it, I would be that guy.

Coughing, I broke the silence. “Ready to head out?”

Chuck nodded, and we made our way into the cool Bay evening. The ride to the restaurant was spent in idle chitchat, the lights of the city just beginning to shine like diamonds on a jeweler’s cloth. As we stood in the doorway of the restaurant, it struck me. In my adult life, I’d never been out on a true date. Fucked, tricked, picked up guys for an hour or two, but never really more than that.

Twenty-eight years old, and a virgin. Well, to the ways of romance anyway. Wasn’t that pathetic?

Some of it must have shown on my face, and Chuck moved in close, bumping shoulders with me. He leaned in and murmured, “This place? Love it. Nobody’s ever taken me out on a date like this. It’s usually beers and bed, you know? This, this is something else, man.” He kissed my cheek. “Thank you.”

Oh, holy Christ on a cracker. I was so done.

We were seated, and appetizers and wine gave way to antipasto and seafood marinara and veal so tender it fell apart on the fork. We had a second bottle of wine and by then, were ready to split a cannoli and panna cotta with fresh berries. I was feeding him bits of the berries with my hand, and he sucked the juice off my fingers. The heat between us was rising, and I was ready to take it back to the hotel. Evidently so was Chuck, who let go of my forefinger with a pop and threw a hand up to signal for our waiter.

Neither of us could keep our hands off the other in the cab on the ride back to the hotel. It had been way too long since I’d been touched by a man, and I wanted him like I’d never wanted anything else, other than flying, in my life. So much so that I didn’t know whether it was the wanting or the wine that drove me to let my guard down and kiss Chuck in the backseat. The taste of sweet ricotta and Chuck drove me crazy. Only in San Francisco, I thought, but then realized I didn’t know that. I’d seen men kissing in cities all over the world, but I’d never had the balls to do it outside a club or the bedroom.

Never letting Chuck go without a touch, I kissed him and held his hand until we arrived back at the hotel. After paying the driver, I held out my hand, feeling shy, and he took it and we walked into the lobby.

“Good evening, gentlemen.” The concierge smiled and nodded to us. “Did you have a good dinner?”

“The best,” I answered and, feeling daring, said, “and now it’s time for dessert.”

The man’s rich baritone laugh followed us to the elevator, and Chuck squeezed my hand. “I like this side of you.”

“I like this side of me too. It’s been... way too long coming.”

When the doors closed on us, I moved behind Chuck and ran my hands around him, pulling him against my chest. My erection pressed into his ass, and he lay back against me with a moan. “Soon,” I promised.

The car stopped with a ding, and I gave Chuck a small push to get him started down the hallway. By silent consent, we moved to my room and after fumbling for the key, we let ourselves in. Chuck pulled me back against him and wrapped his arms around me, taking my mouth in a slow, sweet kiss. “I want to make love to you. Please say I can,” he whispered.

I closed my eyes and shivered. “Please.”

Chuck continued to lick and suck at my ear, stepping back slightly and reaching up to unbutton my shirt. His fingers slid inside, opening the fabric and splaying his hands across my pecs. Moving his mouth to my neck, he found my nipples and tweaked them between his forefinger and thumb. When I groaned and pushed against him, wanting more, he gave me a push and I fell back onto the bed. *When the hell had I moved across the room?* I wondered.

Looking up at him, my mouth went dry. He was so tall and handsome. His eyes went dark, almost black, and all that intensity was focused on me. I raised myself up on my elbows and took him in. “Chuck, I want you naked. Now.” He stood there a moment, then his hands went to his shirt. He unbuttoned it slowly, his fingers sure, and tossing it aside he toed off his shoes while he tugged his belt open and unfastened his pants. They fell to the floor, and *oh God* he had been commando all night. His gaze never leaving mine, he reached down and pulled off both socks before moving towards me.

Fuck but he was beautiful, if you can call a man that. His skin was pale like marble, and the light dusting of hair across the plane of his chest made my

mouth water. My eyes roamed down his body to the thick, strong cock rising from the darkness of his pubes. When he reached down to loosen my belt and yank my pants off my hips and down my legs, I let my head fall back and closed my eyes in anticipation. I felt more than saw him take my shoes and socks off, and sure hands slid my boxer briefs off. My cock, so hard for him, slapped against my stomach.

“Look at me,” he commanded. When I opened my eyes, Chuck crawled onto the bed and, moving us both into the center of the king-sized mattress, stretched himself out on top of me, his body fitting against my own perfectly. We were the same height, the same build, and all that bare skin against mine was heaven. Chuck’s lips grazed across mine, and I chased after them. I had to taste him again, and reaching a hand behind his head, I pulled his mouth to mine and kissed him hard. He brought both hands up and held my face still, pulling back and staring into my eyes. “I want you, Davey. More than I’ve wanted anything my whole life.”

I bucked under him, flipping him off me, and rolled on top of him. Straddling his hips, I leaned back in and attacked his mouth. In between heated kisses, I mumbled nonsense, I know. *Mine. Gotta have you. Chuck, please...*

He thrust his groin up, his shaft rubbing alongside mine. The friction drove me crazy, and I reached between us to take both of us in my hand. We were leaking pre-come, and the heat and slickness felt incredible. Chuck groaned and grabbed hold of my hips, his legs kicking and jerking with pleasure. I leaned down to kiss him again, biting his lower lip and pulling.

“Davey, baby, so good. Please, baby, I need more. I want inside you.”

“Not yet. I want to feel you first.” I let go of our cocks, bringing a moan out of both of us, and moved my hands to his chest. Massaging him, I caught his nipples between my fingers and pinched lightly, laughing when he thrust his chest upwards, begging for more. Bending down, I took one between my teeth and bit, holding his arms by the biceps to keep him in place.

“Patience, babe. I’ll take care of you.”

He fought me, wanting to touch with his hands and his mouth. Bracing his heels against the mattress, Chuck pushed up with his hips, trying to chase after

something, some bit of friction against his cock. It had to be aching, because mine was. I needed him, to have him in me. There would be time later for me to take him, I promised myself. I would give him what he needed, then I would have him on his knees, pounding into him and...

Okay, it was time. I needed to get him inside me before I came. "Are you ready? 'Cause I am, baby. You want me?" I stroked his arms and chest to get his attention. "Just lay there, let me take care of you."

I stretched over to the nightstand and grabbed the bottle of lube and condoms I'd left out before we went to dinner. Sitting back on my haunches, I ripped open the foil and placed the rubber on the head of his cock. "Watch me." His gaze focused, his eyes following me as I rolled the condom down his cock, then popped open the lube's lid and squeezed a stream down his hard cock. Stroking it to cover the shaft, his breath caught, but his eyes never left my hands and what they were doing.

When I squirted out enough lube to cover my fingers, I reached behind myself and circled my hole. He twisted to watch, and groaned as I slowly put one finger inside myself. It felt incredible, and I fought the urge to throw my head back and close my eyes. Adding another finger, then another, stretching myself open, he began to beg. "Please, for the love of God, Davey, you have to... don't tease me anymore. I'll do anything, just touch me. Let me in you. Please."

I let out an evil little laugh. "Anything? Be careful what you ask for, babe. I have an... active... imagination. And a very long memory."

Chuck dragged his gaze up from what I was doing, and my breath caught in my throat. "Anything. Just... I want you. So bad. So bad." The hunger and need I saw on his face, fuck. It was time.

I moved then, straddling his hips and reached down to grab his cock. Holding it straight, I pressed it against my hole and dropped down, feeling the head press against the tight muscles. It'd been way too long since I'd had a man inside me, and I wanted it. Sucking in a deep breath, I blew it out and dropped down onto his dick, taking it all the way in, balls deep. Chuck's shout matched mine, and we both stilled. Fuck, fuck, *fuck!* He was big, I was tight,

but God it felt so good. I focused on loosening my muscles, but I could feel them grip and tighten on Chuck, and his hands grabbed my hips, holding me in place.

“For the love of God, man, please tell me I can move. I think I will explode and blow pieces of us both into the ocean if you don’t tell. Me. I. Can. Move.” His jaw was clenched, and his body was vibrating.

I slowly pulled up, then dropped down again, taking him in even deeper, if that was possible. Chuck panted, and I slid myself up on his shaft again, clenching my ass on him as I rose, and something like a sob escaped from the man under me. This time, when I went to lower myself on him, he thrust upwards and I felt the head of his cock drag against my prostate. I let my head drop back in pleasure, and Chuck took the opportunity to grab my hips, hold me in place, and begin to fuck me. Hard and fast, he pounded up and into me, and I managed to move my hand and grab my cock.

When I began to stroke myself, I tried to match the pace he set. Sparks shot up and down my spine, and I felt my balls tighten and begin to pull up against my groin. Jacking myself furiously, my weight on one arm against the mattress, I looked down and saw Chuck’s face. I almost came. His neck was straining, his mouth open and jaw slack as he sucked in air in great heaves. His rhythm faltered, and his fingers dug into my hips. “I’m... oh, I’m going to, oh fuck, I’m gonna... *come!*”

His whole body went rigid, and I felt the sudden swelling of his cock as he pumped stream after stream into the condom. That’s all it took to take me over the edge, and I shot, ribbons of pearly cream splattering Chuck’s chest and abs. I shuddered, riding through the spasms before falling to the side and collapsing, my eyes closed with pleasure. Small tremors shook me, like aftershocks to an earthquake. I couldn’t remember ever coming that hard, and was vaguely aware when strong arms pulled me closer to a sweaty body.

“Fuck. That was...”

I let out a choked laugh. “Yeah. I haven’t felt that in... ever. It’s never been like that before. Never been that good.” I was too open and vulnerable in that moment to register what I said, much less try to filter my words.

Chuck hugged me tight, and whispered against my jaw. “Me either. I could get used to that. And next time, I want you in me.”

My cock gave a twitch, too worn out to rise to the occasion, but definitely interested. “Give me five minutes.”

His warm breath ghosted across my ear as he laughed. “Make it ten and you got a deal.”

“Mmm. Shut up and kiss me.”

And he did.

EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

“Gio, what the fuck, man?” We were standing on deck, the last rays of sunlight shining off the steely gray plating of the jet.

He looked at me, humor in his face and his eyes sparkling. “Come on, big guy. You know you want it. Beg for it, baby.”

I laughed then. “In your dreams, straight boy. Or have we succeeded in drawing you to the dark side?”

Gio’s proposal in San Francisco had been accepted. For all of a week. When he walked in on his fiancée with two men in their hotel room after he came back early from a called meeting on the ship. He had been ready to celebrate—he was finally awarded the promotion to squadron leader and a transfer to another carrier, when his world came crashing down around him.

The worst thing in the world I could imagine was a crushed Gio. It’s like the sun not shining, like being grounded forever and not allowed to fly. It’s just... not right.

He’d finally called me after going on a bender and ending up in an underwear contest in a bar on Castro. I’m not sure if it was all the attention he was getting, the offer he got to make porn, or the fact he was seriously considering taking a guy up on an offer to pop his cherry. Whatever it was, Chuck and I rescued him and preserved his purity, what there was of it.

The whole experience made him re-think what he wanted, and he decided to stay aboard the Georgetown with the crew we had in place. He liked being my wingman, and in a drunken moment confessed his brotherly love for me and Chuck. I believe his exact words were, “I love you two homos. Not that there’s anything wrong with it. Hell, you can put me in the middle of you two any night and I’d feel safe.”

Of course, the pictures we’d taken on our cell phones of a very drunk, passed out and naked Gio snuggled up between us, butts to nuts, with the caption “Gio is the meat in any sandwich” made for great blackmail material.

For Gio, not for us, though. After two weeks together on shore leave, and three more months dating, we'd decided to come out to the squadron. Who already knew of course, but it was nice to say it out loud.

I'd even come out to my family. That had gone... not as well, but we were working on it. They hadn't reconciled the "gay" with Navy aviator and athlete. But I had hope.

And speaking of hope, I turned and saw Chuck standing on the wing of the plane he'd just landed. Gio slapped me on the shoulder and said, "Hell, if somebody looked at me like you look at him, I wouldn't care if they had an outie instead of an innie."

I looked at my best friend and wingman, and smiled. If he only paid attention, he would have noticed that a certain young aviator—Alex—looked at him like he hung the moon. Ah well, he'd have to figure that one out on his own, I wasn't going to play Cupid.

Yet.

"So what is it you wanted, man? Why was it so important I get my butt back out on deck?"

Again, the grin. "Go up there, my friend. Your buddy has something to ask you."

What the hell? But really, any chance to spend some time with Chuck was good with me. The sun was almost set, and I climbed up on the wing of the Hornet and joined my guy. The view from that height was incredible; the purples and blues of the sky and the setting sun merging with the deep blues and blacks of the water. Amazing. Made a guy believe in God and his country. And love.

"Hey."

"What's up? Gio said you wanted to ask me something. Everything good?" I was suddenly nervous.

Chuck turned to me, the last rays of the sun outlining him. "Never better. Just wanted to ask... what are you doing the rest of your life?"

I saw the small box clutched in his hand and knew.

Raising my gaze, looking at the man I loved, what else could I say?
“Spending it with you.”

THE END

Author Bio

T.A. Webb is the writing name for the Mean Old Bear That Could. By day, he's the director of finance for a non-profit agency. He's worked with people living with HIV/AIDS and with children in the foster care system for over twenty years, and takes the smaller pay for the chance to make a difference for those who can't help themselves. After hours, he's the proud single papa of four rescue dogs, was born and raised in Atlanta, where he still lives, and is a pretty darned good country cook.

His sister taught him to read when he was four, and he tore his way through the local library over the next few years. Always wanting more, he snuck a copy of The Exorcist under his parents' house to read when he was eleven and scared the bejesus out of himself. Thus began a love affair with books that skirt the edge, and when he discovered gay literature, he was hooked for life.

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