

Love's Landscapes

Ren
Sjerne

100
Poetry



TOO PRETTY

This is the story of how Barbarossa (Barbie to his friends) meets Steven. How Steven is an idiot. How drinking can ruin a friendship. And how a meddling cousin keeps everyone in line.

Table of Contents

Blurb	2
Love's Landscapes	4
Too Pretty	6
Acknowledgement	8
Too Pretty	9
Chapter 1	10
Chapter 2	14
Chapter 3	17
Chapter 4	21
Chapter 5	24
Chapter 6	27
Chapter 7	32
Chapter 8	34
Chapter 9	38
Chapter 10	42
Chapter 11	45
Chapter 12	47
Chapter 13	50
Chapter 14	52
Chapter 15	55
Chapter 16	56
Chapter 17	60
Chapter 18	63
Chapter 19	65
Chapter 20	69
Chapter 21	74
Chapter 22	78
Chapter 23	83
Chapter 24	87
Chapter 25	90
Author Bio	92

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

TOO PRETTY

By Ren Stjerne

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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TOO PRETTY

By Ren Stjerne

Photo Description

A young man stands with his eyes closed. He looks calm but confident. His long red hair is tousled by the breeze. His chest is thin and hairless over his jeans, where his thumbs are hooked in his pockets.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I hate it. I hated when this happened with strangers, but when it was someone I thought knew me it was even worse. I liked to wear my hair long, so what? Okay, my features are a little feminine and that green of my eyes is a bit intense, but I am way taller than most guys. I am 1.96m (that's six feet, five inches) for God's sake, how anyone can think I am a girl? I never thought of myself as a girl, I don't wear female clothes, do I? How could have B thought me a girl? And we have been friends for weeks... I thought that I had finally found him, the perfect guy for me. How could I have been so wrong? Oh, I know how—these perfect, stormy grey eyes of him enchanted me, that perfect black hair made me forget my mind, and that body... oh, don't he have the perfect body—so tall and muscular. Who could have thought that I will ever meet a guy taller than me? I have been used to being the tallest guy in class, always. 'Til I came here and met B. How could I have fallen for him so hard and so fast? It was not supposed to happen, because at the end of the day I have only one purpose—to kill.

So, basically, I want some sort of a paranormal romance. Yes, I am thinking that the MCs are still students (seniors in High school or they might be in college, authors choice). "B" is a replacement for a name. He is taller, black-haired, grey eyes and straight—can be human or not.

The MC is androgynous; a redheaded beauty with emerald-green eyes (pretty much got him from the picture, yes). He is NOT human but what he is is author's choice—alien, cyborg, vampire, shifter (doubt that a werewolf will fit but maybe some feline shifter), angel, cambion, nephilim, some ancient god, you name it... Even though he is so tall, he is often mistaken for a girl; he is way stronger than a normal human and trained to kill. What powers he is

supposed to have is also author's choice (I guess that will depend on what he actually is). He is new in town and B makes a move on him, mistaking him for a girl. What happens after? The POV can be first- or third-person and it can follow any of the MCs or switch.

I think I forgot to mention that we need some bad guys. Who they will be and what they want I will leave to the author's imagination. Only thing I DON'T want in the story is sexual abuse, past or present, pretty please. Everything else is okay.

I am sorry the letter became so long, I really hope that's not a big problem.

Thank you so very much!

Sincerely,

Desislava

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, paranormal

Tags: paranormal/fire being, college, first time, friends to lovers, double gay for you, humorous, PTSD, depression

Content Warnings: violence/death of unnamed characters, alcohol: because no great story ever started with someone eating a salad.

Word Count: 31,547

Acknowledgement

For Beulah Mae—you taught me so much about life.

TOO PRETTY

By Ren Stjerne

Chapter 1

Barbie

Bright lights. Burned into my brain. Pierced through my eyelids.

What had I done to deserve this agony?

Oh yeah, I forgot to close the curtains last night. I was still getting used to sleeping under an east facing window, with its daily unwelcome intruder.

The delights that came with being mostly human.

A tall, rail-thin human. I may have looked like a pushover, but I was the wolf in sheep's clothing.

On that note, this wolf mustn't forget to eat, so I grabbed an apple as I headed out the door to my first day at Auburn University.

Luckily, I already knew someone in my first class.

When I was lugging my stuff into my new apartment, a beautiful blonde bombshell lurked in the hallway. When she saw me, she walked over to me, reached up, and grabbed my hair. Well, maybe not grabbed, more like stroked and fondled. If hair could be sexually harassed, mine would have been calling for a lawyer.

"You have such beautiful hair. I just want to pet it and play with it," she said, disregarding the fact that she already was petting it. Her face showed how much she coveted my hair. I started to worry that I'd never be able to get free before she stroked me bald.

"Thank you, I think." I tried to get my hair loose, but she had unexpectedly fast hands. "Have we met?" I was sure I'd never seen her before. It was impossible to forget someone who wouldn't release my hair. Her stylish jeans and cute fitted shirt indicated she probably wasn't a squatter. Everything else faded away when I saw her blue eyes. Big, fake-contact-blue, eyes.

"We just did. I'm Crissy."

Blink, blink. She considered invading my personal space and molesting my hair as "meeting"?

"I'm Barbarossa Atar, but everyone calls me Barbie." I couldn't help introducing myself. I was raised to be polite.

“Barbie, huh? You’re too pretty to be a Barbarossa, for sure.”

Not that again. “I’m not pretty, damn it.” I finally grabbed my hair at the base of my skull, and just pulled it from her greedy, grasping hands, then comfortingly held it over my shoulder.

“Keep telling yourself that, hon.”

It was hard not to like her, and I didn’t even try. Her open and innocent smile hid the downfall of worlds. It wasn’t long before she invited herself over to my apartment and took over my unpacking. It was slightly disconcerting how fast she had control of where I put my boxers. *A man should never give up control of his boxers.*

As she put away my stuff, she told me all about color and fabric and texture. I, in turn, tuned the finer points out. Actually, all the points. What use would I have in knowing that a chocolate suede would go with a beige corduroy?

I needed furniture, and once she found out my budget was a bit bigger than most incoming students, she dragged me shopping. Almost against my will.

My place soon reeked of domesticity. From the modern cream couch to the dainty little end tables. I even had drapes over my venetian blinds. She made me realize that I would have been living in a college bachelor pad if she hadn’t interfered. That would have been a bad thing, at least from her perspective. From my perspective, having my own place was all that mattered.

Within a week, we were almost inseparable.

Monday morning, bright and early, I tried to find the safest parking spot for my baby while I was on campus. My baby was my candy-apple-red Chevelle. No way was I trying to get the closest space. That was a sure way to have some idiot scrape her. I found a nice outside corner spot, no cars in front or to the right.

I parked a little further away than I anticipated so I hurried across the acres of blacktop so I wouldn’t be late.

I rushed up the stairs to the second floor of the liberal arts center to find my classroom. I had a few minutes to spare. Even then, most of the seats in the front were already taken. Some sorority girls giggled and talked about some frat party they got wasted at. The frat boys were all wearing their letters, making them easy to spot. Spread through the room were the regular students; the ones that didn’t have to buy their friends.

Near the back, Crissy waved at me and pointed to the open seat behind her. I squeezed her shoulder as I sat down, grateful that she'd kept a spot for me.

This was Great Books I. A freshman literature class, full of, well, freshmen. When we talked about our schedules just after meeting, I saw that we both needed this class. I lucked out because Crissy kept putting it off. I just hadn't gotten around to it while I was at junior college. I grabbed the last empty space in the class that she was already registered for.

"At least this class won't be all freshmen. Glad you switched into this class with me." She smiled at me with the radiance of a nuclear explosion. Damn, she was such a little bonfire of good cheer.

"Yeah, I got the last spot." I grinned back. Once she made sure I was where she wanted me, she kept glancing at the door every so often. I wondered who she was waiting on. It didn't take long to find out.

"Hey, Steven!" Crissy waved at the last man to walk in the room. Crissy was so excited, I was worried she would wet herself. I certainly didn't get that kind of reaction out of her.

When he'd first walked in, I'd thought he might be the professor. He looked a lot more mature than the rest of our classmates. He didn't have the fresh fruit aura that everyone else had.

I was freakishly tall at six five, but he could be even taller with the way his big body filled the doorway. His soft gray eyes swept over to where Crissy was gesticulating madly. I watched as he lost the stern expression on his face upon seeing her. He gave a small wave and made his way through the sea of desks to take the one to the right of me.

"Crissy, how are you? I haven't seen you in so long. How're your folks?" he asked her quietly as he leaned across me so he didn't have to raise his voice to talk to her. I caught a whiff of his deodorant. Somebody liked Old Spice. I normally didn't, but it fit him. He had that hyper masculine look to him.

"I'm great! My folks are fine. They moved to a new house after I left. They didn't need all that room," Crissy said, almost in one breath. Then she waved towards me. "I want you to meet my friend, Barbie. Barbie, this is my cousin, Steven." Her hands continued to flutter like trapped birds as she waited for me.

"Hi, Steven," I managed to say. Being the recipient of that smoky gaze was enough to put me off my game. *What? Hang on a minute. What game? Why in the world would I think that?* I felt my heart rate pick up. *Be cool, be cool.* No

need to make a fool of myself. This was really quite alarming. I had never noticed anyone like I was noticing Steven. The way his eyes were the color of the smoke from burning tires, blacks and grays swirled together. How his shoulders were broad enough to shoulder any weight.

“Nice to meet you, Barbie. Crissy used to be a bit of trouble,” he said, as he smiled at me with his slightly crooked smile. “I can tell she still is.”

Just then, the professor walked up to his lectern, two minutes late. He dropped his case on the top of it. “If I can have your attention, this is Great Books I. If this is not where you should be, please leave now.” No one left.

This guy definitely looked like a professor, maybe early middle-age, black hair, and tweed jacket included. “Some of you will hate me and curse my name for this semester, so please make sure you pronounce it correctly when you do. I am Dr. Dvorak. Remember the v is soft as silk and smooth as a whisper in church,” he said.

He pulled a stack of papers from his case and started passing them to the folks at the front of the rows. “You may have heard about me from others, but I assure you that the rumors are false. The only way to pass this class is to study the books and think about how they relate to their time and culture. Remember to come see me if you have any questions; my office hours are listed on your syllabus.”

Class continued, but most of my attention kept wandering over to the man beside me. I wondered if Steven would be taller than I was. Then I wondered why I was even paying attention to things like that. Steven was paying attention to the professor, not to me. It shouldn't have mattered, but I was a bit irked by it anyway.

I never had been interested in men like that, or women for that matter. Sex was on my list of things to try, but it was never at the top. At least, sex with women was never at the top. Sex with men hadn't even made it into the same room that the list was in. Was that even an option?

Chapter 2

Steven

The nightmares kept me company and, like all unwelcome visitors, they wouldn't leave. After fighting most of the night, I finally surrendered to the lure of sleep. The only thing to wake me was a call from my mother. Apparently, I'd slept through my alarm.

Sometimes it felt like my mother was smothering me. She called almost every day. I was only a couple hours away; it wasn't like I was across the country.

When I went off to war, she cried. After I was in an IED attack in Afghanistan, she put on a strong front for me while I was recovering and all through rehab. She hadn't thought it was a fair trade; her only child going to war in order to pay for college. She had tried, but there just wasn't spare cash for tuition. That didn't leave a lot of options for me.

When I was registering for classes, my mother told me my cousin was going to the same university. There was even a class that we could share. Just to help me adjust, of course. Not to interfere or keep an eye on me.

My first class was in a small classroom on the second floor. There were maybe thirty folks in the class. It didn't take long to scan all the faces. At least there was one other older guy in with all of the young folks.

Then I saw her. She waved at me and called my name.

Crissy was the same heartbreaker that I last saw as a bubbly teenager learning to drive her dad's old Honda. Even then, no one could be mad at her when she drove into the picnic tables at the family reunion. That was way back when I was on one of my first leaves. I hadn't been home since.

The years had been incredibly kind to her, filling her out into a stunning woman.

As beautiful as she was, her friend Barbie put her to shame. Barbie had the biggest green eyes I'd ever seen and long red hair that reached down to her ass. Since she was seated, I couldn't tell exactly how tall she was. Her legs were folded up and promised to unfold into miles and miles of perfection.

What was I doing? I needed to pay attention to the professor, not let my mind wander. *Eyes front and center, soldier.* Even if the territory to the side was pretty nice to wander into.

What the hell? I hadn't been this affected by a woman in years. Out of the corner of my eye, I could just see her. She was model skinny. I couldn't tell much about her chest under the loose shirt when she was leaning forward like that. Which was perfectly fine, because I was always a leg and ass man anyway. Her voice had been soft and, while not as deep as a man's, was not an annoying high pitch either. Was she single?

I could see her watching me all through class. I hoped she liked what she saw and wasn't staring because I'd put my shirt on backwards or something.

When we were released, Barbie rushed out of the classroom saying to Crissy that she had to get to her next class on the other side of campus. When I looked up from grabbing my books and notebook, I barely had enough time see more than long legs disappearing out the door.

Crissy grabbed my arm from behind. It was all I could do to keep from swinging at her in surprise. She didn't need to know how tightly I was wound. The war had changed me, I was no longer as trusting of people's motives.

Interacting with people as a civilian was still a challenge for me, but Crissy more than compensated for my failings by carrying most of the conversation. Once she had my attention, she told me all about how the family was doing. She wasn't in a hurry since she had nearly an hour to kill before her next class. I couldn't lie to her, so I told her I had about the same before my next class, too.

While I had been close to her before I left, since she was my only cousin, I could tell that now I was going to be one of her friends, whether I wanted to or not.

Tuesday, I headed for the Student Activity Center after my last class. On my way to the entrance, I ran into my cousin and her gaggle of girls. It was obvious that she was the ringleader with Barbie towering behind her and the others surrounding her.

Damn, Barbie was almost a head taller than my cousin. She was the high point of the group. When the girls saw me, they spread out, and I got my first chance to really look at Barbie. She was definitely all leg. Her hair was tied back in a sloppy bun with a few strands making a break for freedom.

“What are you ladies up to?”

“We’re just heading in to yoga. Why don’t you join us? It would be good for you,” Crissy said as she looked me up and further up.

That’s when I noticed the yoga mats all the girls carried. The thought of seeing Barbie bending and flexing and posing in those tight pants was an intriguing one. Too bad I couldn’t stand in the back and just spectate. I was sure that was frowned on.

“Sorry, can’t. I’ve got to,” I racked my brains for an excuse, “go lift some weights.”

“If you won’t join us now, why don’t you come out to the club tomorrow night? We’re going to the Blue Room I’ll even let you buy me a drink,” Crissy called with a wink as the pack headed inside and turned into one of the studios. I saw Barbie giving me a little extra eyeball before turning away.

Maybe, just maybe, I would check out the Blue Room. Just to see Barbie.

Chapter 3

Barbie

The Student Act housed the campus gym, pools, indoor courts, tracks and workout class studios. One of the teachers from the college of agriculture taught yoga on Tuesdays, once classes were in session.

Crissy made sure all of her friends were going. We all trooped towards the entrance, some more enthusiastically than others. When Crissy caught sight of her cousin, we stopped for them to talk for a minute. He didn't seem too excited about the prospect of joining us for yoga or going to the club. Too bad. I wasn't going to let that ruin what I hoped to be a good class.

Our group claimed quite a large space in the back. We rolled out our mats and faced the teacher.

Dr. Susan McCall was a tiny, vivacious woman with short brown hair and laughing brown eyes. Her mat was already laid out in front of the wall of mirrors.

At 5:01, some late-comers caused a bit of a ruckus. They set up right beside me while continuing their friendly argument. I snuck a glance and saw our Great Books professor and a student with shaggy blond hair and brown eyes. I hadn't expected to see my professor outside of class and certainly not doing yoga.

"Not manly, my ass. Are you trying to say something about me? Are you saying that I'm not manly? I'll kick your ass," the little blond said. He barely looked old enough to shave, much less be attending college.

"Nice of you guys to join us," said the instructor. "It's good to see some men taking an interest in their bodies."

"I'm just here to keep him company," Professor Dvorak said dryly.

"No matter why, at least you're here. Maybe you'll learn something that will keep your body flexible as you start to age," she said.

I admit that in loose shorts and a henley, Dr. Dvorak looked a lot younger. He could almost pass as an older student.

"Yeah bro, you don't want to lose any flexibility as you age," Blondie snickered. Dr. Dvorak flipped the blond off as we assumed our first positions.

“Remember to breathe as you stretch each muscle,” she said loudly as she demonstrated while rolling her back until she had her hands on the mat in front of her. “Inhale as you reach down, now exhale and stack your spine back up. Feel your body growing taller.” She reversed the process until she was standing straight with her shoulders back.

From our place in the back of the room, I covertly watched Dr. Dvorak struggle to finish. His fingers didn't make it to his mat before he rolled back up.

I didn't have that much trouble when I started. I tried to focus on the instructor, but this wasn't an advanced class, and I could practically do these forms in my sleep. I couldn't help eavesdropping and sneaking the occasional peek out the corner of my eye.

“We can't all be as flexible as your little, twinkly ass, Sam,” Dr. Dvorak whispered to him. “You know it's not fair to show off when you have no intention of following through with anyone here.”

If I hadn't been right beside them, I doubt I would have heard, even with my better than human hearing. I wondered just what the connection was between them. It seemed strange for a student and a professor to be just hanging out.

“How do you know I'm not looking to get it on with someone here?” Sam grinned and winked over to Dr. Dvorak.

“Because no one, other than me, has anything below the waist that would interest you, and you know I'm not into dick.” He paused while he took a big breath, stretched his right arm over his head, and tried to bend his body. “Haven't you been looking? This is a good sized campus. There is bound to be at least one guy interested in your type.”

I was surprised by how casual Sam was about his sexuality. Dr. Dvorak was joking like it was something completely normal to be bantering back and forth about. I hadn't really thought about how life would be different for a gay person. Actually, I didn't think there should be any difference either.

I had never been around any gay folks. At least, I didn't think I had. Small town Alabama was not the most open and accepting place to come out. With all the different folks, this probably was the best place around to be gay.

After yoga, Crissy came over to my place for dinner. In honor of working out, I'd made a light meal for us. This was also a celebration of having had all

our first sessions of every class. We didn't really need a reason. We gossiped about the different professors and the occasional strange student.

Over dessert, I brought up something that had been on my mind. "Your cousin seems interesting, but isn't he a bit old to be starting college?"

"He was in the Army for a while. He's on the GI bill or something. Mom thought it would be nice for him to have a class with me for his first semester." She paused. "Not like I'm supposed to babysit him or anything. He's four years older than I am, but when my aunt and my mom got it into their heads, there was no stopping them."

I just appeared in a hospital as a newborn, so I didn't have any experience with over-protective parents. Sometimes I wondered about other people's relationships. "I can see you are all broken up over the hardship."

"Just wait till I can get him to open up, and then I'll set him up with one of my friends. It'll be great." Then she looked at me harder. "Megan thinks you're cute. Why don't you ask her out sometime?"

The quick change of topic nearly caught me off guard. "Is she the short brunette that was wearing that bright purple dress at your place last Saturday?" I had noticed and might have stared a bit too much. It was only because I didn't see why someone would voluntarily wear something like that.

"Yes, that's her. I saw you noticing her at the party."

"Umm, she's not really my type." I squirmed a little bit. I had no intention of asking her out. I thought fast. "She's too short for me."

"She's not that short with heels on." Crissy was sealing up all the exits for me.

She wasn't going to buy that excuse. I had to admit it was a lame one. Time to fess up.

"Okay, I noticed her because that dress was hideous. I couldn't believe she wasn't blind." I hoped that would be the end of her pushing to hook me up with someone.

She thought about it for a second, then nodded. "That dress was pretty bad. I didn't think you were interested in fashion."

"I'm not. That's how bad it was."

Crissy burst out laughing. "Okay, then. Not Megan."

Time to change the subject, before she thought of someone else. “What about you? Why don’t you have someone special, if you’re so determined to throw your friends to the wolves?”

She looked me over. “You’re really not my type.” Crissy wasn’t my type either, so there was no conflict there.

“I know that. But what is yours then?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but if I wasn’t related to Steven, he’d be mine.”

I thought about it. I was nowhere near being that bulky. There was a time when I was a mass of muscles. Again I was grateful that I was no longer bound to that life.

“So you like ’em big and beefy? Or just tall and dark?” I asked. If she could meddle, I could be on the lookout for her too.

“All of it, and older too. I want a man, not a little boy.”

“So what am I? Chopped liver?” I faked a bit of indignation.

“You’re a man, but you aren’t that masculine.” She said it without a hint of remorse.

“Fair enough.” I had to agree with her there. Even though I kept my body in shape, I just seemed to burn through the calories leaving me stick thin. I had never been corporeal long enough to grow out my hair before, so, after centuries of short or shaved hair, I was not going to cut it now. Trim the split ends, add a little conditioner, and I had better hair than a lot of women. I knew that well-taken-care-of long hair wasn’t considered manly. Sometimes strangers mistook me for a really tall girl. Not that often, but sometimes.

Chapter 4

Steven

Our second meeting of the Great Books class started to sound interesting. Dr. Dvorak assigned *Dracula* as our first book.

“Now, for your first writing assignment. Most mythical or paranormal beings are created by man’s needs. I want you each to pick a creature or being and explain why it would have been imagined, why each particular weakness, and a description of the society that needed it.”

He continued, “You have two days to figure out which one you want. No duplicates, so everyone will need to sign up with which creature they picked on Friday.”

“What do you mean ‘why it was imagined’? Don’t you think there might be some truth to the legends?” said a goth-looking girl dressed in black with dyed black hair. “There are too many accounts for things like vampires to be fake”

“I’ll give you that there are a lot of vampire stories, but have you noticed that they mostly seem to describe different creatures? From huge monstrosities that can be killed with garlic or holy items to sparkles in the sun. We have them turning to mist, to bats, to one giant bat. Each of these descriptions served a purpose. The sparkly vampire is to teach you to accept others. While the big scary monster vampire is to show that if you face your fear, you can overcome it. Any other questions?” Dr. Dvorak looked around the room. The goth chick was silent.

Everyone seemed to be thinking hard about what they would do. Crissy looked lost in thought, but somehow I thought she might pick fairies. For myself, I was going to go with zombies. Some days I felt just like that, all hollow inside.

Crissy’s invitation to go to the club ran around my brain all day. I hadn’t been to a bar or club in a long time. The crowds never appealed to me, and lately, they flat out made me uncomfortable. All those people in a tight space just screamed at my instinct to search for the threat. It was a difficult decision. On the one hand, there would be lots of people and noise. On the other hand, Barbie might dance.

The Blue Room seemed pretty full for a weeknight. I walked through the door and was hit with the heat. August in the south, with this many people, made most air conditioning systems raise the white flag. It wasn't standing room only, but more than I was okay being around. Most of the folks were out on the dance floor. Only a few were at the bar.

Pulsing through the steamy air, the music thrummed my ears. I didn't recognize what was playing, just that it was a lot of bass with some kind of electronic shrieking over the top. Typical dance club music.

I pushed on through. Finally, gleaming in the multicolor lights, I saw Barbie's brilliant red hair over everyone else. Just seeing someone I knew in the crowd did a lot to calm me. I hadn't realized how worked up I was until it just flowed away like the spring rains.

I tried to avoid touching the folks on the dance floor. Most of them let me pass, but someone grabbed my ass. That made me push through harder. When I got closer, I saw all of the ladies from yoga dancing and grinding on each other. My eyes immediately tracked to Barbie, who had one of Crissy's friends wrapped around her front. That was fucking hot, I had to admit. The way Barbie was wiggling and thrusting with the music was way too captivating.

Barbie was the first to notice me. She turned around and looked straight at me. Those sparkling eyes seemed to see right through to me. She stopped dancing and tapped Crissy to get her to look over and see me.

"I'm so glad you could make it!" Crissy shouted over the noisy club when I got closer. She grabbed Barbie and me by the elbow. Crissy was a fierce little bulldozer as she shoved through the crowd. Somehow, she managed to keep a hand on both of us. I pitied any girl that got in her way. I think she was using her heels as weapons.

She shoved us onto bar stools before climbing up on hers. "Now you can buy me that drink. Get me a Cosmopolitan."

What could I say besides, "Yes, Ma'am."

When the bartender arrived, I ordered Crissy's Cosmo and a Sam Adams for myself. I was about to ask Barbie what she wanted, but she had already caught the other bartender's eye and ordered an Old Fashioned. She whipped out the cash and paid for her drink before I could even think to offer to pay. I was glad to see that she didn't expect to be waited on, but I wasn't so glad to lose a chance to be a gentleman.

I leaned over to ask Barbie. "What's your major?"

"Building Science. I've always wanted to leave something that could stay for centuries." Barbie grinned at me. "But it will probably get bulldozed to put in a shopping mall." She paused. "What about you? What's your major?"

"I'm in Mechanical Engineering. I think I want to do something with cars." I tried to keep my explanation simple. No use boring her to tears.

"Oh yeah? What kind of cars?"

"Old school muscle, like 60s or 70s era big block Chevies. Restoring or modifying the ones that have been left to rust or seize up. I want to design mods and..." I stopped myself mid-sentence when I remembered I was talking to a woman, not one of the guys. I wanted to make a good impression, not bore her to tears.

"Very cool. It was hard to find a cowl induction system that fit my Chevelle. Don't get me started on trying to find aftermarket parts and old original stock parts. And trying to get them all to work together... And god forbid you actually want to upgrade something." Barbie leaned towards me, her eyes lighting up as she spoke.

Maybe talking about cars wouldn't put her to sleep. "Exactly! Unless you can find all original parts, getting everything to work together is a nightmare. I want to be able to have my upgrades fit with new and aftermarket." We kept talking, and I was surprised to find a kindred spirit in this woman. I would have talked to Barbie about cars all night, but Crissy thwarted that plan.

"Okay, boys. Let's go dance for a bit before you disappear under the hood," Crissy said as we finished our drinks. She grabbed both of us by the arm and dragged us back on the dance floor. Crissy sandwiched Barbie between us. I'd never been a fan of dancing, much preferring to stay at the bar and watch. Barbie rubbing her ass against me was changing my mind.

Chapter 5

Barbie

I was so thankful that Crissy had managed to slide me away from Amber when Steven showed up. Not that there was anything wrong with Amber, but she was way too friendly with my front and my back. There was no way to turn where she wasn't right up on me and trying to climb me like a stripper pole. I felt a little slimy after being practically dry humped on the dance floor.

I could feel the fire burning within me wanting to purify my skin. Ah, to be cleansed in flame again. I had left most of that previous lifestyle behind, but on occasion, nothing beat a good burn. I was overdue for one anyway, and it would get that icky feeling off me at least.

It was amazing how much Steven and I had in common once we started talking about cars. We even had similar views on full restoration versus mods and upgrades. I missed having someone to share this with since I moved here. Not that Crissy and company couldn't talk my ear off, but none of them were the least bit interested in discussing the merits of fuel injection versus carburetors. Hell, I don't know if they could spot the difference between a Mustang and a Challenger.

Crissy wasn't fond of our topic of conversation as she gulped down her drink. I allowed myself to be dragged back on the dance floor. This time at least, Crissy and Steven protected me from Amber. I guess she had followed behind us, but I hadn't even noticed her. I could see her back at the bar, still eyeballing me. Crissy was a good friend for finally getting me away from her.

It was so freeing to be able to just feel the music and move my body with the rhythm. Like battle, there was an ebb and flow to the music and the crowd. It wasn't long before Steven and Crissy went back to the bar.

When I noticed that the crowd was thinning out, I joined Steven and Crissy for last call. The rest of Crissy's friends had left already.

"It was great talking to you, Barbie. Here, give me a call sometime. I'd love to see your car," Steven said, as he handed me a folded napkin. I glanced at the message and number written inside and had to smile. Now I had a friend I could share my hobby with. It was a good night.

First thing when I got home, I had to shower off the feel of the club. I could smell the smoke clinging to my hair, and my arm felt sticky from where someone had spilled some beer on me.

It was after two a.m. by the time I was ready to go to bed. I had just slipped under my big feather comforter when my cell rang with a blocked number. I groaned as I sat up and the comforter fell away from my chest. I knew I had to take the call. Just because it was part of the deal, didn't mean I had to like it.

"Hello, Trillian," I said when I connected to the almost eerie silence on the other end. I was never quite sure where she patched in to the transmission, but Trillian's calls always bypassed the actual cell towers. No one could listen in on her calls. Fuck the NSA.

"Barbarossa, you're needed for a quick job in Beijing. I'll text you the address. The head of the Xian Hua syndicate and his top enforcers will all be there. This needs to look like an accident, but no one gets out alive." There was no click, but the quality of silence changed from someone on the other end to the lack of connection. I looked down to see that the phone had recognized this too and closed my end of the call.

One beep and I had the address.

I sighed. My bed was going to have to wait. I threw on a T-shirt and shorts. I could feel the tension creeping back into my body as I went outside and around to a blind alley behind my apartment. A nice, concealed little hideaway with no windows looking into it was the real reason I had picked this apartment. I took off my clothes and stashed them between the wall and a drain pipe. Then I centered myself and reached out for that cleansing flame. It started at my feet and poured over my body like napalm to my outstretched hands, turning my body to flame.

No one noticed the speck of light that raced across the sky.

Two hours later, I was standing, naked, in an alley across from a small, three-story office building on the outskirts of Beijing. No one was outside. The neighborhood was so poor and rundown, it was almost surprising an office building was still standing. The ramshackle dwellings gave the building a wide berth. The locals knew what lurked in their midst.

It was just after dark, a perfect time to catch all the rats at once. I felt no remorse. Trillian would have done all the research, and she had never been wrong. Sometimes she was a bit bloodthirsty. But then, who wasn't? We can't all be sweetness and light.

I summoned the flame and used the intense spark to weld the doors and windows shut. No one would be leaving. I worked in perfect silence, making sure the building was completely sealed. They were trapped like rats and didn't even know it yet.

There was no grandstanding or evil villain monologue. These people had committed multiple crimes, multiple times. They ruled their territory with a bloody fist and dirty money. No corrupt judge in this city would find them guilty, so I was called in. There were no innocents here.

I reached out through the heat in the air and could feel the fuel for an inferno in the gas lines to the heating system. It was quite old and in bad shape. Searching a little more, I found where the lines had a little extra stress from being bent around a corner. Someone hadn't studied fuel line safety, not that it would have mattered against me. I always find a way. A little nudge and a little spark and the fireball engulfed the basement. My fire burned away everything.

It didn't take long before the smoke billowed up onto the first floor, rolling up the stairs, creeping through the vents. When the people realized there was a fire, they tried to flee. They scurried around, trying to escape. Faces pressed against the windows and then fell back. The cries of those trapped were silenced by the clouds of noxious smoke.

Once the first floor was burning nicely, I unsealed the windows. The fire sucked in the night air and fed the flames into a roaring inferno. Even then, I gave it more energy to burn even hotter. Within minutes, there was nothing left but ashes.

I flared bright and was on my way home.

Chapter 6

Steven

I was amazed at how much fun I had at the club with Crissy and Barbie. It was so rare to find a woman who shared my love of classic cars. I couldn't wait to find out what else we had in common. Hopefully Barbie would call me so I could see her again.

When I got a text from her two days later, I jumped at the chance to invite her to come over on Saturday. She said she would come over around noon to look at my project car and watch some NFL pre-season football that afternoon. After so many years of hanging out with the other grunts, I was glad that adjusting to civilian life was not as overwhelming as I had anticipated. I could do this.

After the IED, I knew that I was not going to be a career soldier. During my recovery, I had a lot of time to think about my life and how to start living it. I was ready to think of my future.

I put my affairs in order and found a house for sale. Actually, it was my mom that found it and took video of it for me. It had potential, if I could fix it up while I went to school. After I got out of rehab, I was finally able to behold the mess in all its glory. It was a single story brick house. The hedges were above the front windows. The drive was cracked. It would need a new roof soon. The inside reeked of piss and pot. And it was all mine.

It took me the whole week before classes started to chop the hedges into manageable stumps. At least I didn't have to commit crape murder; they were just boxwoods, according to my mom.

I ripped out the nasty carpeting. The rough hardwoods under the area rugs would just have to wait to be refinished. I didn't even bother trying to sort out the second bathroom. I didn't know what color to paint everything, so I just left that, too.

Saturday morning, I woke up anticipating someone coming to my house. My mother raised me that you didn't have company over to a messy house. I took one trip around collecting the random dirty laundry that, somehow, managed to escape the confines of the laundry hamper. Or had never made it that far, like my socks under the coffee table and my boxers under the pedestal sink in the bathroom. Or the towels on the floor beside my dresser.

I straightened the cushions on the couch. I washed the few dishes in the sink, drying and then putting them away. Once it was as presentable as I could make it, I couldn't stay inside and wait quietly. I'd just wait for her outside.

I was working on tuning the carburetor for my '67 Corvette Stingray when I heard the muted roar of hundreds of horses rearing to go. That sound spoke to my love of muscle, drawing my eyes to try to see what it was. A beautiful candy-apple-red Chevelle turned slowly onto my street. I straightened up in surprise as it pulled to a stop on the street in front of my house.

I had to keep my chin up so I wouldn't drool over the sight of that long leg stepping out onto the curb. Barbie was wearing tight jeans and a baggy Auburn jersey. When she turned to shut the door, she bent just enough for the jersey to cling to her ass. I could stare at that ass all day.

"Hey, I brought some drinks for me and some beer for you. Sam Adams, right?" Barbie said as she went to the passenger side of the car and pulled out two six packs. "Where's your fridge?"

"Follow me, and I'll show you." I led her inside and to the left to the small kitchen. I couldn't help watching her ass as she leaned over a bit to put the beer and her hard cider into my barren fridge. There was plenty of room for the alcohol. I still hadn't learned how to cook, so there was no point in stocking up on stuff I would never use.

When she closed the door on my fridge, she turned to face me. "So how close to running is that Stingray you were working on?"

I cleared my throat. "Pretty close. It dies after turning over. I just replaced the carburetor. I need someone to give me a hand tuning it. After that, I still have the interior and a bit of body work to do."

"Okay, let's see about that carb. Is the key in the ignition?"

"Yeah, it's there," I said as Barbie turned around and was out the door.

She was in the driver's seat in seconds. "Tell me how much gas it needs as we go."

I was surprised at how willing Barbie was to actually work on my car. I assumed that she'd had help on her Chevelle, but it looked like she was completely honest about cars being a hobby.

Twenty minutes later, the Stingray was purring right along. After Barbie helped put the cover back over it, she showed me all the mods and restoration

she had done to her Chevelle. My admiration for her dedication to her car just kept rising.

We ordered a large pepperoni pizza for lunch and settled on the couch to catch the kickoff. By half time, we both had our shoes and socks off and feet propped up on the coffee table. I noticed that Barbie had long, elegant feet that weren't out of proportion for her height. I'd always thought foot fetishists were a weird group of people, but after seeing her feet, I got it. The way the curve of her arch echoes the curve of her backside. Each toe almost dainty and topped with a perfectly trimmed little nail. I had to get my eyes and my mind off her feet before I did something that would embarrass us both, like licking her ankle.

I forced my attention back to the screen. When the quarterback got chop blocked and it wasn't flagged, Barbie yelled at the refs and the teams just as much as I did. It was amazingly comfortable just spending time with Barbie. To think, I had been worried about relating to civilians again.

I enjoyed Barbie's company so much on Saturday, when she invited me over for dinner on Monday, I didn't even hesitate. Barbie's place was filled with the aroma of spices. The small table near her kitchen area was loaded down with chicken tagine and couscous. I'd expected take out or something really simple, but she definitely showed off her skills as a chef.

We talked about everything, from politics to what movies we liked. By the time I left, I felt like I knew a lot more about who Barbie was. I had to wonder though, was there anything she wasn't good at? She was way too amazing not to have guys lined up to go out with her.

On Tuesday, I decided to call my mother. A preemptive attack as it were. I had a better chance of catching her when she didn't have enough time to talk my ear off if she didn't know I was going to call. Not that I didn't enjoy talking to her, just she would go on and on about my health.

I grabbed a beer and settled onto my couch. I had splurged to make sure that I had a great couch. It was butter-soft, brown leather that felt great to slouch against, and it was long enough for me to lie down on and use the armrests as pillows. It was perfect for relaxing after class or sharing with a friend.

My mother picked up on the third ring.

"Hey, Mom, how are you?" I hoped I sounded cheerful.

“Steven? Why, I wasn’t expecting you to call.” She paused. “I’m doing good. Just got home from work about an hour ago. Is anything wrong?”

This time I did smile. It wasn’t often that I called instead of the other way around. “No, nothing’s wrong. I just wanted to talk to you for a minute, since I haven’t spoken to you in a couple days. Classes are going pretty good, but I can hardly understand a word my calculus teacher says.”

“Are you taking notes in that class? Are you doing some extra studying for him?” Even though she had never been to college, she researched it just to talk to me about it.

“Yeah, I’m taking notes on everything he puts up. I keep up with the bookwork, too.” I took a sip of my beer.

“That’s good. Have you had any more pain from all the walking around campus? You told me you walked a long way around campus each day.” She couldn’t hide the worry in her voice. Sometimes I forgot just how much she cared.

“My legs are fine, Mom. They haven’t hurt me in months,” I said. I knew what she was going to ask next, so I went ahead and brought it up. “My head is fine, too. I haven’t had any more headaches, and my vision is clear. I barely even remember the blast now.” Okay, so I stretched the truth a little bit.

“Why don’t you talk to that therapist that your doctor recommended for you? I think it would help you feel better.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Mom, I told you, I’m fine.”

She paused, and I could almost hear her mental cannon realigning on a new topic. “Do you like having a class with Crissy? She said that she likes having her favorite big cousin around again. Are you making any new friends? Crissy said she’d introduced you to her friends already.”

“I better be her favorite; I’m her only cousin. I’ve hung out with one of her friends a couple times. Barbie knows a lot about cars, too. She’s just so warm and funny and I feel like I’ve known her forever already, but I can’t wait to learn more about her.” Shit, I hadn’t meant to say that.

My mom’s mental compass pointed due girlfriend. “Barbie, is it? Do you think there could be something with her? You have so much to offer a nice girl. Why don’t you take her out on a date?” She always insisted on seeing things in the best possible light when it came to me.

“No, Mom, I’m not asking her out. She’s way too pretty to be interested in me like that. She’s just a friend.” Maybe I could convince myself of that, because I don’t think my mom bought it.

“Don’t be putting yourself down. Any girl would be lucky to have you.” She paused. “As long as you’re okay. Your Aunt Hannah and I are going out to dinner tonight, so I’m going to have to run.”

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, Steven.”

I hung up. Sometimes I thought my mom might still see me as I was before I enlisted. I wished I was that boy, but that ship had sailed.

Chapter 7

Barbie

I probably needed to start researching that paper for class. It was due on Friday, and it was already Wednesday. I'd been distracted by hanging out with Steven and the homework for other classes. I really couldn't put it off any longer.

Most of my research consisted of finding accounts of the ancient folks that saw me on the field of battle. Before, when I was assigned to a fight, I would stay until it was done. Mostly that only took a few days. The folks that wrote about me were always the ones on my side. The other side of the battle never drew another breath to tell the tale.

I found Tissaphernes' story of the Ionian War in 413 BC. He recounted a tale of a large man that he referred to as a djinn that stood to the side of Agis II, wielding a lash of flame that mowed down the troops it struck. He gestured and the enemy ships burst into flame. I remembered that I controlled the fire that destroyed the Athenian ships. After all these years, I couldn't remember why I was there. Something to do with a Persian king.

How to come up with a reason for the myth? Old Tissaphernes gave it to me with his prayers that the gods would not blame the Spartans for the workings of the alchemists.

This myth was invented so the atrocities that the Spartans committed would not fall on their shoulders with their gods. The Spartans could not admit that they used rudimentary bombs when Aries was clear that the only honor in battle was strength against strength.

I found a couple other examples of genies and attributed it to people not wanting to take responsibility for the results of their wishes. There was no known way to defeat a genie, just that people would get what they deserved and then it would vanish.

I just had to string that together and I'd be done.

When I finally finished the damn paper, I had a new-found respect for fiction writers. It was hard to talk about things that had happened while limiting myself to only what I could find documentation on. Then misinterpret it creatively.

I wondered if Steven had his paper done yet? Only one way to find out. I got out my phone and called him. Eleven p.m. is not too late to call.

He picked up on the second ring. "What's up, Barbie?" His voice certainly sounded alert enough.

"Just checking in to see if you got that lit paper done. I did mine tonight."

"Yeah, what did you do it on?" He sounded genuinely curious.

"I picked genies. They are everywhere throughout history when you start to look. A lot of the ancient battles were said to have a genie on the winning side. In Islam, they are believed to be made of smokeless fire." Might as well find out what he thought about paranormal stuff.

Since I was paranormal stuff.

"I didn't know any of that, but they sound pretty cool. All this supernatural stuff is really interesting. Going to battle with a genie on our side wasn't something we had to learn in basic." He gave a soft laugh. "I wish they would have. Might have broken up the boring drills."

I gave him a basic description of what I "found" about them, mostly talking about things that I'd actually done or seen.

"Now what do you think of them?" I probably shouldn't have pushed, but I was curious.

"They sound pretty cool. Too bad they aren't real." At least he wasn't against differently inclined pseudo-humans. It's not like I was a real genie anyway.

He paused. "I did mine on zombies."

I could see that. "Why did you pick them?"

"I thought they were interesting, always following the one directive, not having to worry about anything else. There's nothing left of their brain for morality or restraint or fear. They don't have to worry about the future or remember the past."

I wondered if Steven knew he was telling me more about himself than he was about the zombies.

Chapter 8

Steven

NCAA football season started on the second Saturday after classes started. I decided to use my student ticket to go to the first game.

I wasn't going to commit to tailgating since I really didn't know anyone. It seemed like an awful lot of work just to hang out outside of a stadium.

Crissy talked me into going with her and her friends. Crissy made sure we were there about an hour before kickoff. She said we had to get in early to get better seats since we wanted to be together. Turned out that the student section is not numbered or linked to any ticket. It's standing room only. I hadn't been to a college football game before, so I wasn't sure what it would be like.

The stadium was already half full when we got through security and the ticket scanners. There were just people everywhere, flooding the concourse and jostling for space to get to a seat. I swear every other person was shrieking for someone else in their party to either hurry up or to go find someone else. The acoustics of the concourse just reflected all that sound and bounced it around to join with the sounds of the fans on the bleachers above to create a roaring cacophony.

Crissy dragged me over to the concessions. She didn't even bat an eye when she made me carry her sausage dog and large Coke.

I started to doubt the wisdom of this venture.

Above the smell of people, were the aromas of grilled hot dogs, hamburgers and chicken. The smell of roasted flesh. I tried to keep my mind from running back to other times where I had heard screams and smelled scorched flesh.

"Hey Crissy!" I had to practically yell in her ear to be heard. "Are you ready to go get a seat?"

"Not yet, Amber and Megan said they'd meet us on the concourse under the student section."

I couldn't stay there much longer. Already the noise and smell were getting to me. "We need to grab our seats before there aren't any left. We can hold them, and you can text Amber and Megan where to meet us."

It took a long minute for her to think about it and agree with me. “Yeah, I thought we were early enough that there would still be lots of room, but I think getting the food took a bit too long.”

I nearly sighed in relief as we started pushing through the sea of humanity. I held Crissy's food up and over most folks' heads and just bodily started to move forward. She ducked in behind me, and I felt a small hand grab my belt.

Once we got out to the aisle, I could see that I had been right. Most of the seats were taken, but I could see four seats in the middle that were together. Again, I had to push through groups of students that were just standing and talking to each other in clusters that blocked the rows. Some people just had no home training.

Crissy had her phone out and was texting away as soon as we sat down. Making me have to keep holding her loot. Finally she put it away and took her food. The smell was starting to turn my stomach. I could see all of the people just keep packing in and around us.

Eventually, Amber and Megan made it through and Crissy slid over beside me.

They were just in time for kickoff. Everyone stood up, yelling their little asses off. Some folks were jumping up and down in time with the band.

I could tell that the Greek boys beside me were all wasted with the way they were acting all loud and obnoxious. The sorority girls behind us were screeching like banshees, laughing and screaming and cheering.

In the stands, it was almost as bad. The cigarette smoke coming from the redneck boys in front of us mingled with the smells from the concourse. Now I had a full nasal compliment of smoke, charred flesh and sour body odor.

Damn, the day just kept getting worse. *How could anyone enjoy this?* Packed together, practically leaning against strangers. I tried to focus on the game, but the student section was under the Jumbotron, and the line of scrimmage was all the way on the other end of the field. Only the announcer over the loudspeaker gave any hint of what was going on.

Crissy, Megan and Amber were just as into it as everyone else. They were shrieking and waving and dancing around. Ten minutes in and I was ready to leave. This had been a mistake. Why did I think this would be better than watching from the comfort of my home, on my own TV? There were people packed everywhere, standing on stairs, blocking the aisles. Trapping me.

Trapping me with all the people. Trapping me with the noise. Trapping me with the stench.

It was too much. It was way beyond too much. I couldn't distinguish between screams of joy and screams of fear. Screams of pain. Pain ripping into me. The smell of the smoke and dust. The smell of flesh lacerated with burning metal. The smell of my flesh.

I could feel my skin shiver and my stomach clench. I started to sweat from the cold.

There wasn't enough air. Enough air for all of these lungs. I was suffocating.

I had to leave. I had to retreat. I had to get out.

I tried to sound as calm as I could.

"Crissy." No answer. "Crissy!" I screamed at her and grabbed her shoulder.

She couldn't be still. Her eyes were gleaming and her teeth flashed and reflected the light on her brilliant smile.

"Isn't this great!" She screamed back. I couldn't take it.

I bent down to her ear and said, "I'm going to go. I'll see you later."

Her eyes dimmed a bit and she looked a little closer at me, but I turned away to fight my way to freedom from this throng.

The people pushed back. I tried to be polite, but the panic had its grip thoroughly wrapped around me. I pushed and shoved until I was free, the wake of my passing sealing behind me.

After my near panic attack in the stadium, I spent most of Saturday night recovering with a case of my closest friends.

By the time Sunday morning rolled around, I was as ready as I could be to go back home and visit the family for the Labor Day festivities. My family always turned it into a reunion, with all the relatives that could make it for the barbecue on the lake.

Crissy talked me into driving her there in her little car since the Stingray needed a lot of cosmetic work. Sometimes she could be a bit of a mooch, but to get me to fold up into her little Civic, she had to promise that we could leave whenever I'd had enough, and pay for the gas.

I hadn't been back home in six years. As the miles passed, it was almost like going back in time. The buildings and roads were all vaguely familiar. A few more winding roads and we could see Lake Martin. The narrow road was made even narrower by all the cars parked on the side. I parked just beyond my grandparents' lake house.

All of the family saw us walk up. My mom came right over and gave me a hug.

Once everyone got there, we loaded up the pontoon boat and headed out onto the lake.

After Saturday's panic, floating around on the water with family was what I needed to put that incident behind me. The sun kept beating down and Crissy stripped down to her bikini before diving off the boat. I wasn't so sure about everyone seeing my scars, but everyone was family.

When I stripped down to my shorts, I tried not to listen to my aunt's gasp. That was about what I'd expected. My legs and back were laced with scars. I knew I wasn't pretty.

I dove in after Crissy, hiding the mess of my skin below the water's surface.

Chapter 9

Barbie

After a few weeks, I was feeling a bit guilty and a lot like I was abandoning Crissy. On Friday night, I invited her to come hang out at my apartment and have dinner. Just the two of us. I made stuffed grape leaves with tzatziki as a peace offering. Crissy would forgive anything for good Mediterranean food.

I was surprised at how much I wanted to keep Crissy in my life. People had always come and gone from my life, sometimes gone in a ball of flame. There was always something that drew them away from me, or I never made the effort to hang on.

Why hadn't I reached out to people before this? Crissy was even closer to me than my foster sibling James.

James was a few years older and had been with my second foster parents much longer. After a couple years, the husband hit James, and I found out it wasn't the first time he'd been hit.

I took care of the problem.

The fire started in the master bedroom. The smoke confused my foster parents, and they suffocated before the fire crew found them.

Even after we were both sent together to the new foster family, we weren't close like I'd seen with other brothers.

Now I had to learn how to maintain a friendship with the first true friend I'd ever had.

Right on time, Crissy breezed into my apartment trailing smiles and a bottle of wine. She brought such joy to the room, I could almost feel her energy brushing against me. She helped herself to a beer from my fridge, as I put the finishing touches on dinner.

"I suppose you have a reason for buttering me up with my favorite meal?" She asked, as she pulled up a chair.

"Yeah, I've been spending so much time with Steven that I was missing hanging out with you. I wanted some time with my favorite lady, too."

"Well, as long as you're cooking, I'll come over and eat," she said as she grabbed a couple of the grape leaves.

“Of course you will.”

“So you’re spending a lot of time with Steven, huh? He hasn’t mentioned it to me. If my mom and his mom hadn’t conspired for us to have a class together, I don’t know if he even would have known I was here.” She paused and looked harder at me, her eyes searching for some answers to questions she didn’t know to ask.

Finally she said, “It’s good for him to have a friend to talk that guy shit with. I don’t think he has any other friends here. Has he had anyone else around or talked about anyone else?”

“No, he hasn’t mentioned anyone. I haven’t seen any pictures of friends on the walls or anything. His house is pretty tidy every time I’ve been there.”

“You’ve been to his house? He still hasn’t told me where he lives.” She looked a bit put out with him.

“Have you asked him?”

“Well, now that you mention it, no, I haven’t asked. I just thought he would have invited me is all.”

“Since when do you wait for an invite? I remember you practically mauling me without even knowing my name.”

“He’s just so... you know, distant and older. After he got back from Afghanistan, Mom told me he was injured over there and that he’d be different. And he is different. I just don’t want to push, you know? I want him to be comfortable enough with me that he isn’t hiding,” Crissy said thoughtfully.

I could see that she was puzzled over the way her cousin was now. I wondered about the Steven that she remembered. He hadn’t mentioned anything about going to war, or anything about his past, to me. I knew that war could change a person. Hell, it had changed me.

“Why don’t you just ask to come over?”

“I guess I’ll have to. Can I wrangle you into going with me?” She still looked intimidated by her own cousin.

“Sure, no problem.” I didn’t think my voice gave away how enthusiastic I was to see Steven again.

“So you guys are getting pretty close then?” Crissy looked at me with calculating eyes.

“Yeah, we’re pretty good friends I guess.” I thought about it. I really enjoyed spending time with Steven and not just for his conversations about cars. Just being around him was calming. I didn’t feel the need to incinerate anything when I was around him. I especially liked the time he was working under his car and had to take his shirt off because he’d gotten oil all over it. Just the memory of that intrigued me.

The conversation turned to classes and then to plans for the weekend. Crissy was going to go to the club on Saturday night and invited me along. I had to decline since I had already made plans to spend it with Steven.

On Saturday, Steven and I were watching football again. Both of us were sitting on the couch and yelling at that fucking quarterback who kept throwing interceptions. By half-time, we were down 21–3. After quite a few drinks, I thought I might as well give my friend a heads-up on his cousin.

“You know, Crissy wants to see your place. We had dinner last night, and she brought it up,” I said, as I pulled another cider from the fridge and drank half.

“I thought she was just going to come over. I was wondering why she hadn’t yet.”

“She doesn’t have your address.”

“You didn’t give it to her?”

“No, I figured if you hadn’t, then it wasn’t my place.” I didn’t mention that I felt a bit territorial about Steven’s house. Not that I had any claim to it, just that it was special, that I was the only one invited over, at least as far as I knew. I didn’t understand why I felt possessive. I hadn’t been that way over my foster family or any of my friends back in Shorter. Before that, I wasn’t somebody that anyone spent time with.

“I’ll invite her over and make dinner sometime this week. Do you want to come over then, too?” Steven got up from the couch and wandered in to his kitchen. When he opened the fridge to get a beer, I remembered he didn’t have any ingredients beyond condiments and drinks. He certainly couldn’t be trusted to do any cooking.

“Sure. But I’ve seen the way you cook. I can make dinner. That way no one will get food poisoning.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. How was I supposed to know that there was a reason chicken isn’t served medium rare?” That was the point exactly. “Will you be available Wednesday night? Or would a weekend be better?”

“Wednesday is fine. I’ll make something good,” I said. I had already learned that Steven was an adventurous eater.

“Here, have another drink.” Steven said, as he handed me another hard cider when I tossed my empty into the trash.

I liked the way cider tasted. It reminded me of the few times I’d had time in a body and found something to drink.

We spent the rest of the evening just talking and, well, we did quite a bit of drinking. So much so that I ended up asleep.

I woke up with an infomercial playing on the TV. The pillows I was laying against were awfully lumpy, and it felt like there was a spike being driven between my eyes, and I knew what I was talking about. Before I learned what overkill was, I had used too much power and blew up an abbey. A large nail had gotten me in the forehead. I knew that wasn’t what had me in its grip now. This felt like a hangover.

The heat from the pillows was a bit odd. I stretched my neck out and around. I was looking up at the sleeping face of Steven. *Shit. I’d fallen asleep against him. And he had let me.* He wasn’t holding me or anything. He was propped up on the pillows against the armrest.

I looked around. It had to be early morning, but what time, I wasn’t sure. The TV was the only source of light and cast a faint glow over the room. The empty pizza box was balanced on a host of empty bottles. We had cleaned out all the alcohol in his fridge.

I needed to get out of there before things got awkward. Awkward being if I started to touch him a bit more. Why was I having these urges?

I eased myself upright and slowly got up off of his couch, pausing when it creaked alarmingly. I made my way outside and slipped into my car. I put her in neutral and let her roll down the street away from Steven’s house. When I got to the corner, I cranked her up and headed home.

I don’t know why I felt the need to be so secretive. I could have woken up, slapped his feet, and left. But I had felt almost guilty for enjoying the feel of his body under mine.

Chapter 10

Steven

Last Saturday had been... interesting. We hung out, but ended up getting drunk. I thought I remembered her laughing and smiling at something, and the next thing I knew, she was laying against me. Her weight felt so comfortable that I just didn't want to disturb her. She must have snuck out sometime in the night, but I hadn't woken up. I hope she hadn't noticed how good I was feeling with her against me. I didn't want to lose her because of that.

On Wednesday, Barbie came over to my house at five and started cooking. She brought a full reusable grocery sack and cooler then disappeared into my kitchen. I offered to help, but she just looked at me and laughed. I left her to it. Instead, I made sure the house looked good and set the table.

I stood in the doorway watching Barbie cook. She was so assured and competent as she moved around, gathering ingredients together. Standing slightly bent over the cutting board next to the sink, the light from the window made a glow around her. I could smell the bacon cooking and hear a pot bubbling. She had said that she would make us a chicken and veg meal, but it certainly didn't smell like anything that simple.

She told me about growing up in foster care and cooking for the families as her chore of choice. I had heard horror stories about children in foster care, and I was so thankful that she hadn't encountered that.

But something was bothering me about her.

When Crissy came to the door, we had everything ready. She brought flowers for the table, so I handed them over to Barbie. She looked at the flowers, slightly surprised, then grabbed a tall glass, stuck them in it, and put them on the table. They flopped haphazardly out of the top. So Barbie wasn't a fan of flowers, either.

"About time you invited me over. I've been wanting to see your place." There was more than a hint of reproach in Crissy's voice.

"Barbie was the one that brought it up. I thought you would have invited yourself over long before now," I said.

"Well what are you waiting for? Show me around. I've already got some

ideas for your place,” she said as she pretty much led me through my own home. I knew better than to object.

She stared at my bedroom for a while. Her eyes were flicking around. I thought it looked fine, the top sheet matched the bottom sheet and there was a pillow and a blanket. The blinds were down, so that couldn't be a problem. I hadn't painted the walls yet, and they were kind of a mud tan. I did have an area rug by the bed so my feet wouldn't hit the rough floor first thing in the morning. Barbie stayed at the door and didn't even come into the room. I wished I hadn't either when Crissy turned back to me.

“I can't believe I'm the only one with any taste in this family. We are so going to have to fix this place up. I mean, really. Hobo Chic was just a joke, not meant to be taken seriously.”

Was Barbie snickering at me? I heard what was definitely a snort. I looked at her. “It's not that funny, how would you like her to insult your place?”

“She wouldn't dare insult my place. She's the one that decorated it,” she laughed. “I'm not that creative.”

I'd only been over to Barbie's apartment a couple times for dinner. Her place looked so cozy and put together. It just screamed her personality so well that I didn't think anyone else did the decorating.

“Well, show me the rest of this place. It can't be any sadder than this,” Crissy said as she headed out of my bedroom and on to the room where I had put my exercise equipment. I hadn't meant for anyone to see this room, so I tried not to cringe when Crissy let out a gasp. It wasn't that bad, not really. The weight machine was next to the window. I had some boxes that I hadn't unpacked in the corner. The problem was the shorts and towels piled haphazardly in the corner across from the door. Or maybe it was the graffiti on all the walls.

“What the hell is that smell! It's like something crawled in here and died.” Crissy was holding her hand in front of her nose and mouth. Any good that would do was very minimal.

“It's not that bad, it's just unwashed sweat.” Barbie was trying to defend my place? Even I had to admit that this wasn't the best room in the house, but the only one worse was the second bathroom.

I hadn't even attempted to do anything to that room since I moved in. Last I checked, the mold hadn't become sentient yet.

Crissy just closed the door with a shake of her head. I could tell I would have some cleaning to do before she would tackle that room.

“Maybe you don’t want to go in there,” I said as Crissy laid her hand on the door to the bathroom-of-doom. She stopped and looked at me.

“Is it that bad?”

“Yeah, it is.”

She took her hand off the doorknob and nodded at me. “If it’s so bad that you don’t want me to see, it’s probably something I can safely say I don’t want to see either.”

When we returned to the dining room, Barbie pulled pans out of the oven and plated up a delicious meal. Bacon wrapped, cheese stuffed chicken breasts and Parmesan roasted asparagus and rosemary roasted new potatoes. It was miles ahead of the promised chicken and veg. I wasn’t going to complain, just be grateful and enjoy. It was nice having someone who knew how to cook around.

Crissy kept looking between Barbie and I. It was almost disconcerting. She looked like she knew something and wasn’t going to tell anyone. All through dinner, she would tilt her head to the side or lean forward. I hoped she wasn’t planning anything too extravagant for my house. I had a limited budget and simple tastes. Really simple tastes. She wouldn’t fess up to what she had planned, even though I asked her several times.

After dinner, I cleared the table. It was the civilized thing to do since Barbie had cooked for me. When I walked past Barbie, I gave her shoulder a friendly squeeze. She startled and looked up at me with those big green eyes. “What’s up?” she said.

“Thank you. You didn’t have to cook, but I really appreciate it.”

Her smile was enough to melt me. Her lips weren’t excessively full, but just plump enough. I wished I had the nerve to lean in and kiss her, but Crissy was sitting right there. I didn’t want to have an audience when I made my move.

By the time the evening wore down, I agreed to Crissy doing the decorating as long as I cleaned up the exercise room and the unseen bathroom first. Which was entirely reasonable. I knew I needed to stop the mold from evolving into a toxic menace.

Chapter 11

Barbie

The dinner party had been a success. Steven's house was going to get the full makeover treatment from Crissy. I didn't envy him at all. Crissy could be quite domineering. But that was a good thing in a decorator, right?

I left Steven's a few minutes after Crissy because I had to grab a couple pans and put my cooler back in my car.

When I got to our apartment building, I felt something was off. The floodlight that normally illuminated the parking lot was dark. I could see Crissy's car parked near the stairs up to our floor, close to the alley. The driver's door was slightly open. When I got out of my car, I could hear a faint scuffling. Most humans would have missed it, but then, I'm not exactly human.

I raced around to the alley behind the building and saw three men trying to hang on to Crissy. She was fighting and kicking and clawing. One man had something pressed across her mouth. *Oh fuck no. No one was allowed to hurt my friend.*

"Hey, let her go!" I shouted. All three heads turned to me and the biggest man stepped away from Crissy. The other two kept a tight hold on her.

Big guy pulled a long knife from a sheath on his belt. "You didn't see anything. You're going to turn around and walk away," he snarled.

I wasn't going to argue or negotiate. I ran straight at him and slammed my fist into his jaw. He hadn't expected me to attack. He also hadn't counted on how strong or fast I was. He still managed to slice a small gash under my ribs before he went down. I barely even felt it, I was so angry.

When their spokesperson fell, the other two guys got a bit antsy. The one not keeping Crissy from screaming advanced on me. I wasn't going to play with this man either. He needed to go down, fast. I ran at him, swerved to the side, and swept my leg under him. He hit the ground on his back with an audible exhale. I followed up with a hammer fist to his forehead. I could see blood pooling out from behind his head.

That left the one holding Crissy. She was fighting harder now and threw a strong elbow into his solar plexus. As his breath gusted out of him, he lost his grip on her.

“Run Crissy. Go lock yourself in. I’ll be along shortly.” I tried to be as calm and commanding as possible, to make sure she listened and heard what I was saying. She took one last look at me and sprinted out of the alley. When she was gone, I didn’t even bother to attack the third man.

I backed to the alley’s entrance. No one was watching. I held my hands out and a basketball sized ball of flame appeared on each palm. I lobbed the one on my right hand into the guy that was still standing. The fire hit him and flowed around him like napalm. It engulfed him, and when he opened his mouth to scream, it flowed down his throat, searing away his vocal cords.

I threw the one on my left hand. The man with the knife arched up and the fire burned new eyes for him.

I summoned another orb of fire on my right. The other man didn’t flinch when the fire incinerated his body. He had already passed on.

I kept watch until there was nothing but ash left of all three. Then I hit the alley with a quick burst that lit all the air on fire. Flames danced like starry, starry nights creating a vicious updraft to clean up the ash. The alley was once again purified.

I went straight to Crissy’s apartment. It took a bit of convincing for her to come to the door. She was pretty traumatized, and I could understand why. I still needed to make sure she was alright. There were angry red marks on her face and neck. A sleeve had been torn off her shirt. The tears were what hit me the hardest. I wanted to go back and make them suffer more for making her cry. I wrapped my arms around her and just held on as she fell apart.

“I’m so proud of you. You’re so strong,” I said. I didn’t know how to deal with this. I had never had to deal with the aftermath of violence like this before. She just started sobbing harder, and I started to panic a bit myself. I needed help. Her tears were eating me alive. She wasn’t bleeding, and I didn’t think anything was broken.

“I’m going to call Steven. Is that okay?” I thought I felt a nod against my chest, but I wasn’t sure. Since it wasn’t a no, I gently slid my right arm from around her and pulled my phone out. I called him without letting Crissy go.

“Steven, I need you to come to Crissy’s apartment.”

“What? Right now?”

“Yes, right now,” I said and hung up. I put my arm back around Crissy.

Chapter 12

Steven

I didn't know what was wrong, but I thought I heard crying in the background. I needed to get there, fast. It felt like it took me forever to get to Crissy's apartment. I kept picturing the worst things that could have happened to her. The door was unlocked when I tried the knob. I knocked gently, but there was no answer so I let myself in. The lights were all on, but I couldn't see anyone.

I called out. "Barbie? Crissy?"

"We're over here, on the couch," Barbie said, "Crissy, Steven's here."

Barbie was sitting with Crissy curled up and sobbing in her lap. Crissy pulled her face off of Barbie's neck and looked at me with red-rimmed eyes. I could see red marks where bruises were forming on the side of Crissy's face. I didn't know how the rest of her looked since she was covered by a blanket. I felt the rage bubbling and boiling inside of me. Whoever had done this was going to pay.

"Honey, what happened?" I asked as softly and non-threateningly as I could. I sat down next to Barbie and pulled Crissy gently to put her weight on both of us.

Crissy started sobbing harder and burrowed back behind Barbie's hair. Barbie rubbed her back and made a soft shushing sound.

"When I got back from your place, three men had her in the alley behind the apartments. She was fighting. She was fighting so hard. I distracted them, and Crissy ran here."

I felt the rage welling up inside me. I had to not show it though. Crissy didn't need to see that right now. What she needed was calm and safety.

Crissy raised her head off of Barbie's shoulder. "I... I'd just gotten out of my car and th-they grabbed me. I couldn't get away. I couldn't run. They just dragged me," she gulped, "but he saved me. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't been there."

Her words distracted me from what looked like blood on Barbie's shirt.

"Who else was there?"

“Barbie, he saved me.” She paused. “He’s more than fast, he took them all on. He got me free. I ran. I ran here.”

“What?” *Did she just say “he”?* “Barbie’s not a man.”

Her head snapped to me and she straightened up in Barbie’s lap. She wiped her eyes and looked at me like I was an idiot. “Of course, he’s a man.”

I was silent as I took a closer look. With her revelation that Barbie was a “he” instead of a “she,” I realized that I was incredibly stupid for not noticing. I had just assumed that long hair and a feminine name added up to a woman. I had ignored all of the evidence that I was mistaken. Now that I was corrected, I could see that Barbie was definitely all man.

Barbie’s eyes narrowed and his lips thinned as he clenched his jaw. Shit. And with Crissy not leaning full length against Barbie, I could see that was definitely blood on them.

“Who’s bleeding?” They looked at each other and then down between them.

“Barbie! Let me see.” Crissy scrambled off Barbie and started tugging at his shirt. There was a lot of blood oozing out of his side. “You need to go to the hospital.”

“It’s just a scratch,” he said, as he tried to push her hands away from him. Pulling the shirt up spread the blood all along his side. The gash was right under his left ribs. Fortunately, it wasn’t a puncture, just a long slice. “I won’t go to the hospital.”

I could see by the set of his jaw that he wouldn’t budge on that.

“You need some stitches, and this needs to be cleaned so it doesn’t get infected.” I pointed at the bloody mess. Crissy and I pulled him to his feet and led him to the bathroom. I stood in the doorway as Crissy helped him pull his shirt over his head. I saw him wince as he stretched his arms up. My eyes would not leave his chest. My mind was still trying to reconcile that Barbie was a man, and I shouldn’t expect to see tits. His naked chest had put paid to that line of thought. That was definitely the chest of a man.

The blood had gotten on his jeans too, but I didn’t think that there were any other injuries, just that slice. But we couldn’t be too careful. “Take off your pants.”

Crissy and Barbie’s heads whipped around to look at me.

I sighed. “We need to be sure there aren’t any more injuries.”

“It’s just this knife slice,” Barbie said. But when he saw all the blood on his pants, he frowned and took them off.

Once his pants came off, I couldn’t stop thinking about how he looked in just his boxers. I wasn’t looking at him like a friend should either. *How could I have thought he was a girl?* His chest was thin but very well defined. Once the blood was washed off, I could see his chest was lightly tanned. His legs were dusted with red and gold hairs. His boxers did nothing to conceal his large bulge. *Wait, did I just check out another man’s junk? What the hell?* Crissy was attacked, and Barbie was still bleeding. I shouldn’t have those kinds of thoughts.

I cleared my throat. “We need to call the police. They need to arrest those bastards.”

Barbie looked a little guilty. “They won’t be there. The police won’t have anything to go on. Don’t worry, they won’t be seen again.”

Barbie was cagey about calling the cops. He had such certainty that they wouldn’t bother Crissy again, I could tell that he wasn’t just trying to placate her. I wasn’t going to ask how permanently they wouldn’t be seen again.

“I just want to forget about it,” Crissy piped up.

She cleaned up his wound, disinfected it, slathered on the antibiotic ointment and put on the butterfly bandages to keep it closed.

I was less than useless. He was injured defending my cousin, and all I could do was stare at him. I wasn’t proud of myself.

I was still trying to come to terms with Barbie being a man instead of a woman. I tried to be upset with him, but he had never said he was a woman. I was the idiot that hadn’t caught on. And now he knew that I’d thought he was a woman. From the set of his jaw, I could tell he was pissed at me.

After getting hit with some shrapnel, I was warned to expect flashbacks at the sight of blood or any violence. But, when I saw Barbie’s side, I had no twinge of panic, just lust. Really confusing lust.

Chapter 13

Barbie

He fucking thought I was a girl. How could he think I was a girl? I didn't dress like a girl. I didn't talk like a girl. I sure as hell didn't act like a girl... did I? We watched football together; we worked on our cars together.

When I'd shown up for battle, no one had ever mistaken me for a girl. Most people who survived only remembered my blazing red beard and bald head. After centuries, everyone referred to me as the dread Redbeard, sometimes as a pirate, sometimes as a genie, sometimes as a devil, and sometimes as the arm of the emperor.

Since I had become human though, there had been a few people who had mistaken me for a girl. That hadn't happened in a while. At least, I thought it hadn't.

Okay, my hair was long, but there have always been men with long hair. So what if I didn't have a beard? My stubble, when it grew, was light red and didn't really show up. Thinking back, I hadn't introduced myself, Crissy had. She hadn't used my full name. I knew Barbie wasn't considered a man's name.

What I couldn't figure out was why I was so upset that he had thought I was a woman. It hadn't bothered me the times it had happened before. I tried to tell myself that it was a feeling of betrayal since we had become such close friends, but I knew it was more than that. I thought he had seen and accepted me.

My side really didn't bother me. I'd had worse in all my years as a soul of fire. Once Crissy had finished patching me up, we went back to the living room. Steven began to fuss over her as her adrenalin crashed and she was a weepy mess. I took advantage of their distraction to slip out the door. I managed to return to my apartment with no fuss.

A few hours later, I was trying to go to sleep when my phone rang with a blocked number. *What is with Trillian calling in the middle of the night?*

"Hello," I said.

"Some of the Xian Hua weren't in the building. I will send you the addresses. These don't need to look like accidents." She paused, like she was going to ask something. "Will you reconsider working in war zones?"

Oh hell no. I wasn't going to be dragged into anything like that again. That had been my existence before I rebelled. The agreement was no more wars; I would be human and only burn what needed killing.

"You think to ask me that? After atomic bombs were used? I will not be the flame for any country again. Have you seen what we did to those people? That was not clean, that was not pure. That was only abomination." I would no longer be the fuel for the fires of war.

"Modern freedom fighters don't use adulterated flames. It's just fire again." She was trying to be logical, but she was not talking to the being I used to be. Before my semi-retirement and the start of my human life, I might have been persuaded. Now, I would not. Soldiers are not evil, so I would not be a part of war any more, and civilians had a right not to be incinerated.

"Suicide bombs and terrorist attacks are not pure. They do not cleanse anything, only breed more hatred." I paused. "I have no problems with our arrangement as it is. I will take care of the remaining Xian Hua."

Time to burn brightly.

Two hours later, I was again on the outskirts of Beijing. This time, I had a list of addresses. Since I was still in turmoil about the situation with Steven, the first house was taken out in a huge fireball that reduced the whole building to ash almost instantly.

As I worked my way down the list, the burning was bringing a peace back to my soul. There were eight houses in all, each one burned hot and fast. And they died, and they died, and they died. By the time I returned home to my apartment, I felt calm once again.

Maybe I could think rationally about Steven now.

I thought about him. I thought about him a lot. I thought about him more than I should have.

Chapter 14

Steven

Barbie was still avoiding me on Friday during class. He didn't waste any time heading out the door. Crissy caught me watching him leave. I hoped she wouldn't make a big deal out of it.

"Steven, I've been thinking about your place. I have some ideas on how we can update it and make it feel more like a home for you," she said, as she laid her hand on my shoulder.

I turned to her. I'd spoken to her on Thursday night as well, to make sure she was holding up okay. She sounded like her normal chipper self. At least, I couldn't spot any change.

"Sure, that'd be great. When do you want to work on it?" I asked.

"How about tomorrow? It's an away game anyway, so I won't be missing that. We can get started with the paint."

Ugh, painting. I'd hoped she'd just want to look at my place again, maybe take some measurements, maybe sketch it out. Maybe take a couple weeks just thinking about it. I hadn't painted anything since my mom had decided to repaint the whole house in earth tones. Dirt brown. Swamp green. Roadkill maggot cream. I vaguely remembered having to pull all the furniture out of each room. My mom had covered all the flooring in drop cloths and taped off all the trim. I know it took us two weeks to paint our small house. I wasn't sure I was ready to live in the middle of all the plastic and fumes.

"We could look at colors, I guess." I tried to sound enthusiastic, but I failed that miserably.

"Great, I'll see you at eight in the morning. Later, big cuz." She smiled and was out the door.

What the hell had I just agreed to? I hoped that I wouldn't regret letting her have free rein.

After finally falling asleep at one in the morning, I wasn't prepared for the banging. I slowly surfaced from my dreams, rolled over and looked at my alarm clock on the floor next to the bed. *Seven-fucking-thirty*. I remembered Crissy was going to come over, so I doubted she'd go away just because I yelled at

her. The pounding came again. I tossed back my blanket and sheet and flopped on my back to stare at the ceiling. *Was I ready to face her this morning? Hell no, but she wasn't going away.* I knew she meant well. Sometimes the best therapy after a traumatic event is to refocus on normal activities. *Why did she have to refocus so early?*

I yelled out, "I'm coming, just hold on a few would you? And knock that banging shit off."

Now to separate the men from the boys. I kicked my legs free of the blanket's embrace and sat up on the edge of the bed. If she was going to want to paint, I'd better dress accordingly. I dug out a pair of my oldest denim shorts, from when I was in high school, and a stained up wife beater that I wore to work on the Stingray. If she had any objections, she could keep them to herself. I danced around the room fishing the shorts on to my legs. My balance still hadn't compensated for being upright. After I put on my shirt, I rubbed my hair, but I knew that was a lost cause without water and a brush.

I was still trying to flatten it out when I opened the door for Crissy. She looked fresh and radiant in the early morning sunlight. She picked up two buckets and carried them to my coffee table. One was filled up with paint brushes, stirring sticks and who knew what else. The other...

"I thought we were going to discuss what I wanted before we made a decision on the color?"

"We were, but then I remembered the colors you painted Aunt Trisha's house. So I picked out the color you would have agreed to anyway and went ahead and got it. You're welcome," she said, as she started laying out all the painting paraphernalia.

I looked at the color swatch on top of the bucket. "Why would you pick brown? It's too dark."

"It's either the paint or I put up wallpaper." She held up a square with a fussy floral pattern in two shades of gray.

"Where do you want to start?" I said as I grabbed a brush.

She chuckled at me and rolled the sample up and stuck it back in the bucket.

"You don't get a brush. I'll go around and edge the trim and you can come behind and roll it on." She snatched the brush out of my hand and gave me a roller on a telescoping pole and a paint tray.

“Aren't we going to tape stuff off or lay out drop cloths?” She was already pouring paint into a small pail.

She stopped pouring and looked at me. “Tape and drop cloths are for other people. You know, talentless hacks.”

Once I'd pulled the TV away from the wall, she started cutting in around the trim. I had to admit that she had an amazingly steady hand. The paint just flowed in a straight line.

When she had that area done, I got out the roller and started painting.

“No, no, no. You don't go just up and down, you have to use an angle and then overlap in the opposite direction. You don't want to see the roller strokes.” She put down her brush and came to show me how to roll paint on a wall.

“Fine, I'll do it your way, but it's still my wall. If it's not perfect, that's fine with me.”

She hmph'd at me, and went back to her brush. We were working on the second wall before I was ready to bring up Wednesday night. I couldn't leave it alone. I had to make sure she was okay.

“Did your landlord get that light in the parking lot fixed?” I could be subtle if I had to.

“Yeah, Barbie put in a complaint Thursday morning and it was fixed by the time I got back from classes. All the other lights got checked too.” She just kept painting. She didn't show any signs of distress.

“Are you okay going outside after dark?”

“I haven't been out after dark yet. I don't know how I'll react. I want to say that it won't bother me, but I don't know for sure. Barbie offered to walk me to and from my car, but I told him that I couldn't let fear run my life.” Her strokes slowed to a stop. “I keep worrying about it, but every time I picture what happened, I remember how easily he beat them off me.”

I hoped that she truly wouldn't be bothered by it. I was living proof that you couldn't always dictate how things would affect you.

“I'm just glad he was there. Who would decorate my house if you weren't around?” I smiled at her, and after a minute, she smiled back.

Chapter 15

Barbie

Almost a week after the attack, Crissy invited herself over for dinner with a pepperoni pizza and sat me down.

“Why are you still avoiding Steven?” she asked as she opened the pizza box. She looked up and stared into my eyes.

“He thought I was a girl.”

“So? Now he knows. He says you haven’t been returning his calls or texts. I thought you guys were better friends than that.” She had me there. If it had just been a friend making a mistake, it wouldn’t have bothered me like this.

“Because he seemed like he was interested in me as more than friends. And I, well, I was kind of getting interested in him like that, too. Now when I look at him, I want to see where that would have lead.”

I thought about it and realized something. “You know what? I’ve never been attracted to anyone before.”

“What? No one? Ever?” She kept staring at me, and if anything, her eyes kept getting bigger.

“No, no one. Look, I just thought that I hadn’t met someone that was my type yet. Turns out, your cousin might be mine.” I thought about the implications and hoped that she was open-minded. I hadn’t thought of myself as gay before, but after admitting out loud to my friend that I found her cousin attractive, I probably was. I shrugged, “Anyway, we both know that he’s straight.”

“Well damn.”

Chapter 16

Steven

After the night that Crissy was attacked, Barbie stopped answering my calls. I texted a couple times to see if he would talk to me, but he didn't respond to those either. I told myself that I was disappointed because he had been a good friend. Honestly, it was more to do with him not being a woman.

We crossed paths in Great Books, but he wouldn't look at me. He would come in at the last minute and find the farthest seat from me. I felt like shit. I had been a blind idiot. After thinking it over, I decided that being a man instead of a woman shouldn't have any effect on our friendship. Now, if only he would get on board with it.

After a long week of not speaking to Barbie, Crissy barged into my house.

I had forgotten to lock my door after coming home from class. She came right up to where I was sitting at the counter eating the Chinese takeout I'd picked up. Damn, I missed Barbie's cooking.

"You need to fix this," she said. She didn't even have to explain what "this" was. I knew she meant the gulf that had opened up between Barbie and me.

"I'm trying. He won't talk to me. I've called and texted."

"Did you try going over to his place?"

"Not yet." I hadn't wanted to burn that bridge yet. As long as I hadn't tried to track him down, I could lie to myself that he would listen to me.

"Well, I'm not going to have my friend and my cousin avoiding each other. I don't like having to pick which one of you I want to hang out with."

I hadn't even thought about her being in the middle of this clusterfuck.

"I'm not sure why he's still pissed. I know, I fucked up by thinking he was a girl, but he won't give me a chance to apologize."

"He's pissed because he thought you were interested in him." She looked up and then stopped. "Oh, I shouldn't have said that."

But I had been interested in him. *Wait. I had been interested in Barbie the girl. He thought I knew he was a man. Why would he want me to be interested in him as a man? That would mean he wanted me to be into him. As a man, liking another man...* I choked on my Mongolian beef.

“He’s gay?” I almost shouted.

“I didn’t say that,” she said. “Besides, would it be such a big deal if he was? I mean he didn’t hit on you or anything, right?”

“No, he didn’t hit on me.” I thought about it some more. *Why hadn’t he hit on me?* I thought I had been subtle when I thought he was a girl, but he certainly hadn’t done anything more than be my friend. I already decided that I still wanted his friendship, and him being gay wouldn’t change that. Besides, it was oddly flattering to have a man interested in me. Not that I’d be interested in a man. I was straight.

I had always been the giant that the girls wanted to climb. I wasn’t handsome, but I was tall and in shape. As I thought back, that was pretty much how every woman started a conversation with me if they wanted sex. It was always “My, you’re a big boy,” “You’re so tall,” “What do they feed you?” or “I bet you could lift me with one hand.” No one had ever said they wanted to talk to me or wanted to know what I enjoyed doing. This was new for me.

“Well, would it bother you if he was gay?” Crissy prodded.

“No, it wouldn’t bother me. It doesn’t change anything; he still won’t talk to me.”

“Then you need to make him talk to you. We need a plan.” She paused in thought. “After class tomorrow, you need to see if he’ll talk to you. I’ll work on him tonight. I won’t let him leave the classroom until you guys get a chance to talk for a minute. Then tomorrow night, I’ll invite him over to dinner and then you can come over.”

“That might work.” I needed to apologize to Barbie and try to fix this.

I didn’t sleep much that night worrying that Barbie wouldn’t talk to me and the nightmares plagued the few hours I did. I hoped Crissy would be able to help like she said.

When I got to class, I sat by Crissy, near the door. Barbie sat on the other side of the room from us, but he kept looking over at me. I barely paid any attention to what Dr. Dvorak was saying about the Odyssey. I could borrow someone else’s notes later, Barbie was just too distracting. Today, he had his flaming hair tied into a low ponytail. Flaming, ha. Now that I was looking at him as a man, he really wasn’t flaming at all. I felt like a blind idiot.

As promised, after class, Crissy quickly got to the door and stood just inside. When Barbie tried to leave, she grabbed his arm and held on.

“Barbie, can I talk to you? I need to apologize,” I said. He stood still and watched me as we waited for the rest of the students to clear out.

“You know, it’s pretty insulting that you thought I was a girl. Hell, we’d been friends for weeks.” He ran his hand roughly over his head, dislodging some hair from his tail.

“I know. I’m so sorry. I didn’t think you were feminine, really. When I first met you, your name threw me off, and I just thought you were an awesome chick. I didn’t question it. I miss hanging out with you and working on the cars. Can we get over this?”

After my short speech, he looked a bit disgruntled.

“I’ll think about it,” he said, and then broke free from Crissy.

At least he said he’d think about it. I guess that was the best I could get for now. I really hoped that Crissy knew what she was doing.

“Come over at six-thirty,” she said before she slipped out the door. Nothing for it, I needed to go to my next class, too. All through the rest of my classes, my attention was just as shot as in my first.

When I got home after class, I took extra care in making sure that my clothes were clean and not wrinkled. I knew these had been washed recently and would pass the sniff test. I wanted Barbie to see that I was serious.

At exactly 6:30, I knocked gently on Crissy’s apartment door. I could hear faint voices.

Crissy greeted me at the door and invited me in. I could tell she had gotten Barbie to cook dinner.

It smelled like home cooking and also, faintly, like the bazaar near our base in Afghanistan. Barbie made a lot of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean dishes. He was sitting at the table, facing the door. The table was set for two and they hadn’t dished up the food yet.

“Hi, Barbie,” I said shyly. I didn’t want to offend him again.

“Hi, Steven. Crissy completely failed to mention that you were coming by.” He turned his glare on her. “And don’t think I don’t know this is a set-up.”

I rushed to speak before Crissy could. “Don’t blame her. I needed to talk to you.”

“We talked after class. I’m still thinking about it,” he said as he leaned back in his chair.

“Would you look at the time? I forgot I was going to help Amber study tonight. Steven, why don't you stay?” Crissy squeezed Barbie's shoulder when he went to get up. “You, stay. Both of you. Sort this out by the time I get back.”

I was glad she hadn't turned the force of her will on me like that. *Oops, she wasn't done.* She whirled around to face me.

“And you. You talk to him.” Then she swirled out the door. So I hadn't escaped her notice.

I looked back to Barbie. I could see he was trying to suppress a grin at the way she had just talked to both of us.

“I really am sorry. I hope I didn't ruin our friendship.”

“You're not the first person to make the mistake, but most people figure it out after the first time they meet me. I didn't know you thought I was a girl the whole time, or I would have said something sooner.” He paused. “It might've helped if I was introduced by my real name and not my nickname. My name is actually Barbarossa.”

That would have been helpful to know before I made such a fool out of myself.

“Are we okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think we are. Let's not mention this again though. It's way too embarrassing.”

We fell back into our comfortable camaraderie once we had established that I was never going to think of him as a girl again. I didn't bring up that Crissy had implied that he might be gay, and he didn't either. By the end of the meal, we were laughing and joking just as we had before. When Crissy returned, she looked between us and just smiled.

Chapter 17

Barbie

After that dinner, Steven and I were back to being friends. By the following Saturday, we were watching football, drinking beer, and ordering pizza. This time, we were just a couple guys, hanging out.

Late in the fourth quarter, my cell rang. *Damn it, Trillian.*

“Hey, I need to take this. I’ll be right back,” I said, as I ducked into his kitchen.

“Hello, Trillian.” I greeted her. “This is not the time for you to be pulling my chain.”

“Settle down, we have an emergency. There’s a bombing at a planned parenthood in the capital—”

I jumped in, “I want no part of that.”

“If you would let me finish—you need to stop it from hurting anyone.”

“Why me? Don’t you have anyone else you can send? How about my replacement?” I asked.

“It has to be you. I’ll text you the address.” I looked at the screen. The address was less than an hour away by car. There was also a time. Fifteen minutes until the bomb detonated.

I leaned back into the living room. Steven was still on the couch, but his head was cranked around so he could watch the kitchen door. I quickly thought back over my side of the call for anything incriminating that he might have heard. Nothing too bad.

“I have to run an errand for my old boss. I need to go real quick. I’ll be back later,” I said as I walked across in front of him. He watched me go and didn’t say a thing.

There wasn’t much time. I drove to the end of the block and parked around a corner. I hoped my baby would be safe, though it wasn’t a bad neighborhood. I didn’t see anyone on the small side street. There was nowhere to hide. I would have to take the chance of being seen. I slid out of my car and walked casually down the sidewalk. When I was next to a large tree, I stripped quickly and put

my clothes on a branch. I had to make this fast. I released my flame and was engulfed in less than a second. I winked out to a small speck and winged through the air.

There was a cost for the speed of my change. When done slowly, the skin and nerves pull back as my body is turned to flame. When I do it fast, my nerves aren't prepared, and I feel my flesh char away. It only lasts a split second, but it is pure agony.

I touched down in an alley behind the office building next door to the target. There were only a few windows looking into the alley. Anyone that heard the racket would be looking out the windows in the front at the fire department, bomb squad, police and ambulances arrayed in front of the building.

The police had the protesters held back and were trying to get people out of the surrounding area. Through a small window in the door, I could see the bomber inside.

He had strapped on a vest of doom. I took a minute to figure out what exactly was going on. He didn't have a hostage in front of him, but the snipers hadn't taken him out. There. In his hand was a pressure switch. Shit, he'd rigged it to blow if he let go. I could feel the malevolent power in the bomb and knew it was built correctly. There wouldn't be a malfunction.

I hadn't seen this configuration before, but I could find where the ignition point would be. Now for the hard part. Not blowing everything to hell and back. This would take finesse and I could understand why Trillian had demanded my help on this. My replacement would still be in the "happy, happy, fire, fire" stage of his life. It had taken millennia for me to learn that there was also a flip side of the power, knowing when a bigger flame isn't better. And knowing that no flame may be best of all.

I tried to be inconspicuous as I stood between a dumpster and the wall. I couldn't pass for emergency personnel wearing nothing at all. I held my line of sight on the device and concentrated a pinpoint of extreme heat on the wire coming back from the switch. I melted through the coating and shielding to the copper wire in the middle. I had to hurry this up so I poured power into melting the copper. Finally, a few little drops sizzled free and fell to the floor with a hiss. The bomber looked down at the smoking drops on the floor and then to the wire. I was not going to give him a chance to figure out what was going on. It only took a few seconds to summon my ball of flame inside his skull. His eyes opened wide and his body went slack. He fell to the floor, the switch slipping from his hand.

When he fell, everyone ducked and covered. I didn't have that luxury. I kept my focus on the ignition point to make sure that my fix had worked. I had taken a risk in killing him, but I was confident there hadn't been any booby traps elsewhere to set it off. That and I was pretty sure it was stable enough to not detonate when it hit the floor. Still, it was hard to be sure with the volatile chemicals right next to each other.

I slipped away in the confusion, back to the alley. I zipped back to my car. I had to hang out as a spark in the branches of the oak tree while a little old lady and her little old dog slowly walked down the block. Then I slipped back into human form and put on my clothes. I checked the time. I'd only been gone twenty-five minutes.

I could head back over to Steven's and spend more time with him. I'd been at his place over three hours when Trillian called. *Was I really up to it after using that much concentrated energy?* I wasn't even sure if I was trying to talk myself into going back or not. If I went back, he might ask about my errand, but if I didn't go back, he'd still probably ask. Maybe I'd just go home and sleep on it.

Chapter 18

Steven

I knew he wasn't telling me everything. He took a call and said he had to run an errand for his old boss, but that really didn't make much sense. It sounded like he had to be talked into it over his initial objection. Why would he run an errand for a boss that he didn't work for any more?

The only other reason for Barbie to run would be me. Somehow, I must have made him uncomfortable. He must have caught me staring at him and trying to figure out what was going on with me. I didn't think he'd noticed, since I made sure to not stare when he was looking at me. Even after the revelation that he was a man, I still thought he was the prettiest person I'd ever seen.

I wasn't prepared for what that meant for me.

In Great Books on Monday, Dr. Dvorak had an announcement. "As you all know, there is a joint paper that you will have to write with a partner. Go ahead and pick that partner now."

The room erupted in chaos. I heard a squeal and saw Crissy grabbing Barbie. Damn that girl moved fast. I should have been faster. Shit, now I'd have to find someone else.

"Hi, do you have a partner?" said a voice from my other side.

I looked up and it was the older looking guy with the scar on his face. At least it wasn't one of the Greek crowd.

"Nope, I don't. I'm Steven."

"I'm Ben. Wanna knock this project out together?"

"That sounds like a plan to me. Here, let me give you my number. You can text me yours." I smiled, and he returned it before heading back to his desk in the other back corner.

Dr. Dvorak cleared his throat deliberately. "If you would return to your seats once you have a partner." He waited a few minutes as all the stragglers sat back down. "Good, now what I want is for you to share life experiences and then pick a novel or a story that you feel matches something about your partner.

Then, using only those two works, write a paper on how they relate to all other people. While you can use a book that we go over in class, it better fit your partner. So if you pick Dracula, your partner should have the fangs to prove it.”

After class, Ben texted his info to me and invited me to go out to dinner to talk about ourselves. Barbie and Crissy already told me they planned on knocking out the life story part. Perfect time to get this started for me too.

We met up at Niffer's at seven. We ordered a beer to get us started while we waited for our meals.

“I need to tell you a couple of things about me first. If you have a problem with it, I'll see if we can find new partners,” Ben said.

I motioned for him to continue. I couldn't think of anything that would need that kind of warning, unless it involved necrobstantiality.

“I was a marine.” He pointed at his face. “They called it friendly fire, but my column got hit by an A-10.” He took another breath. “And I'm gay.”

I was stunned for a moment. Even though he was a different branch of service, I respected the hell out of marines. The friendly fire part struck a bit closer to home. I was surprised that he was brave enough to open a conversation with being gay.

I must have thought about it too long, because he straightened up and took a big gulp of his beer.

“I have no problem with any of that. I'm ex-army. An IED got me in the leg.” I paused before adding, “I'm not gay.”

“Well, looks like we can work together.” He smiled and the skin below his scar puckered a little bit.

Turned out we had a lot in common. If he hadn't told me, I would have never guessed he was gay.

Chapter 19

Barbie

Friday, after class, Crissy came over. I was surprised to see her, since she was having a party in her apartment later. She barely made it into my apartment before she spun to face me.

“You need to make a move on Steven.”

What? Why would she think that? I thought I'd been subtle. I hadn't smacked his ass or anything. Just snuck a few more looks at it than a straight friend would probably approve of.

“The fuck are you talking about?” I demanded.

“I see you looking at him, and when you're not looking at him, he's looking at you. You boys are just being clueless.”

I thought about it. Didn't like where she was going with it though. I hated to say it, but I was slightly fixated on him. No one else turned my crank, but then, no one else had before. There were just a few problems to work out before I could get my crank turned.

“I've never tried to make a move before,” I admitted sheepishly. “And I wouldn't know what to do if he went for it.”

She looked at me, and I could see the wheels turning behind those eyes. I probably wasn't going to like whatever she came up with next.

“You know how guys have sex, right?”

Could this be any more embarrassing? I knew the basics. “Yeah, a dick and an ass meet. What else is there?”

I could tell I was blushing furiously. Even my arms and hands were getting in on the act by turning a bright red. I hadn't felt this close to spontaneous combustion before.

“Have you watched any porn? Read any blogs? Hell, read a book about it?” She kept asking as I shook my head no to each one. “Then you need to. Come on, get out your laptop.”

She flopped down on my couch when I brought my laptop to her. She commandeered it and started searching and pulling up all kinds of websites. She patted the seat for me to sit down, too.

“Okay, here’s a forum talking about it. You can ask questions if you need to.” Then she opened another tab.

“This is gay porn. Start with that one.” She pointed to a thumbnail of two men kissing. “It’s got a lot of info in there.”

I looked at her again. “How do you know what’s a good one or not?”

This time she blushed up to her hairline. “I... um... might have done a bit of research since you told me you might be gay. Turns out that guys together are hot.”

Oh. Shit.

“Have you been getting off on gay porn?” I asked her. She wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“Maybe a little.” Her voice was so small, not anything like how she was normally. I felt a little bit bad for it, but she had brought this on herself.

I started up the video. It wasn’t doing anything for me. “Maybe I’m not gay, this isn’t sexy.”

“Um, try to imagine it’s you and Steven.”

I watched some more. The guys on screen were just kissing and rubbing each other. I thought about Steven doing that to me, touching me like that. *Whoops*, my pants got tight immediately. Now, I was the one embarrassed as Crissy watched me. I stopped the video.

“I, uh, I think that maybe you should have some privacy for a bit,” she said before standing up and heading for the door. “Don’t forget about my party tonight. Steven’s going to be there.”

I would have gotten up to show her out, but I had enough wood for a forest. Some things you don’t want a friend to see. Well, unless it was Steven. I wouldn’t mind him looking at my forest all day.

After she left, I read some of the forum and watched the rest of that movie. I learned quite a bit about my body that I wasn’t aware of. I learned a lot that I wanted to test out with Steven. I really wanted to see what the rest of him looked like. Only problem was, Steven was straight.

By the time I dragged myself away from the videos and pictures and threads, I could hear Crissy’s party across the hall. I quickly slipped into something a little more festive and crossed to her place.

She had some industrial mix playing in the living room. It sounded like a remix of Nine Inch Nails. All her furniture was pushed back to make a little dance floor. The lights were dim and the drinks were cold. As soon as Crissy spotted me, she pressed a drink into my hand.

“Try this, you’ll like it,” she said. I took a sip.

“What is it?” I asked. It was really good, didn’t taste too strong of alcohol, just a little like citrus.

“It’s a Grateful Dead.”

I finished that one off, and headed back to the bar area. In other words, her kitchen counter. Amber was making drinks for herself and a few others. I saw a few bottles tipped into my cup before she handed it back with a smile. I could really get used to a few more of these.

I saw Steven holding up the wall in between the kitchen and the living room. He had a fierce expression on his face. I had a feeling that he probably didn’t want to come out tonight. I’d learned that he wasn’t a big fan of crowds. Neither was I, just sometimes the energy was worth it. So far, it wasn’t. My drink and I joined him against the wall.

“So your boss still has you running errands?” he asked. He hadn’t brought that up all week, and I’d thought he’d forgotten about it. I guess I wasn’t that lucky.

“Yeah, she sometimes needs things done. When I moved away to college, I quit the full-time part of it. She pays well for the things that need a personal touch, since she doesn’t have an office here.” It was mostly true. I hadn’t mentioned what exactly I did, or where I did it. I felt bad about it, but not bad enough to tell him and have him run from me.

He nodded his head at my explanation. He looked like he bought it. We chatted about our classes and professors. He complained about the annoying freshmen in his classes. I told him it was because he was taking first year classes. He looked a bit disgruntled at that. I laughed.

We kept talking, and we kept drinking. Occasionally I’d get us a refill or four. We were both getting a bit tipsy, bordering on falling down drunk. Well, a bit closer to hammered.

Then somebody got a hold of the sound system and put on an eighty’s hairband playlist. My kryptonite. I had to dance. Steven refused to join me, saying he still preferred to watch.

I was really getting into it and letting myself go, when someone plastered themselves to my back. It was too short for Steven or Crissy. I looked over my shoulder. Amber looked wasted as she clung to me. She tried to sing along with “Pour Some Sugar on Me”, and ended up pouring regurgitated alcohol on my back.

That pulled me out of my good mood. Fast. Steven was already on us and trying to disentangle Amber as she kept trying to rub off on me. I was drunk, but there wasn't enough booze to make what she did attractive.

Chapter 20

Steven

Crissy's apartment filled with people. I stayed out of the crowd as best I could, just watching their antics as they drank away the week of classes. Barbie showed up and gave me something to focus on instead of counting down the minutes until I could leave without offending Crissy. He came over to talk to me instead of hanging with his female fan club. Of course, we had a few more drinks. Maybe a few too many drinks, but regret was not an option when the music changed from the industrial to classic rock.

Barbie was so hot when he danced. Like the music was liquid and he swam freely in it. *Shit, I needed to stop thinking about that.* Even though his hair was flying around his head like tongues of flame. Everyone else faded into the background as I watched him dance and pretended he was dancing for me.

I was having a good time, until Amber upchucked all down Barbie's back. *Why couldn't she have left him alone and just crashed out in a corner?*

Once my eye candy stopped dancing, I led him over to his place to get cleaned up. He was so drunk, I thought he was just going to collapse on the couch. It took a bit to convince him he needed to take a shower instead. Finally, he kicked his shoes off and went into the bathroom.

My ears heard the shower come on. The hot water had to be cascading down through his hair and across his perfect ass. I tried not to imagine him all wet, soaping himself down, rubbing and stroking himself until he was clean. *Stop it.* I didn't need to get excited by that image.

Pacing didn't seem like a good thing to do while he showered. My feet just might have me in his bathroom if I didn't control them. So I sat on his couch and looked around for something to take my mind off of hot, wet, naked Barbie. There was his laptop. Maybe something on there would keep me from picturing that red hair flowing in the water around Barbie's silky smooth tanned skin. I could log on to Facebook or find some online time-wasting game.

I tapped the touchpad, and when the screen turned on, my heart just about turned off. A video was paused on the screen. It was two guys. It was two guys kissing. It was two naked guys kissing while they fucked. I knew the basics of anal sex and had a few gay buddies try to squick me out with excessive sharing.

When they described it, it hadn't sounded fun at all. *Who would want to be forced down and have something shoved up their ass?* I didn't know it could look this, well, loving. The men touched each other like they were really in love, not just actors.

I had to see the rest of the video. I started it from the beginning and watched the bigger man dominate the little guy with his kisses. I watched them touch. I watched them prepare the little man to handle the huge dick the big guy was swinging. I couldn't tear my eyes away. I just kept thinking about Barbie sitting right here and watching this, maybe touching himself, maybe doing something like this with someone. The video kept playing and they kept holding each other, and touching each other. *How many times had he watched this? Did he want something like this?* There was no way I could tear my eyes away.

Until I noticed that the shower had stopped, and Barbie was standing in the doorway, a towel wrapped around his hips. Staring in horror at me with his laptop. Watching his porn. Knowing that he had watched this, too.

I had to touch him, had to feel his slick, wet skin, had to know if it would burn my hands from the fire of his body. I slowly walked over to him. The green fire in his eyes burned away all of my good sense. He didn't say anything as I gently brushed his wet hair back over his shoulder and slid my hands up his neck to bury my fingers in his scalp. He didn't resist me as I brought his lips to mine.

I had never known a kiss could be that mind-numbing. In fact, I couldn't even think anymore. The strands of his hair bunched around my fists as I held his head in place. My tongue ran along the seam of his lips until they unzipped and let me pass through. Our teeth clicked together when I coaxed him out to meet me. The minty tang to his tongue drew even more of my attention to how it felt, sliding between my mouth and his.

My hands knew what they wanted to do while I was occupied with his lips. They didn't need any input from my brain. One hand stroked up and down his back as the other stayed tangled in his hair, pressing our lips together so he couldn't retreat. My lips were content to rub along Barbie's, our tongues trying to move in together. He gasped and then pressed his body closer to mine.

His hands rose up to wrap around my chest and flex up and down my back, stroking and pulling the muscles. Kneading like he was a big cat. I was so relieved to know that he wasn't fighting me, was even encouraging me to take what I wanted.

Just standing in the doorway was not going to cut it. I guided us to his bed, with him stumbling along not releasing me.

We bumped into the edge then fell headlong onto his still unmade bed. I propped myself up and looked down at his lightly tanned body with the wet red hair and the hideous orange towel still wrapped around his hips. That had to go. I flicked the towel open to get my first full length view. I just stared. He was perfect, glowing skin covering small but defined muscles. The cut under his ribs had healed to a red streak.

There was his cock, relaxing against his hip. So soft. I wondered what it was like to have a foreskin like his. Was it something that he played with? *I could play with it. Would he let me play with it?*

His thighs made a shadowed cave. His sac had to be in there, under all that fiery, fluffy, fur. Would it be high and tight; or floppy and loose? My thoughts kept wandering around his crotch.

After who knows how long, Barbie started to twitch under my gaze. He looked me in the eye and ran his tongue over his lips. At least I think that's what he was doing.

“See something you like?” he said in a breathy voice.

Oh man, did I like. I liked it just the way it was. In front of me.

“Yeah, all of you,” I said, as I was broken out of the spell his body had me under.

He brought a hand up to my shirt and started to push it up. I took the hint and ripped it off over my head. I tried not to think it, but I worried when he saw my scars, he might not want me. Luckily, it was still pretty dark in his bedroom, maybe he wouldn't notice them.

I went ahead and pulled my pants and boxers down to let him see the whole show. There was lots of scarring on my legs from the shrapnel and raised white stripes along my left side.

He pushed himself up on an elbow to get a better look. Then ghosted his free hand over my chest and up to a nipple. He gave it a little tweak. Wow, I didn't know my nipples were that sensitive. No one had paid them any attention before. I couldn't help but arch my back into his touch. He reached over and squeezed the other one, then gave it a pull before releasing it. His finger meandered along my shoulder and then down my side.

I knew he felt the occasional bump of scars. He wasn't freaking out, but then he was pretty drunk. My skin twitched as he came close to tickling me when his hand slid smoothly over my hip bone and around to slide down the crease of my thigh and cup my balls. The strangeness struck me then. Another man had his hand on my sac, and I had absolutely no panic about it, in fact wanted him to touch. Wanted him to do anything he liked to me.

He gave me a light squeeze then slid his hand up and over my begging cock. I stood at attention and saluted his efforts. He swayed unsteadily on his arm as he stroked from my balls to the head of my cock again.

"Ah, that feels nice," I whispered when he circled a finger around the head of my dick, just playing with it. I leaned over and licked his lips. I might have leaned a little more than I was expecting. He fell off of the arm that was keeping him propped up and landed flat on his back. His breath whooshed out, and he gave a little high pitched giggle. His cock cast a shadow from the light in the other room. Just like a sundial that said it was time to fuck.

I lunged up over him, sliding my body over his. He gasped softly, and I could still smell the mint and alcohol on his breath. I couldn't remember why we shouldn't be doing any of this, but, hell, we all do dumb things when we're drunk. He was so warm under me; I couldn't make myself get off.

Hmm. Maybe we could both get off. My leg slid in between his. His cock burning against my hip. I needed more of that contact. I had to have it. I slid my other leg in and spread his thighs so I could feel his legs surround me.

Ahh... much better. Then I caught sight of his lips above me and had to have those again. When I stretched against him, my cock pressed against his. He gasped against my lips as I deliberately pushed a little harder. This was way beyond anything I'd ever felt before. I tried to tell myself it was the booze talking, but I knew it was just Barbie that was overloading my circuits.

He thrust his cock hard under me, rubbing along mine. My brain melted out of my ears. I had to have more. I had to... I don't know. I had to do something. I pushed back and the friction between us was scorching.

"Yes, oh yes, do that again. Just do that again. That felt so good," Barbie babbled, "I'm on fire."

I followed his commands as best I could. Who knew that two cocks were so good together, so good rubbing together. I didn't know it before, but damn, I knew it now.

“This, baby? You like it when I do this to you? Does this make you hot?” Hell, I started babbling, too. I couldn’t make myself shut up. The feel of us rubbing together was lighting my fire. His hands pulled at my hips, grinding me harder against him.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop. Don’t you fucking dare stop.” His eyes were blazing green in the dim light. His still damp hair was practically steaming from the heat. Sweat glistened on his forehead. His lips were parted as he kept up a string of orders never to stop.

Then his body arched backward, his head thrown back to expose his long throat. He lifted us off the bed and then I felt it. I felt his cock jerking between us and his hot lava erupting and coating my cock and his.

I was so close that seeing him explode pushed me over the edge too. I came so damn hard I blacked out for a while.

When I came to, I was still partially on Barbie. He was breathing softly in his sleep. I didn’t have the strength to pull away, so I let myself slip into sleep as well.

Chapter 21

Barbie

Oh the agony! Oh the pain! My head wished it had been decapitated long before this. It took me a little while to realize that I was lying in my own bed, and the light from the window was responsible for stabbing out my eyes. *Damn burning day star.* I threw my arm over my face to block out the evil light.

When did my blankets get so heavy? And only on my left side? I tried to feel them with my left hand, but it was still asleep. Okay, something was going on here. I would have to do the unthinkable. Mustering up my courage, I peeled my eyes open to face the annoyingly bright light. When I turned my head, I was staring straight into a mess of black hair, just inches away.

The memory of last night came back to taunt me. Steven had seen the porn. I didn't know what came over him, but he kissed me, and all fuzzy thoughts had slipped away. I barely even noticed when I went from upright to laying down on my bed, staring up at him. When he took off his clothes, he was spectacular, and I couldn't help myself. I touched. I kissed. I rubbed off on him, or maybe he rubbed off on me.

Oh. Shit. Oh shit. Oh shit! We had been so drunk, I didn't even know if he knew what was going on. *Did I take advantage of him?* I couldn't be sure since I remembered feeling way too good to stop.

His head moved. I thought he was starting to wake up. His arm that was draped over me started to twitch. I prepared myself for what I would say to him. Then his legs joined in, spasming like a dog caught in a dream. His head jerked up.

"NO! Don't!" he screamed right in my face. Then his eyes snapped open, and I was looking into swirling pools of terror. I tried to scoot back, but I was under him, and he had me gripped tight in his arms.

The fear in him was the only thing that kept me from forcing my way free. What was I supposed to do? I could tell he had just woken from a nightmare, but my rational mind was still hammered, and that scream was like a spike through my ears all the way to my brain.

I'd never been the one to turn to for comfort. No one tried to cry on my shoulder, besides Crissy that one time, and even then, I hadn't been any help.

The only thing I could come up with was rubbing his shoulder with my free hand and pushing his head into my shoulder.

“It’s okay. You’re safe now. I’ve got you.” I just kept repeating those words until his eyes cleared, and he relaxed out of the terror.

“What the hell happened?” Steven said in a confused tone. “Tell me we didn’t...” His voice trailed off, shock taking over his features as he saw I was naked and holding him tight.

Yep, he had been too drunk to know better.

My door crashed open. We both jumped, and I nearly shrieked when it felt like my pubes were being yanked out by the roots when our crotches separated. I grabbed the sheets and pulled them over my body when Crissy came through my bedroom door, baseball bat up like she was going to hit something out of the park.

“What the hell is going on here?” She asked, looking from me to Steven, who had pulled the comforter up around him.

“What does it look like?” I shot back. I was hungover and pissed. I was not in the mood for this shit. My glowing clock on the nightstand read 9:42 a.m.

“I don’t know. I heard screaming over here, and thought you were being murdered.” Her eyes kept flicking around the room like she didn’t know where to look. “I didn’t know you still had company.”

“Well I do. Would you leave now? No one is getting murdered. You’ve done your duty.”

She took a second, then nodded her head and walked out.

Now that the distraction was gone, I had to figure this out. I wrapped my sheet tighter around me, up to my armpits, and sidled over to my dresser to get something to wear. Steven just kept staring at me. I slid the jeans on under my sheet and up over my ass. I grabbed a T-shirt to finish my armor and pulled the shirt over my head as I dropped the sheet.

“I’m going to make some coffee,” I said and slipped out of the room. I had never felt this unsure of myself. I was always in control. Fire is not timid, it does not shy away from problems. That’s what I kept telling myself, anyway.

While the coffee was brewing, Steven came out of my bedroom wearing his clothes from last night.

“So... Um... we um...”

“Yeah, we um’d.” I wasn’t sure where he was going with that. It had been the hottest experience of my life. I didn’t want to stand here in my kitchen and listen to him explain how much of a mistake it was.

He hesitated for a bit before continuing. “So now what?”

I didn’t know what he wanted. What I wanted was for him not to regret what we did, but that ship had already sailed out and been shot down in the harbor. I would settle for just being his friend, if we could still even manage that. Deep breath, pull in all my rampaging emotions.

“Now we pretend it didn’t happen and go back to the way we were. There’s no need for this to ruin our friendship.” I hoped he would go for it. I didn’t want to lose even that much of him.

“What if...” he paused and cleared his throat, “what if I don’t want to pretend it didn’t happen?”

My breath caught in my throat. Could he mean what I thought he did? Did he want the same thing I did? To have a chance to find out what this thing was between us?

“What do you mean?” I hesitantly asked. “I thought you were straight.” Probably shouldn’t have reminded him of that.

“Maybe... maybe... God, why is this so hard. I don’t want to pretend it didn’t happen. I just don’t know what it means for me.” He paused. “Hell, it could be just a drunken mistake. I know I was trashed off my ass, and you were right there with me.”

“Do you think it was just a drunk thing?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

He ran his hand through his hair. He wouldn’t meet my eyes. It kind of stabbed at me that he could think it was just the alcohol when it had felt so right. It wasn’t just the alcohol for me. That only let me show what I wanted from him. After seven weeks, thinking about him cranked my engine and drove me away. But to hear him say it could just be a drunk thing made me want to burn something and watch it explode.

“I don’t know. It might be just... I think... I need to think about it.” He cleared his throat. “I need some time. I can’t think with this hangover, and midterms are next week. Um, I’ll call you.” He was out of my apartment so fast, I almost looked for burned rubber on my floor.

Well. That didn't go as expected. What had I thought would happen? I still didn't know if he believed it was only because we were drunk.

After three cups of coffee and a healthy shot of bourbon, I felt a bit more human. I couldn't seem to make myself want to get up off the couch to do anything constructive. I didn't clean up anything, my sheet was still on the floor along with my orange towel, evidence of the night before.

The funk lingered with me for the rest of the weekend. I kept going over what he said and all the ways it could be interpreted. Was I turning into a teenage girl with all this turmoil? He didn't call, but I wasn't really ready for round two, yet.

I studied my ass off Sunday night for my midterms. That was just par for the course, since I always crammed before any test. It wasn't because I was avoiding thoughts of Steven. Not that it really helped. I couldn't concentrate on my notes, and when I tried to read my textbooks, the words blurred into things he had said.

Chapter 22

Steven

Oh my fucking god. I couldn't deal with how I felt waking up in a panic from one of my nightmares to have Barbie holding me till I calmed my ass down. I hadn't told anyone about the dreams, and now Crissy thought I was crazy after waking the whole complex. Then there was the... was it sex? I didn't remember anything going in anywhere, but it had sure felt like sex.

I couldn't accept Barbie's offer of just forgetting. Pretending it didn't happen was the coward's way out. Barbie's face when I said it might have happened because we were drunk was sticking to me. He looked so disappointed. But I'm straight. Or at least I always thought I was. As much as I enjoyed what we did, I didn't know if I would feel the same if we were both sober.

I fled Barbie's apartment like the demons of hell were on my tail. Things would probably have been better if I'd stayed and talked to Barbie about it, but I just couldn't. Not taking the easy way out that Barbie offered took all the courage I had left.

Sunday, I heard my doorbell followed by some furious knocking. I was sitting on my couch, watching NFL. On the coffee table, I had a beer waiting for me to kill and add it to a pile of dead soldiers on the floor. After not even trying to make it to my bed the night before, I knew that I looked pretty rough.

It had to be Crissy. I could hear when Barbie came over from several streets away. I didn't bother getting up for her. The door was unlocked, and she could damn well open it for herself.

She didn't bother knocking again, just stormed into my living room.

"What the hell is going on?" she said. "I gave you guys some privacy to sort this shit out, but seriously, what the hell? You look like you haven't moved in a week. You stink." She looked more closely at me. "And didn't you wear that to my party Friday? Have you even bathed since then?"

"You caught me. I haven't. So? What are you going to do about it?" I knew I sounded belligerent, but I couldn't find it in me to be polite. *How would she like it if her world got stood on end?*

"Have you even slept?"

I just stared at her.

“I thought you guys had gotten somewhere. Saturday morning, you guys were cuddled up in bed. Today, Barbie wouldn't talk to me. You're not answering calls, and you look like a hot mess.” She sighed. “Have you eaten anything today?”

I shook my head no.

“I'll order us something, then you're going to talk to me.”

She ordered a pepperoni pizza and a two-liter Pepsi. Barbie and I had eaten a lot of pepperoni pizzas on this couch. Crissy just wasn't the same. She sat down next to me with her slice on a paper plate. Barbie ate straight from the box like I did. Shit. *Why couldn't I stop thinking about him?*

After we ate, Crissy cleared her throat. “Now, spill. I want to know what happened Friday night and yesterday morning. Tell me what's going on.”

I thought for a minute on how to answer her, but finally decided to tell her everything, from finding his porn until seeing him naked. I didn't tell her what we had done in bed, but I didn't need to. I could see her filling in the blanks. I didn't tell her what my nightmare was about. My aunt had told her what happened. Then I repeated our conversation from Saturday morning.

“You are a fucking jerk, Steven. Why the hell did you have to say that it was a drunken mistake?”

Ahh, now I'd pissed Crissy off. My life could be called complete.

“I had to be honest with him. I didn't want to lead him on if it was just the alcohol.”

“Now that you're sober, what do you think? You are mostly sober, right? Does he still turn you on? Do you think of that red hair spread out so you can touch it all? Do you want to touch his smooth chest? Do you want to feel him wrapped around you?”

I could feel my face burst into flame. Did she really expect me to talk to her about that? I couldn't stop picturing the things she said either. Just the thought of his hair wrapped around my fist was getting me worked up again.

“I don't know, Crissy. I've never tried to date a guy before.”

“So, you want to date him now?” Those blue eyes were boring into my skull, trying to see my thoughts. I had drill instructors that couldn't pin me down like she could.

“Crissy, I don’t know. I think about him, and I want him. I’ve never had a relationship with anyone. Maybe I’ll screw it up, and he’ll never speak to me again.” Damn it, why couldn’t I stop whining? She kept staring at me. I started to squirm.

“Well, you need to decide what you want. If you want him, you’re going to have to talk to him. If you don’t want him, you’re going to have to tell him that, too.”

My head was a mess. “I’m going to need a bit of time to think about this. I’ll take the week and sort through all this. I don’t want to make things worse.”

I knew what needed to be done. I just didn’t want to do it.

“Are you going to talk to Barbie about this?” I asked.

“No, I’ll let you do that. Now, I have to go study. Good grades don’t just happen.” She patted my thigh. “Now start taking care of yourself and think real hard about what you want.”

With that, she pushed up out of my couch that had tried valiantly to hang on to her. Much like how I wanted to hang onto a certain redhead.

I sat there just thinking about what she’d said about still wanting him. Barbie was certainly prettier than any girl I’d ever been with. We got along very well, when I wasn’t being a jerk. I hadn’t been turned off when I saw his cock. Thinking about that perfect pink dick now, I didn’t feel any disgust or revulsion, only an urge to see how it would feel in my hand. *Would it feel like mine? All bumpy and veiny and curving towards his belly button? Or would it be soft and smooth, the foreskin sliding around in my hand?*

In fact, I wanted to find out what it would taste like. *Would it taste like his mouth? Soft and wet? Or would it taste like his shoulder, salty and fresh? Had anyone ever done that for him, gone down on him? He didn’t mention any other people he’d been with. Had he ever been with a guy?*

It was curious to have this desire to be the first to try sucking his dick. Being someone’s first anything never appealed to me. I thought of that little bit of porn I saw on his laptop. *Did he want me to do that with him? Did he want to be the one getting a cock shoved up his ass, or was he the one that wanted to give it?*

The thought of shoving my dick up his ass didn’t turn me off at all. The thought of him taking my ass was something different entirely. That thought

was scary as fuck, but at the same time, so much hotter than me doing him. *Would he want to do that? Could I ask him to? What would it even feel like?* I'd never done more than wipe the backdoor. Never considered it to be part of having sex.

My cock was getting hard from the thought of Barbie having me like that. I shoved my hand down the front of my pants.

Wait. Why were my pubes crusty?

Oh yeah, cause I hadn't showered since Friday. My curly pubic hairs were stuck together in clumps. That was Barbie's semen crusting up my crotch. Which reminded me of how we'd gotten it there in the first place. Just the thought of Barbie under me, rubbing my cock on Barbie, got me to attention faster than anything before.

The need to touch myself was almost overpowering. I didn't want anyone to see this, so I locked my front door and went into my bedroom. I pulled off my shirt, then my pants hit the floor and I collapsed naked onto the bed.

Looking down my body, I could see where our semen had coated the black hairs on my treasure trail. Little white flakes lay against my skin like perfect little snowflakes. My hair was matted down all around the base of my painfully swollen cock. I couldn't help myself, I had to touch it. They were stuck tight together so that when I pushed my fingers through, they tugged my crotch before letting go. The slight pain from the hair pulling around my cock was so delicious. I'd heard that hair pulling could be fun, but I didn't think this is what was meant.

I had never even thought about adding a bit of pain to sex, but just that little bit put me on the edge. My other hand started to gently stroke across the skin of my cock. Up and down, back and forth. The dried cum let go and flaked away making such lovely tingles on my shaft. I needed more. I had to have more.

I pushed my cock down on my belly and ground it into the filthy hairs. I rubbed it on Barbie's semen, where his cock had rubbed against me Friday night. The rough texture of our dried come pushed me over into an explosive orgasm. My back arched up. My knees fell open. I pulled the matted hair on my crotch and my balls kicked my come out and onto my belly to join the mess from Friday night.

Once I calmed down from the best rub out I'd ever had, I felt so filthy. *Did I really just masturbate in two-day-old dried come?* I shuddered in disgust. If

Barbie knew what I'd just done while thinking about him, he'd run. It was time to get cleaned up. Hard to believe I hadn't been compelled to shower as soon as I got home Saturday.

I didn't think I could pass myself off as straight after being that turned on by another man's come on my crotch.

Chapter 23

Barbie

Tuesday night, I found I had an odd feeling. I wanted to call my foster mother. I hadn't called her since I moved away to college.

"Hi Pamela."

"Barbie? Is this Barbie? Are you doing alright? Do you need help?"

"I'm fine. Just thought I'd call you and see how you're doing. I realized I hadn't spoken to you since I moved up here."

"That's right, we still haven't seen your apartment."

I thought about it. She was right. I'd packed up and moved away with everything that was mine in the trunk of my car. I was sure that she and Fred would like to see it, and they weren't all that far away.

"Would you guys like to come see my place?" I hesitantly asked.

"We would love to. We don't have any plans for tomorrow. Would that be okay?"

How fast she answered, and didn't even consult with Fred, let me know that they probably were waiting for me to invite them over. Growing up, they always respected my decisions and wouldn't push. I wondered if they would have wanted to be more of a part of my life growing up. I remembered a few times that Fred asked if I wanted to go camping or fishing with him. In fact, one of the few things I would interact with them on was when Pamela taught me to cook.

Back when I was ten and the social worker dropped James and me off at the Merrill's house, we were both very standoffish. James disappeared into his room and only came out to go to school. He grabbed his meals from the kitchen and ate in his room. Pamela and Fred tried to get us to talk, to tell them about the night of the fire.

Pamela and Fred were a middle-aged couple who didn't have any children of their own. They'd already raised three other foster children before James and I moved in. Those children grew up and moved away, but still came back every Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Then one day, Pamela made souvlaki. She told me that if I wanted any more, I would have to learn to make it myself. After that, she got me a couple Mediterranean cookbooks and taught me how to cook. It didn't take long before I was able to make foods from all over the world. I never told her that I already knew how they tasted when made by a native. Looking back, I realize that was her way of spending time and bonding with me.

While I was always a skinny bean pole, James was tall for his age and bulked up easily since he ate the same amount I did. But mine was burned away, while his went into muscle. When school started, James was encouraged to play junior varsity football. Fred finally broke through to James then. Turns out that if you want to play, you need at least one other person to practice with.

I wasn't interested in playing football. More accurately, I wasn't interested in accidentally drawing attention to my strength and speed if I slipped up. In school, the only physical thing I did, was yoga. I took a few art classes, learned to play classical piano, then disappeared into the garage to tinker and rebuild my Chevelle.

"Tomorrow would be fine. What time do you think y'all will come up?" I heard her put her hand over the phone and shout for Fred to tell her when.

I had to smile, Pamela didn't ask if he wanted to go. She just assumed he did.

"We can be there at six, is that okay?"

"That would be fine. I'll see you then," I said.

She hung up.

All night it rained, and in the morning it let up to a slow drizzle. My family was coming to visit. Huh. They were my family, and I hadn't even noticed.

At 5:56, they knocked on my door. Fred had started getting a bit of gray sprinkled through his dark hair and at the temples. His laugh lines were permanent and bracketed his eyes and lips. Pamela was aging gracefully as well. I could see a few more white hairs blending in with the blonde. Her smile was as serene as the first time I saw it.

When she held out her hand for me to shake, I don't know what came over me. I pulled her to me and wrapped my arms around her shoulders. I saw the surprise in Fred's eyes over the top of her head. I couldn't remember ever hugging either one of them. Had I really been that frigid?

When I gave Fred a one arm shoulder hug, I was afraid I might give him a heart attack from the shock. He cleared his throat. "How have you been, son?"

He always called James and me son. I finally recognized that was how he saw us. We weren't just the rejected kids; we were his kids. I took a second as I motioned for them to come on in. I needed a distraction to unclog my throat.

"I'm good. I'm learning a bit in class."

I showed them around my apartment. Pamela kept looking around then back to me. It took me a minute to figure out what had her puzzled.

Gesturing around the living room, I said, "My friend is working on her BFA in interior design. She wanted to practice on my place."

I wouldn't have even thought of having a bench height bookshelf running the length of the room under the windows. The ultra-modern, low, cream couch took a bit of getting used to. The enormous shiny-black on matte-black painting would not have been my first pick either. Somehow, Crissy tied it all together with what she called accent pieces. I called them lamps and end tables.

We talked about classes for a bit, then the conversation moved around until it came back to friends.

"This Crissy sounds like she's pretty great. Do you see her very often?" Pamela asked.

"Yeah, almost every day. She lives right across the hall, and we have a class together. She and Steven are my best friends." After it was out, I realized that I still thought of him as my best friend, even if he thought we'd made a mistake.

Pamela reached up to touch her hair, then said, "Could there be anything more between you?"

"No, very early on, we figured out that we weren't each other's type."

"Is there anyone else that you're interested in? Maybe a girl in one of your classes?"

I thought about how much strength it must have taken for Sam to be so open. I hadn't appreciated it, until I was getting ready to tell my foster mother.

"Pamela, Fred, I need to tell you something." I took a deep breath. Here goes. "I'm gay."

Fred dropped down on my couch. Pamela though, didn't react much at all. She said, "We've always had our suspicions. We're just surprised you're finally

telling us.” She paused for a second. “There for a while, we were worried that you wouldn’t tell anyone. You were just so closed off.” She stepped toward me and opened her arms. “Come here.”

I stepped forward, and she wrapped her arms around me for the second time that day. I felt my eyes start to prickle and tingle. Then I felt a cool streak of wetness down my cheek. *Was this what it felt like to cry? But why would I cry over something that made me happy?*

Over the top of her head, I saw Fred get back up from the couch and come towards us. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking until he reached his arms out to hold both his wife and me.

“I love you, son. I’m so proud for you being this strong,” he said as he kept us wrapped in his arms. “I’ve always thought of you as my son, and this won’t change that.”

I didn’t know what to say. I knew he cared about me, but somehow I hadn’t wanted to see just how much these two loved me. And then I realized that I loved them back.

Chapter 24

Steven

I tried to study on Sunday, but I couldn't concentrate. Monday came too soon, bringing with it my first midterm, and I didn't feel prepared. Crissy and Barbie were already seated by the time I got to class. I could feel Crissy glaring at me, but I just ignored her. There were other things I'd rather look at. Barbie was so pretty with his hair tied back in a ponytail so I could see his face. Were his eyes a little baggy? Did he look tired?

Luckily, the test wasn't too hard. Even with my blown concentration, I was still able to get it done in time. My eyes kept wandering over to Barbie. At least we weren't sitting next to each other or we'd be busted for cheating, even though I never looked down to where he was writing. I couldn't help myself. He just pulled my eyes to him and held my attention until I could talk myself into doing a few more questions before allowing another glance.

He finished before me, so my distraction left, and I was able to concentrate on my own test. I didn't even notice when Crissy left. Of course, that also meant he wasn't waiting for me when I was done. Which was just as well, since I didn't know what I would say to him. I didn't want to screw up like I had last time. Then I realized that was exactly what happened. I'd screwed up by not jumping all over the chance to have Barbie. Being drunk was no excuse for not recognizing how much I wanted more with him.

I called Crissy on Wednesday to check on her. Really just to try to find out how Barbie was doing. She told me that Barbie wasn't sleeping much, but she couldn't tell if that was a midterms thing or because of me. I hoped it was just the midterms. I didn't want to be the cause of any problems for him.

I promised myself I'd wait until Friday night before trying to talk to Barbie. Just the thought of him led to many lonely whack off sessions. While picturing him with me was a big turn on, it had nothing on the time with his crusty cum. *Did that make me wrong?* Maybe I was gay. Was I ready to date a man? Did I have to tell anyone? What if Barbie turned out to be the one for me? Could I tell my mother? At least I didn't have to worry about telling the guys from my unit.

I spent more time thinking about what to say to Barbie than I did studying. I hoped that didn't affect my grades too much, but no matter how hard I tried, I

couldn't be too concerned. A new discovery of my sexuality at my age made my foundations shudder and was much more important than knowing how to calculate gross GDP.

By the time Friday rolled around, I'd practiced what I would say, how I would say it. I couldn't take how he looked at me in lit class. Like he couldn't decide if he should ignore me or give me a chance.

I called Crissy right after my last class. She confirmed that Barbie was still in his apartment. Now or never. The trip to his place flew by too quickly. I was so nervous, even though I knew there was no physical danger, just that he might never want to speak to me again.

His car was still in the parking lot. I had no excuses to delay. Don't be a coward, soldier!

Knocking on his door was harder than facing down enemy fire. I heard him shuffling to the door. It didn't open.

"What the fuck do you want?" Barbie snarled at me.

I deserved his anger. After all, I had been the one to run.

"I want to talk to you. I've done my thinking. Please, let me in." I would beg if that's what he needed to give me a chance. I heard the chain slide back, and then I was confronted with the man that made my heart stutter. He was in a T-shirt and jeans with his hair pulled back. His eyes were a little baggy, but they sparked with his own fire.

"You could have just called. I'm sure you didn't need to drive all the way over here."

He stepped back and motioned me inside. His apartment was a little disorganized but not like the disaster my place had become. I sat down on his couch like I normally did at his place. He didn't join me. Instead, he perched on the edge of his desk chair. This was the first time he'd sat on a separate piece of furniture just to avoid me. I could feel the distance between us growing.

"Yes, I did. I had to see you. Staying away from you was the hardest thing I've ever done, but I owed it to you to think this through completely." Deep breath. He was paying attention to me at least. "I thought about last Friday night. It wasn't just the alcohol."

"Then what was it?"

“I’d noticed that you were attractive, but I hadn’t let myself follow through on that thought. Hell, I thought you were straight, too. When I saw your porn, I knew you weren’t.” *Now for the hard part.* “I... I’ve never found another man attractive before. When I saw you in that damn orange towel, all I could think of was how damn hot you were. How I wanted to do things to you like in that movie. I just had to touch you.”

“Crissy was the one to look up the porn.” Barbie finally interrupted me. “I’d never seen any gay porn before that. I’d never done anything with a guy before.” He stared straight at me, but I could see by the way he kept rubbing his pants that he wasn’t that comfortable with the conversation.

What? Was Barbie not gay? I’d been so sure that it was just me that was uncomfortable with it. Had I totally misread what he’d said a week ago? Shit, was I screwing up everything? It was too late for that, I was already spilling more than a friend would want to know. Best to keep going and get it all out, then at least I would know.

I cleared my suddenly parched throat. “Well, since I took the time to think over everything, I know, without a doubt, that you turn me on. Once I allowed myself to think of you like that, I couldn’t stop. I don’t know what the hell is going to happen, but I’d like the chance to find out.”

The ball was firmly in his court.

Chapter 25

Barbie

Was I dreaming? After a nightmare week of studying and missing my friend and worrying that I'd done something wrong, he offered everything I didn't know I was looking for. It seemed he actually was thinking about things, not pushing me away like I'd thought. Now the question was, did I believe him? All week I'd run over everything that we'd done and said from Friday night to Saturday morning.

I had never been with a man before, but I was pretty sure that blaming everything on the alcohol was not a good sign. And then I'd always heard that "give me time" was code for "fuck off and die." It was good to know that he actually just meant time to think.

Now he was asking for a chance. A chance for what, I wasn't sure. It sounded like a good thing.

"Are you sure you weren't thinking of me as a girl? I'm a man. You're a man. Two men doing stuff together is gay. Are you gay?" I had to know for sure.

"I'm gay. I want to try all that gay stuff with you."

Yeah, that was just about what I'd dreamed he would say.

"Do you even know what all that 'gay stuff' is? I looked it up last week. Are you sure you want that? Do you want me to stick my dick up your ass?"

His eyes got so big when I said that, I was afraid that I might have gone too far. From what I'd read, not all guys took it up the ass. I didn't expect to have his right away. Although, I admit that the thought of him bent over with his ass in the air was exceptionally hot. I could just picture him bent over for me, pants sagging around his thighs. My brain short-circuited.

His breath stuttered out and his cheeks went up in flame.

"I... I... um... I want to try that." He could barely get it out, but it set fire to my dick. I hadn't expected him to fucking agree to it, but damn if it wasn't hot as fuck.

"All of it?" I had to ask.

“Yeah, all of it. I think we could learn to do it together.” He paused. “I don’t know how to be gay.” Damn, that was a load of honesty. He rubbed his hand over his head. Those smoke-gray eyes never left my face. “How about we try it. Maybe go on a few dates. Maybe try some other stuff. Hell, I don’t know. The only thing I do know is that I want you. Please.”

“Okay.” I didn’t have it in me to be articulate after having Steven practically present himself on a silver platter for me.

My plan wasn’t fully formed, but I got up and went over to him. I put one leg on each side of him and leaned over, putting my hands on the back of the couch so I was hovering over him. His pupils dilated, but that was his only response as I lowered my face to his.

His lips parted and received my kiss as a benediction. Once we settled into a solid joining of mouths, his hands left the couch to loop around my back and pull me closer. He felt so good under me like that. I needed more. I lowered myself into his lap so I could free my hands. When I slid in close to his chest, I could feel his cock under me. He was gasping and moaning around my lips when I moved my hips a little bit, rubbing on him. That felt super good. Have to do that again! And again.

My hands rested briefly on his shoulders then I slid them down his chest. He felt so good. I couldn’t stop touching. He was right where I wanted him, and he wasn’t protesting.

The End

Author Bio

I'm a slightly interesting person of average intelligence living an average life in the middle of Alabama. I've worked as a claims adjuster and a riding instructor. I'm an artist and a musician. Occasionally, I'm an activist and protester.

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