

A person wearing a white, featureless mask and a dark, textured, possibly latex or fur-like outfit is crouching in a dark environment. The person's body is illuminated from the side, highlighting the contours of their muscles and the texture of the outfit. The background is completely black.

Everyday Spectres

Too Close  
to the Sun

Willa Okati

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*by Willa Okati*

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## Chapter One

"Everything seems to be in order, Mr. Tomas." The case worker shuffled raggedy-edged doctor's reports, court orders, and what seemed like a hundred different forms into as neat a stack as she could make.

Slipping them into a manila file pocket, she smiled up. "So, we've got the formalities out of the way. How are you doing? I mean, really. Not all this stuff." She waved her hand dismissively at the legalese. "Tell me about yourself, Mr. Tomas."

Her "guest" didn't look up from his cup of office coffee, burned into bitter syrup after a long day of sitting in the pot. He stirred the cold mess with a plastic twig, poking at lumps of creamer that refused to dissolve. "Usually I take my caffeine black," he said, voice low. "I thought, how much worse could your motor oil taste? Guess I found out."

"Mr. Tomas—"

"Javier." He raised his head. "My friends call me Java." Raising the cup, he offered her a half-smile. "On account of the habit, you know?" He took a hesitant sip. "God, you guys need to just stop trying and buy instant."

"Hey, don't think I'm not tempted, Java." The woman tried out his nickname but Java didn't bother reacting. She'd use the short version a few times to be polite, slip back into Javier, and the next time they met, he'd be Mr. Tomas again.

Ah, hell. He couldn't be bothered to get annoyed. Besides, Java kind of liked the woman, although he always remembered to call her Carly, the way she'd asked when they

first met. He remembered things about people. Couldn't help noticing what they liked and what they hated. Sometimes he saw things they loved deep and true.

Moments like those made him want to squirm. He took another sip of viscous coffee and shifted his weight on Carly's hard plastic office chair. Too short for Java, it made his bad leg ache if he sat folded up in there for more than a few minutes.

Carly saw him trying to hide a wince and made the appropriate sympathetic noise. "I really will try to find a cushion before next time. Javier. Java."

"Appreciate the thought."

"So have you made any ... er ... strides in rebuilding your personal life?" Carly asked, leaning forward a bit, as if they were friends sharing secrets. Like he didn't know she'd write everything down later.

Java twisted his mouth into a half-smile and shrugged.

"Javier, it's been over a year," Carly said, disappointed. "I know what Gary did—"

"We don't talk about Gary!" Java raised his head to look her square in the eyes, Mexican-Indian black to white bread hazel. He shook his head, a hard jerk. "Gary doesn't enter this conversation. Are we clear?"

Carly looked shaken by the vehemence from the usually soft-spoken portion of her caseload, but Java had to hand her kudos, because she did have balls. A moment's pause, a toss of her hair, and she leaned forward again, knitting her hands together like a single fist. "Yes, Gary does enter this conversation. What he did to you was unforgivable, okay?"

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What you've got to realize is you're not alone. I don't know how many of my cases have had their loved ones walk away and leave them to handle this life all alone. There are support groups, counselors, people you can talk to. You don't have to handle everything by yourself, Javier."

"I do." Java's voice had dropped again. He stared into the clumps of cream on the surface of his coffee, wishing he could read futures in them like gypsies did with tea leaves. Instead they sat there, useless lumps, ugly and bad tasting. Bitter as life, sludgy as the daily trek through what he called existence.

Ever since the fire, he'd had nothing to live for and nothing to lose except these disability checks. If he screwed them up, he'd be out on the streets. He was two steps away from living in a cardboard box as things stood.

"I know, Carly. I promise I'll check them out. One day. Just—not yet."

"You need to, Javier. You really have to pull yourself out of this solitary lifestyle. It isn't healthy."

"I know."

She pointed a pencil at him. "I mean it, mister."

He lifted the corner of his mouth again, black humor engulfing him. Carly really did mean everything she said for the best. "I know." Sighing, he rubbed his hand over the back of his neck, flinching when his fingers met smooth scar tissue. Funny how it never stopped startling him. "Are we done here?"

"For now." Carly lifted his file and dropped it onto a stack of others waiting to go back into the records room. She reached down, opened a desk drawer, riffled through a stack

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of envelopes and handed him one. "Here. Go ahead and take this. Save us a stamp."

Java took the check, swallowing down a hard knot of pride in his throat. His father would have died of shame to see his boy taking charity—if he and the old man had still been on speaking terms when he'd passed. His dad hadn't liked having a gay son, and made no bones about the fact.

All the same, Papa's blood ran in Javier's veins, earthy blood tying him with a strong bond to the day-to-day grind. Shouting at him that he should be working. Earning his bread.

What did he do, instead? Sat at home, drinking bottle after bottle of cheap American beer, not even the good Cuervo. Living on booze, coffee, and cigarettes, and coming out once a month to meet with Carly.

No kind of life for a man, and he knew as much. But the things Carly suggested—Java couldn't see himself sitting in a circle, smiling and nodding at other people's sob stories. Couldn't imagine paying someone to listen and pretend they cared.

He'd rather be alone.

The envelope felt hot in Java's fingers. Burning. He could almost smell the smoke. The sickly-sweet scent of charred flesh. Feel the healing grafts. Smell the doctor's offices...

He shook his head and stood, staggering a bit as he had to adjust his balance for the gimp leg. Never would be right again. Broken in too many places, spiral fractures. He'd limp for the rest of his days, weighed down to earth. No firehouse would take him on if he couldn't run, do drills, slide down a pole, or walk steady through a burning building.

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He caught an echo of his old chief's voice in his ears, like a ghost from the past: "Think of it like an honorable discharge ... not fired, just prematurely retired ... can't keep you on ... you have to go ... go ... go..."

"Mr. Tomas?" Carly's worried voice jolted Java out of being lost in his thoughts. "Are you all right?"

Java blinked, watching her pert little face swim into focus. God, she was young. Probably just out of college for a couple of years. Still new enough to the world she hadn't forgotten how to care. Even had a few drops of bleeding heart left for gay firefighters, or at least the dumped, crippled ones.

He made himself smile at her, not a bitter sideways twist, but a genuine almost-grin. "I'm fine. Just remembered something I have to do on the way home."

"Are you walking?" Carly worried at her lip, twiddling her pencil. "I know it's good exercise, and I'm all for you keeping up your physical therapy, but Mr. Tomas, this isn't the best part of town. I'm afraid you'll—"

She broke off. Didn't have to finish what she'd started to say because Java had already filled in the blanks. He was too slow to run if someone tried to attack him. Too weak from bad food and sleepless nights to fight off a mugger.

His grin vanished, melting like frost on a dirty window. "I'm fine," he said stiffly, folding his check in half and stuffing the envelope in his jeans pocket. "See you next month."

"Mr. Tomas, I didn't mean—I'm sorry."

He didn't turn around to reassure her he wasn't angry. Couldn't risk her seeing the look in his eyes: dark, smoldering with rage, disconnected and depressed. The last thing he

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needed was her deciding he needed more visits to a shrink. They'd kept him for seventy-two hours once, after he'd admitted to feeling like there was nothing left to live for, and he'd sworn never to go back inside a nut house again.

Shrinks! Java fucking hated head doctors. Pills were their answer to everything, and he already had three vices that were gonna kill him someday. He didn't need another. If he wanted to pass over a chunk of his small check to make someone pretend they cared, he'd go hire one of the rough-edged male hookers who hung out on street corners.

Maybe pretend for a minute the guy sucking him off was Gary. Big, burly Gary, who'd been great about understanding a firefighter's life once upon a time. Java would come home from a shift, smoky and exhausted, and Gary would be there, cold beer and sympathetic ear at the ready.

No more.

Java rotated his head on his neck as he made for the entrance to the Social Services building, ignoring the polite calls of "Have a good evening!" a few flunkies offered him. A good evening? When he'd go home to his one-room apartment, cook a frozen burrito—just one—and sit up until dawn, watching bad movies on TV in an effort to make the time go by?

Good. Right.

He closed his eyes and let himself imagine Gary would be there, waiting for him. Gary, with his surprisingly sexy smile in his craggy face, his huge, bear-like body so warm and hard to lean against, the way he'd plucked a guitar sometimes and let Java sing snatches of songs in Spanish. Golden tequila



moments stretching into hours. All gone now, taken with Gary when he walked out the door two weeks after Java's accident.

Asshole.

Java opened his eyes to the dreary metal door that would lead him back outside, sighed, and put one hand on the crash bar. He made a face at the sight of his skin, the caramel color marred by a rough pink square. One of the transplant sites. He'd gotten that hand roasted protecting his face. Almost succeeded, too. Just a few scars marred his lower jaw, a few more down his neck. Growing his hair out long and shaggy hid most of them, but a beard didn't work. Hair wouldn't sprout over a burn scar.

Gary's voice sounded in his memory, clear as a bell. Laughing over beard burn on his chest as Java moved from nipple to nipple, teasing with his mouth and with fingers dancing on the hard planes of Gary's lower belly. "You're gonna drive me crazy!" he'd snorted. "Come on, man, stop teasing."

Java remembered how he'd laughed back into Gary's warm, taut skin and slid his hand further down, grasping the solid column of his boyfriend's cock. Velvet over iron. Sliding it up and down, teasing, slow, making the love last forever ... right.

He sighed, feeling suddenly terribly tired, hopelessly horny, and lonely as hell. *Stop*, he told himself. *No use wishing for what you can't have. This is your life, and you have to get used to the way things are. Accept your future as it is: empty. Don't expect anything more, and you won't be disappointed.*

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*Don't go looking for love in the right or the wrong places.  
Love isn't part of you anymore. You're not capable. If you  
were, Gary would still be here. Right?*

Go home, Java. Go home.

Forget about daydreams and sighing over what might have  
been.

Wishes don't come true.

He had no idea how wrong life was about to prove him.

## **Chapter Two**

He could have taken the short route home. Should have. But when, in the last year, had Java ever done anything worth a nickel on the common sense market? In his opinion, if you were going to screw up your life, at least do a good job. Be a legendary failure, not just an everyday hack.

Stepping outside of the Social Services building, Java glanced around and made a face. Just about four forty-five in the afternoon. Still some daylight left, if it deserved the name. The skies were overcast with heavy gray clouds that weighed down the streets with a thick blanket of fog. On the bad side of town, not such a downer.

This side of the city had once been a big factory area, but the jobs had moved on to other countries—outsourcing. Was that what they called "shifting the load to sweatshops" these days? Only the buildings remained, full of squatters, drug dens, and homeless folks shifting in and out of doorways. This was No Man's Land, where hope met reality and gave up the ghost.

Kind of a fitting place for those who were too crippled up to work any more to come and get their pity checks. Java resisted the urge to pull Carly's envelope out of his pocket, wadded the paper into a ball, and toss it into a gutter.

Fuck, he hated walking in those offices with his hand out! He'd worked hard all his life to beat down the stereotype of the lazy Latino, and even if he did wear enough scars to prove he'd "earned" the subsistence, it ate at him every time he went through the battered building's doors.

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A bag lady rattled her shopping cart in front of him. She pulled a nasty face. "Watch where you're going!"

"Jesus, sorry." Java held up his hands, only to be totally ignored. He watched the woman disappear into the mouth of an alley. Once upon a time, he and Gary had liked roaming the bizarre network—almost like a labyrinth—of back passageways that spiderwebbed the city. They'd bet you could go in there and get so lost no one would ever find you.

His leg already aching, his stomach sour from bad coffee, Java gave half a wistful thought to following the woman. "Hey, wait up," he mumbled. "You want a bodyguard? I've still got one good leg and all my teeth. You show me where to dumpster dive, I'll teach you how to street fight."

Wouldn't have been a bad trade. But nah, he was just letting himself be maudlin again. No time for that. He needed to keep going, even if he couldn't—no, wouldn't—move on the way Carly wanted.

Java reached into his back pocket instead and pulled out first a soft, crumpled dollar bill, then a half-empty pack of cigarettes. He tapped one out into his hand, gazed at it, and shook his head. All his years on the team, he'd never once been tempted. He'd seen too many houses burn down to ash by careless smokers.

The day they fired him, he'd bought his first pack. Made him sick as hell through most of the cancer sticks, but he stood firm, and after a few days, he'd learned to relish the burn of smoke going down in his lungs. If he closed his eyes he could almost see the fire glowing in his chest like a little live coal. A spark of who he used to be.

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His logic didn't make sense to the one friend he still had from days gone by, but what did she know? She ate non-fat yogurt and drank diet soda. Wouldn't even touch decaf herbal tea, much less the coffee he liked. Fragrant Mexican coffee, strong and thick enough you could all but stand the spoon on its end.

His mouth watered at the thought of the taste, how it would kick like a stallion on the way down, scorching a trail to his stomach. Almost better than liquor. Sweetened with some nutmeg and sugar, but God, no cream. The sight of those nasty congealed lumps in his charity coffee clung to his mind like mold on a rock, resisting all efforts to scrape the image away.

He leaned back against a street light and fished out his lighter. Cupping one hand around the end of the cigarette he held the other to the flame, taking in as deep a drag as he could hold. Wisps of smoke trickled away from his nose while he counted to twenty-five, then let a thin wisp of vapor escape his lungs.

Java wondered how black his lungs were. Was he charred yet? No way to tell, so he'd best just keep smoking until he began to cough and his voice lowered from a smooth, deep tenor to a rough-hewn rasp.

God. And people wondered why he acted like he had nothing to live for.

Java kept the cigarette dangling from his mouth as he folded his arms across his chest and limped, drag-step, drag-step, down the broken and littered sidewalk. Once-brilliant posters for rock bands and pictures of long-lost pets covered

the buildings beside him. He didn't give one of them a glance. He'd seen everything before. The dimmed colors in the corner of his eye depressed him, though, and he cursed his inability to walk any faster.

He took a left turn where he could have taken a right, stubbornly determined to give his leg a real workout. The doctors said he'd never be comfortable again. They'd suggested canes and walkers, and said he might want a wheelchair someday. To hell with their prophecies of doom! Java intended to push himself both hard and fast. Maybe he'd never race to the scene of a fire again, but by God he'd walk without drawing startled looks of pity.

The neighborhoods around him didn't get any better, but the area was more populated. Some enterprising slum lords had developed a couple of the old factories into low-rent housing, and although most tenants had the sense to stay inside when dark approached or in heavy fog, a few lingered on the streets.

"Peg leg!" a teenager with a matted afro called after Java, laughing while elbowing his buddies. "You want me to help you across the street?"

*Fuck them.* Java gritted his teeth and kept walking, one slow step at a time.

Halfway down the block, he stopped at a hot dog cart, just closing down for the day, and bought a Styrofoam cup of coffee with the dollar he'd rescued earlier. Tasted like crap, the dregs of an urn filled eight hours before and kept on boil since then. Weak and burned. Slimy as syrup. Bitter on his

tongue. All the same, he turned down the flyspecked creamer and clumpy sugar.

Java tried a tentative sip, feeling the tender skin of his lower lip and tongue scald. The oily liquid slid down into his belly, snakelike, unpleasant. He took another sip, determined to get his buck's worth, and shuffled away from the cart. He hated to admit it, but his leg ached too much to go on for a few minutes. Time to stop and take a rest.

The cart had been parked in front of one of the slum dives. Java backed up to the dirty bricks and leaned against them, carefully balancing himself. He took the last possible drag on his smoke, stubbed the cherry out, and thought about lighting another one.

*Nah*, he decided. He'd need a third hand—one was already busy bracing himself, and the other held his coffee. Sure, he could tip against the crumbling steps, but damned if he'd sag all over them while he smoked.

A girl, maybe in her early twenties, and a middle-aged woman watched him dispassionately from their place on the stairs. A boy came up to join them, throwing rocks at the few passing cars as he approached. Neither one scolded him, whether he was nephew, son, or grandchild, and none of the three spoke to Java.

No one had the heart, on this side of town. Live and let each other be.

Java fit right in.

Sighing, he tilted his head against the wall and let his eyes comb over the ramshackle factory directly across. Someone had painted fresh graffiti over the padlocked loading dock

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doors and adjacent wall. Fresh colors, brilliant even in the curling fog. Green dragons spraying red flames, sapphire blue names in sprayed cursive, a few choice swear words outlined in black.

Halfway up the wall, all by itself, there was a bird. Java frowned, wondering how someone could have managed to paint at that height. The building had to be twelve stories, and while it was zigzagged with a fire escape dangling iron rods over the walk, no one could have managed the artwork without some serious ropes and pulleys.

Maybe they'd climbed the old factory like a cliff wall. The Mount of Skid Row. Java half-laughed, wondering if this was a new thing, a braver way of showing off the balls, or if someone had done the art to prove they could.

Pretty bird. Vibrant jewel colors, with one big black eye weeping tears like pearls. Java sipped his coffee and admired the work, almost not tasting the nasty brew he kept tossing back.

Idly, he imagined Gary there with him. They'd liked walking through town back when Java was better fit for the exercise. Jogging warmed up a man's heart and loosened his muscles. He remembered how, toward the end of their runs, they'd always glance at each other, grin, and put on an extra burst of speed heading for home.

Once safely inside the doors of either one's apartment, they'd fall on each other with hungry mouths and eager hands, tugging off shorts and kicking running shoes off with solid *thunks* against the far wall. They'd fall down on the bed, couch, or floor, however far they managed to hold off, and



roll together, tangling in a knot. Wrestling until one kissed the other, hot and hungry, and started to writhe against the hard body beneath him...

Sometimes Java thought he hated Gary for leaving. He'd claimed he wasn't able to cope with all Java needed while he was healing up, but Java knew the truth. Gary liked beautiful things, and Java had been made ugly. Kicked out of the firefighters. No living, no body temple, not able to fuck for months. He hadn't been able to give Gary what he'd wanted, so Gary'd left.

"I'm sorry, Jav," he could still hear Gary say uncomfortably, standing in the door of the hospital room. "You understand, don't you? I mean, you'd do the same thing yourself, right?"

Java snorted bitterly and washed his acrid humor down with the last swig of coffee. He crumpled the cup and sent it skidding into a pothole. No one cared about littering. Hell, the boy raised one fist and whooped, "Score!"

Shaking his head, Java looked back up at the building, hunting for the bird, wishing he had a camera with him. Fuck if it made him look like a tourist; he wanted a memory that beautiful, sad creature frozen in flight. Maybe he could find his way back someday...

"Woo!" the older woman cackled. "Look! Flyboy's back!"

Java blinked. What the hell? He glanced at the women and child, startled to see them laughing and pointing at the building he'd been watching. "What, the bird?" he chanced being rude enough to ask.

The younger woman cut him a disgusted look. "You ain't from around here, are you?"

"Like that's a surprise," the older one muttered. "Look there! He's on the ledge."

"He? The bird?" Java asked, fumbling for the truth.

The young woman made an impatient noise, shaking her head, a half-undone braid tickling her cheek. She picked the split ends up and pointed with them. "Up on the building. Not that spray paint shit. On the roof."

Confused, Java looked up, past the bird of paradise, up into the gray mist swirling around the top of the building ... and stilled in shock. "Damn!"

A man stood on top of the crumbling brickwork ledge. Tall and thin, his hair grown out long enough to be tossed in the strong breeze up there, he had his arms out as if he were ready to be crucified, his head tilted back, and his feet dangerously close to the edge.

If Java's heart hadn't jumped right into his throat, he would have thought the sight beautiful. The man was gorgeous. Long hair the color of maple syrup, just a little curly, swirling around his face. Long arms and legs, too thin, but he looked strong for his weight. Light as a feather, ready to soar.

To jump. Java swallowed hard. *Shit!*

"You think he might step off the ledge today?" the boy asked, bouncing up and down. "Cool! I wanna see!"

"Fifty cents says he won't."

"You're on," the two women dickered. They laughed, raucous as crows, at the sight of the man all but floating above them. Ready to fall to his death.

*God, those heartless ...* Java shoved his coffee at the older woman. "Call 911!" he ordered. At her surprise, he gave her a push and said, "Go inside and call the police, would you?"

The woman eyed him narrowly. "He won't jump," she said after a minute.

"Yeah? What if he falls?"

She said nothing. Java got the feeling that she truly didn't care. He swore at her in Spanish, calling her the faithless mistress of a goat, and threw in some insults to the younger woman and brat as well.

Okay, so, no help from their quarter. Determined, Java pushed himself away from the wall and started walking as fast as he could, step-scrape, step-scrape, over to the trailing edge of the fire escape.

"What do you think you're doin'?" one of the women yelled at him as he reached for the first dangling rung, bracing himself for how much the climb would hurt.

Java stared up the side of the building, all the way to the man about to throw himself to the wind, swallowed down a lump of bitter pride and black humor, and replied, "Going to save someone's life."

### Chapter Three

God! Why was he doing this?

*Oh, yeah. Can't just stand by and watch a guy risk his life. Too many years of doing the right thing. Too much time playing the hero. Guess it takes a toll. And fuck if I'll even let myself be as heartless as those people on the ground.*

*They don't register beauty when they see it in the face of a man. They don't value life. All they want is a distraction, something to make them laugh and feel better about their own sorry-assed lives.*

I'm not like them. I won't ever be.

Grim and white-lipped with determination, Java seized the railing of the fire escape and hauled himself up. Thank God he'd managed to hang on to a set of weights when he'd lost his apartment, the one he'd been planning to share expenses on with Gary. There wasn't room for them in the tiny place he lived in now, but he kept the barbells anyway. He worked hard on his arms, trying to make up for his leg. The leg that slid and skidded when he scrabbled for purchase on the rusty iron.

He almost fell on his ass, but after a moment's fierce humiliation and a dangerous screech of the metal, he managed to haul the rest of his body up to semi-safety.

Java lay hunched-up on the bottom of the fire escape, his lungs already hurting as if he'd been walking through a house ablaze without a mask. Damned cigarettes! His leg was seared with pain, the muscles seized up and quaking. He

glanced up, hoping against hope the man would have retreated.

No such luck. Just barely visible from Java's vantage point, he stood balanced with his arms out, raised to the sky. God! One more step and he'd—

No. Java wouldn't fucking *let* him take the plunge. Gritting his teeth, he hauled himself up onto his feet. The fire escape screeched and swayed in protest, but he held on with a hand on the railing and one on the wall until it stopped.

Twelve stories to go. *I can do this.* Right.

White dents appeared at his jaw. No one beat Javier Tomas when he had his stubborn backbone worked up. "Come on, you bastard," he muttered at the steps. "You want a piece of me? I'll show you who's gonna win this game."

He fought that fire escape every step of the way, story by story. Bracing himself, going with the sway, whatever it took to hang on and keep going. Each step he took made his leg scream with white-hot agony, but he ignored the pain, and forced himself up one foothold at a time. Every so often he glanced up to see if the man were still there, if he hadn't fallen. Not yet.

Java guessed he'd have heard a cheering from the street if "Flyboy" had decided to take his last step. God knew there were enough people watching. A crowd had gathered, some on the street, some leaning out their own windows. Rotten vegetables and sulfurous eggs were thrown at him, splattering his jacket with effluvia that stank to high heaven.

No one had bothered to call the cops, as far as he could tell. Seemed like they were used to seeing this man up there. Probably had a god-damned pool on when he'd finally leap.

Java ground his jaws together, stuck his chin out, and climbed on. Why *did* this matter so much? Just another guy thinking about taking the easy way out of life, looked like. Why should he stop someone from going out with a bang instead of living a whimper, the way he'd done himself since the accident?

Shaking his head, Java climbed on.

The rise to the roof was almost worse than getting onto the fire escape had been. He hung a couple hundred feet higher in the air, and had to deal with both crumbling masonry and wavering iron at the same time.

His foot slipped. A huge cheer rose from the onlookers, along with a chant of: "Fall! Fall! Fall!"

The mockery kept Java's hands scrambling for purchase, until at last he got a solid grip and hung on for dear life, his knuckles going white. Deliberately shutting out the flares of misery in his leg and the aching of his arms, he hauled himself bodily over the ledge, rolled, and landed on the roof, on his back, staring up at the swirling gray sky.

"It's cold up here."

The voice startled Java into flipping over, up on his hands and knees, ready to lunge before he could think twice. A burst of pain flared through his bad leg and it collapsed beneath him, the knee scraping open on sharp roof tar. He stared up at the man, who'd turned to look over his shoulder at Java, and speak.

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"What are you doing up here?" the man asked, as if he were the sane one in the operation.

Java blinked, fighting back a stream of anger. Words like: *trying to stop you from splattering on the sidewalk, you fucktard!*

"I came for you," he finally managed to snap. "What kind of game are you playing?"

"Game?" The man frowned. "It's not a game. I just wanted to be up here. Just to be..." his voice faded out. As if forgetting Java were there, he turned back to face the swirling sky. "So beautiful," he murmured, voice barely audible about the gusts of wind blowing hard enough to make his slight frame waver and wobble.

Slowly, painfully, Java hauled himself up to his feet. He had to stand favoring one side, to ease his muscles' loud complaining. His knee felt warm and wet, probably bloody, with a hole torn in one of his few good pairs of jeans. He stared at the man, shaking his head. Crazy. One hundred percent lunatic. Had to be.

The man tilted his head back further, parting his lips as if he wanted to swallow the fading light from the sun like a fire berry if someone would just place it on his tongue. He began to sing, not words, just vocalizations up and down the scale. Haunting and beautiful, a light, sweet tenor that wavered with sorrow. At first Java wondered if it was opera, and then he realized: birdsong. The man was mimicking the music of the creatures of the air.

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As he watched, a tear ran from the corner of one eye, gray as the sky, down the man's thin cheek. "I sing," he broke off to say, "but it never works. No one ever listens."

Java put a hand to his face and dry washed it, squeezing his eyes shut. Okay, so the guy clearly didn't operate on all cylinders. Damn shame. He hadn't seen anyone so ... beautiful ... in years. Even Gary hadn't compared; he was the rougher, burly type. Java liked manly men, but something about the flying man's corded frailty appealed like nothing else ever had. He felt stabs of pain in his heart for the sorrow of the man, in his balls—denied release for weeks on end—and in his scraped-up leg.

What were you supposed to do in these situations? He'd stood below jumpers before, on billboards or other buildings, the firefighter's air mattress spread out below to catch the guys if they did leap. Back then, though, they'd always had a crisis interventionist on staff or retainer to go up in a cherry-picker and talk the person down.

He'd never had to find the right words before. Fumbling, he opened his mouth to blurt something he hoped was right.

"Do you want to join me?" The man had turned again to face Java. "The sky is beautiful from here, you know. You can't see the clouds as well so far back."

Java stared. "On the ledge?" He jabbed a finger at his wounds. "You actually think I could balance?"

The man smiled. Smiled! "Come and see," he said, extending one long, slim-fingered hand. "It's all right. I won't let you fall."



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Java couldn't help it. He burst into laughter. "You won't let me fall? Oh, God, give me a break! I came up here to—"

"Stop me from jumping?" The man's gray eyes turned a deeper shade of sad. "I wasn't going to. I just wanted to pretend I could fly." He looked away, dropping his voice. "One more time."

"What?"

The man shook his head. Graceful as a dove settling into its nest, he sat down on the decaying ledge, letting his legs dangle into the huge drop of thin air. He lifted one knee after a moment, tucking it on the edge, and rested his chin on the bone.

"I come up here because I want to know what it's like to fly again," he said softly, as if telling a truth he knew Java wouldn't believe. "I miss the air so much."

Java edged closer, dragging his leg behind him. Blood had begun to dribble, streaking down to his ankle, making his sock damp. He shook his head. The wind picked up, beating at his face and shoulders. Enough to knock a man down. The guy had to be stronger than he looked, to sit in the maw of the blasting wind and stay rock-steady.

Not afraid, either. His face showed a hundred different things, from lack of any sleep for far too long, not enough food in days, and smudges of dirt from sleeping rough.

Deep grief was in the man's eyes, gray as the clouds above them. Moving back and forth, lighting on this and that like a hummingbird, then glancing on. Holding still for just long enough to get a bead on something—then off and following the wild winds again. His gorgeous hair, curls you

could wind both fists through as you tugged his thin, elegant statue's face down to you for a kiss, was tangled into elf-knots. He wore a battered T-shirt, some Goodwill reject with a crackled-off logo, more holes than cloth, and a pair of ancient jeans that had dirt deeply ground in. No shoes on his raw, scraped feet.

Beautiful as the statue of David. Staring, Java had the oddest feeling—as if this were someone not quite human. Not a fallen angel, but not a regular Joe, either. Like a gargoyle come to life, minus the wings and the monster's face.

The man half-closed his eyes and let his leg drop again, spreading his arms. He lifted them into the wind, fluttering his fingers. "It's not the same."

He turned to Java. Fear etched deep lines into his face, around his eyes, turning his mouth down. "What if I never can again?" he asked, sounding like a lost child. "Will I be punished forever?"

"Punished?" Java managed to speak at last, crab-walking a few steps closer. He struggled through his memory and recalled a few snatches and details. How to win people's trust. "Hey, what's your name? I'm Javier." Hahv-EE-AIR. The man's ears perked up. "What do they call you?"

The man half-laughed. "At the hospital, they said I was John Doe," he said, picking at a frayed string on his jeans. He shook his head. "That's not my name. I don't know what they called me when I was born. I don't remember anything before waking up and finding out my wings were gone. That I couldn't fly."

His voice had risen, growing more and more upset. Java put his hands out, trying to soothe John Doe back down. "It's okay," he crooned. "Take it easy."

John D. laughed, bitter and sad as Java after the third bottle of beer. "Down there—" he pointed—"they call me Flyboy. They don't believe me when I tell them I used to be able to fly. They don't want to think anyone could rise above the earth. So they want me to jump, to go splat on the ground. But me? I just need to feel the air rushing against me."

The man swayed. "To feel the coolness, and smell the ozone. To be alive, I have to be in the air." He looked at Java, sad as a worn old man. "No one understands me."

Then, he tilted his head, bird-like. "Do you?"

Part of Java's brain, all business, ordered: *humor him*. Another small part gazed at the miserable beauty before him and wanted to kiss his cross in awe. The rest of him, the dominant part, didn't know what to say. "I'm not sure," he said at last. "You just look like a guy to me."

The man's lips lifted in an unhappily amused smile. "I know," he said. "I do. Now." He shook his head, looking back up at the fog. "If I could only remember who I was. What I was. Maybe then I'd know how to get my wings back. How to—" he gave himself a quick hitch forward and back that sent Java's heart rocketing into his throat—"how to do this, and know I could soar, not fall."

"Don't do that!" Java burst. "Please, *Madre de Dios*, don't. Look, come with me, okay? Take my hand. I'll get you down

off this roof. Take you somewhere you can clean up. Get you a hot meal."

The man shook his head. "I won't let them lock me away. They tried, once. I lied and told them what they wanted to hear. I'm not crazy." He gave a half-laugh, half-sob. "I just don't know myself."

"Then come with me." Java reached for John D., hand palm up, fingers outstretched. "Take this, and walk with me. We'll go somewhere it's safe, and we'll try to find an answer. Okay?"

John Doe frowned. He eyed Java up and down, from wind-blown black hair to ripped shirt to bloody knee, and back again. "Did you ever want to be someone you're not?" he asked.

Java couldn't help his bitter chuckle. "All the time." When he was younger, he'd wanted to be not gay. Later, he'd wanted to not be lonely. He'd wanted not to go into the burning building he *knew* would be a death trap. He hadn't wanted to be the hurting half of the Gary-Java split-up. He didn't want to be a crippled-up mean bastard living on the government. "Oh, yeah. Too much."

A sudden, startling smile broke onto John D.'s face. He stood, easy as if he wasn't two inches from falling to his death, and stepped lightly off the ledge—onto the roof. The harsh tar didn't seem to bother him.

He took Java's hand, and held it for a moment, his fingers icy but his grip strong. "Then I'll go with you," he said, tilting his head in the opposite direction. "You don't lie to me. I can tell already."

Java let out a deep breath he hadn't known he was holding. "Fantastic, man," he said, grinning like a fool. "We'll go." *Not to a shelter. He'll think I tricked him. My apartment? Do I trust him? He's crazy, after all ... one hundred percent loco ... but do I care if he comes after me?*

*Go out with a bang, not a whimper.*

"We'll go to my home," he said. "There's a balcony. You can stand outside and watch the birds fly past. Mostly pigeons, but they can sure soar."

John Doe laughed. Java couldn't stop himself from smiling, despite the pain and blood, the dangerously rotten roof, and all they'd still have to go through to get down from the building. "Come on, Johnny," he said. "Let's go. I'll lead you down the fire escape."

John D. put up his hand. "No. I said that's not my name."

Java frowned. "What do you—"

The man's gaze had gotten lost and drifted far away again. "Once, I met a woman who was nice," he whispered, leaning in toward Java's ear. The wind tangled their hair together. Java stiffened, the scent of the man setting his nerves afire with electricity, his cock reacting on pure instinct when lips touched his lobe. "She called me Raine. Will you call me Raine?"

Java let his eyes fall shut, aching to be able to raise his arms and wrap them around the guy—Raine, if he wanted. Knowing he couldn't, he shouldn't. It'd be wrong. Taking advantage. No point in hoping Raine was gay, or liked men in any fashion.

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But he could give him the gift of the name he wanted. Just one thing ... "Why?" he asked. "Why'd she call you that?"

Raine drew back, reaching up to cup Java's cheeks with his slim fingers. The cold of them burned. "Because," he said softly, "I fell from the sky."

And with that, he leaned in and brushed his lips, sweet as silk, over Java's own.

## Chapter Four

Java hadn't been kissed in almost a year. The last time lips had touched his, he'd pulled away in disgust—Gary's lame attempt at a good bye. He'd stopped aching for the passion in a kiss after a few months; the need for comfort had gone on much longer before it finally ebbed away.

Not that he'd been celibate, either. He spent quality hours whacking off to his collection of porn, and two, maybe three times—one of the memories cloudy and questionable through a haze of beer—had offered twenty bucks he could have used for food to a hard-eyed man lounging in an alley to get down and suck him off.

They'd done their jobs like line-worker professionals. So calm they were all but bored, perfunctory bobbing up and down like trained seals. No creativity, no interest in anything but his buck. They hadn't kissed him. He hadn't wanted them to.

The touch of Raine's lips on Java's startled him enough that he staggered back, almost falling, righting himself just in time. The icy heat of his mouth burned Java's skin. He resisted the urge to touch his lips with callused fingertips. "What are you doing?"

Raine looked back at him, calm and sad. Not angry at Java for pulling away, though. "I wanted to," he said simply. "You're like a dark angel. You've walked the earth and lived hard. I can read your history in your scars and your blood."

He stepped forward, closing the distance between them again. "And because you are beautiful to me," he whispered,

his breath ghosting warmly over Java's cheek. "I wanted to taste you. Smell you. Take you in. Can I? Please?"

His mouth roved over Java's face, never lighting on one spot, traveling from the corner of Java's mouth to his cheeks to his forehead. Cold hands started by hovering over his shoulders, skimming down his arms, then wandered over his chest. Java shut his eyes tight, feeling himself fall just as surely as if he'd stepped off the roof.

"There's people..." he said hoarsely, "watching us. They'll see."

Raine's lips pressed soft and sweet on Java's chin. "Do you care? I don't." He slipped his hands around back, one floating centimeters above the space between Java's shoulder blades and one at the small of his back, over his tight ass. "I want to feel you move with me. Kiss me in the wind. It doesn't matter if anyone sees. Up here, it's just us two all alone."

"Raine..."

"Ssh." Raine drew a path up Java's spine with the tip of one chilly finger. "You think too much. My head hurts with the busy-ness of your mind whirring around. Can't you just rest for a moment? Can't you just *be*?" He lifted his mouth to Java's and spoke against his lips, tingling with a barely-there touch and warm breath. "Let me kiss you. Fly with me."

Java moaned softly. God, he was only a man, and no matter how much of a lunatic Raine sounded like, he was a hell of a gorgeous wild child. Free as the winds buffeting them from head to toe. He sagged against Raine, easing the sharp ache in his bad leg, and felt the arms hold him steady.



Then, oh, thank God, Raine's mouth claimed his own again, sweet and strong, gentle and demanding that he come out to play.

Java gave himself up to the moment. Felt better than fucking or being fucked, a hand job, a suck-off. The heat and pressure of Raine's mouth sent lightning bolts through his body, waking up long-deadened nerves and sparking off showers of pins and needles as they came back to life. The wind screamed like a proud witch flying high above them, relishing the sight of two broken men making up a single whole.

How long it went on, Java didn't know. He made the kiss last as long as he could, from one chaste closed mouth to another, to tilting his head and deepening the contact. Sliding his tongue against Raine's in tender, steady strokes. Giving in to the urge to tangle his hands in Raine's whipping hair, gathering great fistfuls of the silky knots and using them to press Raine closer.

Raine swallowed Java whole with his kiss. Took his deep inside to a still and quiet place, somewhere he hadn't been since the accident. For a moment he forgot everything. The roof, his knee, the protests of his muscles. Nothing mattered but skin on skin, silk and leather, the taste of cigarettes and coffee and cold city air.

More. Java had to have a deeper taste. He needed Raine like he needed to breathe, drink, and sleep. *Guess I don't have to wonder if he likes men*, he thought giddily as Raine made a happy sound underneath his breath and wriggled against Java's body.

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Reluctantly unknotted his hands from Raine's hair, Java skated them down his narrow back. God, he could feel every bone, each knot of spine, but Raine seemed relaxed and boneless as a cat. "Please," he rasped into the strange man's mouth. "Let me feel you."

"Yes," Raine whispered, seductive as a siren, undulating closer until their chests touched. "Come on."

Java groaned. His hands, good strong hands made rough from a lifetime of work, cupped the globes of Raine's ass, squeezed them—*God, so tight*—and tugged him in so they met groin to groin. He canted his hips, rubbing into Raine's pelvis, and felt a hardness matching his own.

He broke off with a startled curse. "Java," Raine said, not quite a question, or a warning. "What?"

Java stood still as he possibly could, trembling from head to toe with cold and arousal. His cock was on fire, screaming at him for friction, pressure, demanding its right to sink deep into a velvet hole that would grip him like a python and squeeze the God-moment out of his body.

He needed to feel Raine on the inside. Ached to turn him around, tug down the worn jeans, and press his cock into a tight hole, the pucker opening and closing like an eyelid, burning to receive him.

The visual streaked so sharply against his inner eye that he gasped, reeling. *Oh, God. I'm on the edge, man. I could rape him if he doesn't know how to say 'no'.*

*I'm not that kind of man.*

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"Java," Raine repeated, his own hands landing lightly on Java's back, then pressing down with all the force of a bird's wing brushing his skin. "Tell me."

Java pulled away from Raine's lips, turning his head. He trembled from head to toe, pulses of need and tremors of shame racking his body. "Forgive me," he managed. "Please?"

"For what?" Raine sounded honestly confused. "I like you. You listened to me and you didn't laugh. You're the handsomest man I remember knowing, and you're not pushing me away."

"I should."

"Why?" Raine shook his head. "This is natural, I think. I'm not sure who I was, or what I liked, but I know what feels right now." He brushed a line of kisses across Java's cheekbone, ending at his ear, where his whispered:

"I want you. Please? I lost my wings, but when you kiss me it feels as much like flying as being on the ledge. Only with you, I could step off and not fall down to earth."

Java trembled as the words tickled his ear, sending fire cascading through his bloodstream. He wanted ... *Madre de Dios*, how he wanted ... but would it be right...?

"Don't," Raine soothed, rubbing his arms with that same feather light touch. "Stop thinking. I told you, you're too busy in there. Come with me. Learn how to fly."

Java shook his head. "You don't make any sense," he said, a little desperate. "I don't get you, Raine."

"You can." Kiss. "You should." Flicker of tongue to skin. "You will."

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Raine sucked Java's earlobe into his mouth, biting down just sharp and rough enough to drive him wild. And Java, consigning himself to the fires of Hell, couldn't hold out a moment longer. Seizing Raine by the waist, he tugged them together, cock to cock.

He groaned at the realization that Raine was hard, too, a steely length bashing against his own erection. Eager as a cat in heat, rubbing back against him, the friction heady as breathing in helium. Filling him with the headiness of a swollen balloon, just tethered by a fraying string. If it snapped, he'd soar off into the skies.

Java's body screamed at him to let go. Just let go.

He sucked in a gasp of cold air at the burning friction when their pricks rubbed against one another, then breathed in again, struggling to hold off the orgasm that rushed toward him like the waves of earth in a quake.

Even his leg—*ah, ah*, his leg! Java tried to stifle a shout of pain, but didn't quite manage to choke it off as he buckled. He would have fallen if Raine hadn't caught him plunging back down toward the rough tar.

Hovering between heaven and earth, he looked up into Raine's amazing gray eyes, still tinged with so much sorrow, but with a new flicker in them of concern, and a flame of neediness.

"Don't." Raine cut Java off before he could say anything. "I understand now. Why you were brought to me."

"Brought?" Java shook his head, his face burning with shame at having to be held like a weak old man. Him, who'd

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stridden into infernos with his head high and his nerve like forged steel. "I came to you. You needed help."

"No, I didn't." The corners of Raine's mouth turned up in a faint smile. "You did. That's why you saw me. Why you came. I know you now. You flew too close to the sun, and you lost your own wings. I can feel the earth dragging you down. It wants to swallow you whole, but I can show you what it's like to soar." Raine ran the tip of his pink tongue across his lips, sliding his arms so that the hold wasn't "catch", but "carry". "I want to show you what it's like to ride the air."

Java had half a moment's panic that Raine was going to toss him over the side of the building. He struggled ineffectually, his balance completely off, until Raine bent his head and pressed their lips together again. Then, sweet mercy, he gave in again, because he couldn't *not*. Raine's kisses were addictive as heroin, and they left a man craving more and more.

Java didn't know anything about Raine except he was probably crazy, the way he talked, and possibly dangerous. Who knew what kind of things Raine had in mind? He might end up rolled off the roof after all. His life hung in the balance, but his cock ruled the day, and for all the things that should have stopped him, the high was too much to resist.

He reached up to touch strands of flyaway hair once more, raking his hands down Raine's thin back. Touches and bursts of flavor. Unfettered flight. Raine was freedom, wild and unleashed. No rules, no right or wrong.

On the roof, in their moment, nothing else mattered. Gary was cast away like an old note, fluttering in the rushing air

before he disappeared into a void. Disability and unemployment vanished with a flurry of fallen leaves, the fetters melting away.

Slowly, he felt the strength returning to his leg as the pain lessened. Java eased himself back into a standing position, still careful, but seizing back the control he'd had to surrender. He wanted more. Raine's mouth was wonderful, pure sin encased by a pair of lips, but he wanted to go further.

Who cared if anyone could see them? He couldn't hear any noise from the street, and he didn't care if they had an audience. Up on the roof, the only thing that mattered was the two of them, caught in a moment neither wanted to break away from.

"Please," he whispered, voice hoarse, his hand coming up between himself and Raine to tug at the hem of Raine's T-shirt, then up to his collar. He slipped his fingers into one of the gaping rents in the cloth, skating them across hard bone and soft, pale flesh. His fingers fascinated him, so dark against Raine's ivory, a contrast in day and night, earth and sky. "Let me?"

Raine moaned, tilting his head back. His own fingers raked through Java's shorter hair, pressing him down. Java exhaled in shaky relief and excitement, knowing it'd be okay. He had permission. Moving his hand, Java found one of Raine's nipples, puckered into a hard knot from the cold. He pinched the nub, then soothed it with gentle sweeps of his thumb.

"Oh!" Raine made a wordless noise, sliding into Java's touch. "I didn't know. So good. More, please, give me more."

His hands clutched Java's scalp. "Your mouth. I want your lips on me."

"You have no idea." Java half-laughed, biting lightly at the curve of Raine's shoulder, clean white skin that tasted of the wind and of sea salt. "I want to have you in my mouth," he whispered. "Take your cock between my lips. Want to taste your come bubbling out, little white pearls. Salty, bitter, sweet. So good."

He loved giving blow jobs as much as receiving them, and he hadn't in so, so long. Too long. His hand slipped beneath the waist of Raine's jeans, just teasing at the trail of hair that would arrow down to a nest of tangled curls. "Can I?"

Raine opened his eyes, gray and dazed, whirling like a tornado funnel. "So good," he mumbled, sounding confused. "It feels ... almost too much. I want, but I don't know—"

Java stopped, pulling his hand back. "Oh, God. I'm sorry, Raine, I'm sorry."

"No!" Raine shook his head. "It feels ... something's opening up inside me, like a flower reaching for the sky. I don't understand it. What's going on? My muscles are screaming at me. If I jumped high enough, the wind would catch me up and I'd fly away. It's power. Raw. Filling me up. I'm going to explode—"

"Raine, no!" Java was the one to catch this time as Raine stumbled.

The man let out an agonized cry. "No!" He beat his fists against Java's chest. "It isn't fair. I don't know why I can't fly anymore. There's no sense to it. What did I do that was so

wrong they won't lift the curse, won't fix me? I want my wings back. I need to dance in the air!"

"Raine—"

Raine pressed his hands to his ears and *screamed*.

A scream echoed, moments later, by the almighty screech of iron tearing away from stonework. The fire escape! Swearing out loud, viciously, Java twisted around to look down.

The escape had pulled away from the wall. Crumpling in on itself, like a house of cards in slow motion, it swung away from the wall, then broke into pieces, raining death down into the streets. He heard screams as people saw what was coming and began to run, and the first furrowing scrapes as shards of metal plunged into the street.

"No!" Raine shrieked, shaking his head to and fro. He opened his eyes, seeing something Java didn't. "Stop!"

His voice boomed and echoed like a crack of thunder. Java, staring at him, almost missed what came next: the pieces of fire escape slowed impossibly down, as if they weighed a fraction of the metal's worth. Floating to the ground instead of arrowing, like hard, cold clouds settling in the fog. Each piece nestled into place on the ground, choking the empty street. No one lay trapped beneath the rubble. Everyone had gotten away in time.

Java's mind reeled, trying to understand what his eyes had just seen. Impossible—but he'd watched the thing happen. Had Raine done this? How? What was going on?

He turned back to the man in his arms. "What just happened?" he barked, then froze, his heart in his throat, for



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Raine lay in his arms limply as a rag doll, his eyes half open and seeing nothing at all.

His breath, rasping like the wind against metal, had stopped.

## Chapter Five

"Oh, God." Java held Raine tight, one arm around his back like a steel band, the other hand roving over him—face, chest, arms, cheeks. "God! No, don't you do this. You don't get to pull that kind of shit and just run away!"

Raine's dull eyes stared back at him, sightless as the dead. Java lowered his ear to Raine's lips. No sound, no breath, no rattle. He shook Raine hard, cursing. "Don't you leave me!" *Not now, not here, not yet.* "Come back, damn it. Get your ass back here with me!"

No response. Java's heart thundered in his chest. Pulse. Did Raine have a pulse? He placed two fingers on Raine's slim throat, then flinched back as if burned. His heart did still beat, but trip hammer and hummingbird-fast. Too fast for a human. And fuck, he felt so light. Like he'd float away, a feather on the breeze.

A dying bird crumpled in Java's arms.

Java shook him again. "You don't get to jump!" he yelled, his voice beginning to choke with the panic and threatening tears. He dashed his hand roughly against his eyes. This was going to hurt, he knew it would, but he had to get Raine lying flat.

Gathering every ounce of strength he had, Java stood, lifting Raine in his arms, and put the full weight on his good leg and the bad one.

Pain arced and arrowed down the length of his body. Java gritted his teeth until he heard them groan in protest, then bit his lip until he tasted blood. Looking around, scanning for

something, anything. Maybe—there? A blocked-off chimney. Fucking huge, the way they used to build them back in the day when this factory had gone up. Cement-capped, it looked sturdy enough. Smooth, not jagged like the rough tar spread over everything else. It'd have to do.

Java took one step, bit his lip again, fresh coppery blood flooding his mouth, and then, took another. Staggering like a drunken man, fighting the screaming howl of the wind, he made it to the chimney and laid Raine down on top of the cap. The height put him at about waist level, just right to lean down and check to see if he'd started breathing again.

"Damn it!" Not yet. Java didn't know what to do. Was Raine having a stroke? An epileptic fit? God, a year ago he'd have known what to do, just like snapping his fingers. How could he have forgotten so much? No, not forgotten. Deliberately put out of his mind. Without a reason to reach for the knowledge, he'd made himself lose the skills he needed right *then*.

Mouth to mouth? Force some air into the fragile chest? Java didn't know if breathing into Raine would hurt or help, but he had to try something. Laying his hands on either side of the slim neck, feeling Raine's terrifying pulse race, he placed his lips over the man's and blew in. He pulled back to press down, forcing the air back out. Repeated his actions. Once, twice, three times, four, five—

Raine coughed. He reared up, his eyelids flying open wide, staring up at the sky in sheer terror. Java stumbled back, skidding on the broken tar, and landing on his ass. He bit

back a ragged yell of pain, struggling for the strength to stand back up.

Gagging and choking, Raine flailed at the air with his hands. "Java!" he called, desperate sounding. "Java! Don't leave me!"

The fear in Raine's voice gave Java the power to rise to his knees, ignore the starburst of anguish in his already damaged skin, then scramble to his feet. He stood, bracing himself heavily over Raine, and touched his face. "It's okay!" he said, half-laughing, half wanting to cry, as he stroked the thin cheeks. "It's okay. I'm here. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

Slender, corded arms wrapped around Java with a death grip. He almost fell a second time as Raine dragged him into a hug and refused to let go. "I thought you went away," the man whispered into his ear. "Don't leave me."

Java rocked him. "I won't. I promise."

"Swear it?"

"I swear."

"Good." Raine's grip was weakening. "So tired ... I feel like I did once ... like I'd flown for miles and miles against the wind." Java felt Raine yawn against the crook of his neck. "Want to sleep, but I don't want to leave you."

Java pressed a kiss to the top of Raine's head. "You're not leaving me, *corazon*," he soothed, stroking down the tangled curls. "I'll be right here."

"You won't go away? Not leave me all alone?"

"Never," Java promised, slowly easing Raine down onto his back. He laid Raine's head against the concrete with a tender

brush to the cheek and a half-smile. "Wish I had a pillow for you."

Raine returned the warmth in his eyes and voice. "Don't need one. All I want is you."

"You have me." On impulse, Java ducked and brushed his lips over Raine's, sweet and soft and almost chaste. "Sleep. I'll be by your side when you wake up."

"Good," Raine murmured, reaching for Java's hand. "Good ... like having you here ... shouldn't be apart," he added, his words swallowed by a yawn. Tipping his head to a side, cheek pillowed against the chimney cap, his eyelids fluttered shut. After a moment his breathing evened out into a steady rise and fall, and the tension in his face eased.

*Madre de Dios*, but he was so beautiful. Java touched Raine's face, marveling.

He'd never liked pretty men. Gary had been his type, with a jaw that could cut rock and abs hard enough to slice tomatoes on. Big and bulky, loaded down with even more muscles than Java had earned fighting fires and hauling heavy equipment. He'd loved feeling engulfed by a man, the same power as a fire held when he forged into one, wielding the tools to stamp out that force of nature.

Raine was so different. Fragile, a broken bird, its wings clipped.

Wings—yeah. Java shook his head, twining a curl around one finger. He didn't understand Raine in the least. Did he still think the man was crazy? Yep. Did he want him all the same? Hell, yes. His balls ached with the need to release, for

wanting an orgasm to burst through him and set his body alight.

None of this made any sense. Putting Raine's hand down with a last finger-stroke along the back, tucking it up wing-fashion against his chest, Java stepped away. He had to clear his head. Figure out what was going on, what would happen next, where to go from there.

One thing he knew pretty much for sure: they were stuck. No one on that block would call the cops in, even after dark, and so few cars traveled these streets that no motorist might even notice the blocking of rubble until morning "rush" hour. He didn't think any wires had been snagged and snapped by the falling fire escape, so no repair trucks would be coming out.

How had Raine gotten up there in the first place, anyhow? Fire escape, some other way he didn't know about? He wouldn't have thought the guy would have had the energy to haul himself up, but didn't those women say he did this all the time? Maybe practice. Maybe his light weight had something to do with why the iron hadn't buckled before. Java, solid and heavy with muscle, had probably given it the last push before the wind took over.

Was there another way down? Not sure, but there was nothing for it except to look. Funny, though. He hated walking away from Raine, even to go so far as pacing off the roof. Well, it was a big roof. He wouldn't be able to hear if Raine ... but, no. Java shook his head. No more thinking about weird fits and chunks of iron that fell in slow motion and rising

suspicious about all the bizarre twists and turns the day had dealt him.

Slowly, dragging his gimp leg behind him, Java began to pace the perimeters of the roof. The high ledge meant to prevent people from falling had crumbled away in more than one place, rebar sticking through. He shivered, knowing just how dangerous it'd be to get jabbed by the aged, rusty metal. Just in case he tripped, he kept his distance from those danger zones.

Pace, pace, pace. Hard to tell what was coming, with the evening fog, dense and heavy as a cloud, lowering down on him all of a sudden. He almost stumbled over a second capped chimney, this one partly decayed. The smell of rot welling up from inside made him gag. Birds, probably, pigeons and crows. Maybe some squirrels. *Keep away from this one*, he decided, moving on.

Halfway around the roof, his foot struck a large square plate padlocked to the floor. Java almost jumped in excitement. An escape hatch! Looked rotten enough he could probably stomp right through ... if he'd had a good leg to balance on while he kicked.

"Damn it!" he swore, putting a hand to his forehead. He felt odd. Dizzy, somehow, and stupid. He had a weird mental vision of the fog snaking tendrils into his brain, coiling around the meat and nerves, dulling his thoughts. The idea sent shudders down his spine. Ugh! Giving his head a shake to clear it, he paced on, step by step by step.

The last thing he found was a knapsack, battered from hard use. No name or anything on the canvas, but when Java

lifted it he caught a whiff of Raine's wild scent. Freedom and life, fettered by the chains of earth. The smell awoke hungers and miseries in him such as he'd never known before.

Would Raine want it when he woke up? Maybe. Java tucked the bag beneath one arm and plodded on, finally finishing his circuit up back by the strange man's side at their chimney cap.

Raine had curled up on one side, tucked into a ball with arms and legs shielding his face and belly. He made small low noises, as if afraid something would attack him while he slept, or dreaming of whatever it was that had driven him crazy in the first place. He shifted, moaning in a way that had Java reaching out to touch him, smoothing down his hair. Still asleep, he butted his scalp into Java's hand.

Java chuckled, petting him. "You got lonely, huh?" he asked quietly. "Okay, then. Come on. Move over and I'll join you. Not like either of us is going anywhere tonight."

Stiff and awkward, Java managed to ease his bad leg up onto the chimney cap, and, with a serious effort from his arms, hauled the rest of his body up next to Raine. The man shifted and murmured in his sleep, the lines falling away from his face again. Unconscious, Raine writhed back against Java, spooning him as he eased down into place.

Java balanced himself on one arm, trailing a finger down Raine's arm and gazing at him in confused awe. Who'd have thought? This wasn't how he'd seen himself spending the night. Swear to God, he'd just wanted a slow walk home with his cigarette and coffee, and then he'd had to look up.



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He checked his watch and had to chuckle at himself. A little over ninety minutes ago, he'd seen Raine for the first time. Just past an hour since, he'd been climbing the fire escape.

Forty-five minute before, he'd been kissing Raine like there was no tomorrow, as if he held the power of life or death in his lips, sweet on his tongue.

Thirty minutes, and he'd been holding the man, terrified he'd gone and died on him.

Now? Nothing to do but lie still and hold Raine, feeling that bird-swift heartbeat hammer against his ribs, stroking the lightness of his bones, so strange with the solidity of his slim flesh.

Java realized his head had cleared. Glancing up, he saw the fog beginning to dissipate, to blow away on a gentle breeze replacing the earlier cruel winds. He had to laugh. If there were ever a night to fly, if a man could fly, this would be the perfect world and weather for him.

"You should be awake for this," he whispered teasingly in Raine's ear. "Or ... maybe not. I don't want you to be sad, missing what you can't have. What you think you can't have." He rubbed his thumb against a smear of dirt on Raine's cheek, then nuzzled in, lips soft against Raine's jawbone and ear.

"I wish you could fly," he said quietly. "I wish for this, if it would make you a happy man. Maybe you could teach me, yourself. We'd go sailing off together, hand in hand, wouldn't we? I could grow wings, myself ... we'd live in the highest

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tree in the world and never come down unless we wanted. Spend our time fucking and drinking nectar, like love birds."

He laughed, shaking his head at his own foolishness. "The things I want to say, when I'm with you," he marveled. "I'm not a talky guy, Raine. I haven't said this much to old friends in a year, but now I'm spilling everything to you." He kissed the curve of Raine's ear. "Guess it helps me, knowing you don't hear what I'm saying. You won't remember me letting it all out for you."

The sky began to appear above, dark as night, deep blue velvet with white diamond stars. How weird that he could see them up here in this all-but-abandoned part of town, away from the noise and crowds he lived among.

So many people, and no one ever looked up to watch the sky, admire birds wheeling in the gales, or see men who were crying out for help. Beautiful, fuckable, edible men who needed someone's hand to help them past their fear of falling, to ease them out of the fires caught from flying too close to the sun.

"Being with you," Java said quietly, as if to himself, "is more than just sex, though. I want to eat you up from your toes to your hair, every savory bite of you. I want to suck your cock. I want to see you ride me and watch how you fly to pieces. But sex, it isn't everything."

He nestled his cheek closer to Raine's scalp, feeling heat radiate off it in waves now they had "nested" together. "It's life, isn't it? This is like life. Like walking out of a fire and realizing hey, I'm okay. I stopped you from falling, and you..." he trailed off. "I don't know the words."

Raine's eyes opened slowly, languid and lazy, the gray beneath them only just a little sad, and mostly happy. Sleepily cozy and contented. He squeezed Java's hand that lay across his chest, twining their fingers together. "A leap of faith," Raine said, apropos of nothing.

Java smiled. "Say what now?" he asked, nuzzling Raine's hair, savoring the airy smell of the knotted locks. Clean. How did he stay so clean, if he lived rough? Aside from a few smudges, he was pure and untouched by the city filth. Java, who had a shower and mostly hot running water, felt grubby next to his light-as-a-bird man. "A leap of what?"

Raine turned easily, wriggling around in Java's arms. Face to face, he reached out to cup Java's cheek. "Faith," he repeated. "By bringing me back, you brought yourself back. Don't you see? You didn't leave me. You wouldn't leave me. It matters. You make me matter, and I—"

"You do the same," Java whispered, stunned. Fuck him if it wasn't the truth. Saving Raine's life had given his own existence meaning again, and he hadn't realized it until just then. "Oh, God. Raine."

"Ssh," Raine soothed, rising up toward Java. The ghost of a wicked smile touched his lips. "I think we have some unfinished business." He arched his groin into Java's, undulating with the lightest touch. Neither of them were hard, but the bolt of pleasure made both gasp. Just contact was enough to drive them halfway to wild.

"I was promised you'd stay," Raine whispered, kissing Java briefly.

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"We're stuck together." Java wound his arm around Raine, pulling him tight.

"What do we do?"

"We start with this," Java said, giving in to his best and basest nature, tangling his hands in Raine's hair and seizing his mouth in yet another kiss.

From the sound of Raine's happy moan, he thought it the best answer that could possibly be given. Java didn't disagree. Maybe this time they'd make it across the finish line...

## **Chapter Six**

Throbbing leg, rough concrete, cold wind—Java forgot everything the moment his body collided with Raine's. His all but stranger, all but lover writhed against him as he plunged his tongue into the man's mouth and sealed their lips together.

Greedy hands scored down Raine's back to grasp the globes of his ass, squeezing them through the worn jeans hugging hips and thighs. Warm as a radiating furnace, Raine wrapped himself around Java so tight Java wondered if he'd ever let go, but hoped not.

"Tell me," Raine gasped between thieving kisses, "what do you think we look like?" He bit down on Java's collarbone and tickled words against it: "You and I. Here, on this roof. Halfway between dirt and sky."

Java groaned. He wasn't a guy who liked talking when he was getting down to the good stuff. Just then, he wanted Raine's mouth busy doing other things, but damn if he didn't seem to have a talky streak along with a wicked tongue.

"I don't know," he managed. Truth be told, he didn't care. Not when Raine was undoing the buttons of his shirt with nimble fingers and pinching his nipples, rolling them into tight knots that stung with cold and pleasure/pain. At Raine's scolding look, Java arched and gasped, "You. Tell me."

Raine hummed, whistling a few soft notes as he pushed into nibble along Java's throat. "I think we look like birds," he said. "You make me feel like I could fly again. All I'm missing is my wings. Beautiful feathers, green and blue and gold."

He rubbed his hips against Java's, teasing him with the feel of his cock, hardening again into raw silk over iron. Java arched his neck back, gaping up at the stars. They seemed to laugh at him, daring them to climb any higher.

*Fuck you*, he thought, struggling to pull Raine tighter. "God. Love the feel of you," he offered, hoping it would egg the man on to still more contact.

Not that he needed the encouragement—Raine undulated against him, full body to body, wiry muscles working as he coiled arms and legs around Java and held him fast. He rubbed his swelling cock into Java's own hardening prick and pecked another line of searing kisses down the line of his throat.

*Like a bird eating seeds*, Java thought hazily. *A bird and a python, wrapped up together in one. Raine, who are you?* He hadn't forgotten the fire escape. *What are you?*

Did it matter?

Not to Java, who had his arms and his mind full of wriggling heat matched with roaming hands and a daring mouth. Raine shoved his hand between them, tugging Java's shirt out of his jeans. "Want to feel you," Raine rasped. "So hard against me. You're huge, like a killer snake."

"You're the constrictor." Java found himself laughing. "God, let me breathe!"

Raine's eyes were purely wicked. "No." He caught Java's mouth in another kiss, tongues tangling slick and hot against each other as he slid his hand into the waistband of Java's jeans and down, fingers curling around his cock. He gave

Java's erection a hard squeeze that made him see stars behind his eyelids as well as overhead. "You're wonderful."

"Hey, let two play at this game." Java let go of his double handful of Raine's ass and brought his own fingers between them, cupping the man's cock and balls through his tissue-thin pants. Loving the way Raine sucked for air and bowed his spine, bucking into Java's hand, begging like a shameless slut for more touching, harder.

But ah, ah, no. Java liked his games. As Raine's hand tightened and loosened on his own cock, he teased with feather light touches, tickling one finger up Raine's zipper and sliding it down click by click.

Raine made a loud bird noise and thumped Java's chest with a fist. He didn't seem to have any words, which made Java laugh. "Finally made you shut up, huh?" he teased, sliding his hand inside. No underwear. The pungent smell of male arousal hit him like a bolt from a clear blue sky as Raine's heavy cock fell into his palm, satin-soft, steel-hard, throbbing with the same breakneck pulse as Java had felt in his throat.

"You're okay?" he whispered into Raine's chest, making a fist around his cock and jacking the length, slow and lazy.

"Very—very okay," Raine gasped.

"You like this?"

"So much." Raine struggled to reciprocate, but his hands were clumsy. Too much stimulation, maybe? He warbled something like obscenities in his own weird language of chirps and whistles, ending in a strangled groan. "Harder!"

Java obeyed, squeezing, his grin wicked. He loved the way Raine sucked for air, imagining what those lips would look like wrapped around his cock. Strangers? To hell with that. He felt as if he'd known Raine for years. He could already play him like a well-tuned guitar, wringing sweet Spanish melodies out of the slim body when he strummed the ... strings.

Mischievous, he tugged lightly at the curls nesting around Raine's straining erection, marveling at the way they felt beneath his fingers. Light, downy, springy. "Where do you live?" he whispered. "Who takes care of you?"

"I live here," Raine said so softly Java almost didn't catch it. Gray eyes swung up to meet his. "You. You're the one who takes care of me."

The words struck home with the force of a silver knife, slicing keenly to Java's heart. Someone to ... he hadn't even had a pet since the accident. No one to watch out for, to love, and no warm, living man in his arms to fuck.

He'd better start making up for lost time.

"More," Raine pleaded, oh, so sweet. "I need. Don't know what I need, but you make me ache. More!"

Java laughed, the sounds tinkling away like chimes on the cool wind bathing them. "Oh, you want more, huh?" He grabbed Raine securely and began to move, burrowing playfully into his neck. "I'll give you more." He had to feel that long, lean body splayed out beneath him, writhing up so wanton and free, and—

"Ah, fuck! Goddamn it! Fuck!" As he'd tried to roll them over, Java's bad leg struck the concrete. The scrapes on his knee ground down as he put his weight on it. Helpless,



swearing, he collapsed on top of Raine all right, but not as he'd wanted—in agony, gripping the man's shoulders hard enough to bruise as he struggled not to cry out again.

"Java." Raine looked up at him, the gray eyes clear and startled. "You're hurt."

"It's all right," Java managed to squeeze out, grinding his teeth together against the waves of pain. "Be okay in a second."

"No." Raine sat up, easing Java first into his arms, then, sleek as a seal, shifting weights until Java was the one on his back on the concrete. From above, he gazed down sorrowfully, shaking his head. "You have to let me fix you now. If you take care of me, I have to do the same for you."

Java chuckled again, biting back a cry as his leg protested being moved in any direction of all. "I usually finish what I start," he said, voice fading in and out with the pain. "Not usually a minute man, either."

"Hush." Raine's cool hand rested in the center of Java's chest. He used the other one to zip himself back up. Java watched, making a sound of dismay as the beautiful cock disappeared back in Raine's jeans.

Raine's mouth tipped up. "Later. I promise. I keep my promises, like you. First, I have to fix you. I know how. I've been hurt before. I'm remembering things now." He shook his head, a light of wonder in his eyes. "I'm starting to remember," he whispered. "Let me do this for you? Fix you?"

Java wanted to reach out and touch Raine, so he did, pressing the flat of his hand against the tattered T-shirt and Raine's warm chest beneath.

Too Close to the Sun  
*by Willa Okati*

Linked, they hovered for interminable moments, somewhere between falling from the sky and falling for each other. Then, with grins shared between each other, they admitted: no, they'd already fallen. How or when or why, didn't matter. The two of them belonged together. They'd stay by each other's side, no matter what.

Java felt warm as if he were swimming in crystal skies underneath a brilliant yellow sun. Suddenly lazy in all his bones, he tilted his head back as Raine leaned down for a slow kiss.

"I'll fix you," Raine breathed against his skin. "If you trust me. Do you trust me, Java?"

Java answered, all the force and belief he could muster in the words: "With all my heart."

Like he'd believed in nothing since before his world fell apart. None of the crumbling past mattered anymore. By witness of a cloud of stars, he'd let this man into his life and his heart, and he'd rebuild the broken walls. Fix him, soul and body, starting with his bad leg.

Raine was the golden key unlocking long-shut doors to living again.

## Chapter Seven

"I have some things," Raine said, lacing his hands together and running them back over his scalp. He peered around. "A knapsack. I don't remember where—"

"By the side of the chimney."

"Oh!" Raine's smile was as bright as an opening sunflower, brash, with no reason to hide his pleasure in the moment.

"You found it?"

"Yeah." Java felt abashed. After all, he'd promised not to leave Raine's side, and what had he done as soon as the guy fell asleep? Gone rambling off on his own like a damn fool.

"I'm sorry. I had to see if there was a way down. One for both of us! Not just me. You and I." He reached out to catch Raine by the fingers. "I didn't leave you for good, or for long."

"I know. Even though I was asleep, I could feel you." Raine reached into the thin air between them and made a motion, as if tugging on something. "There's a silver cord between us. It stretches. Only so far, like a rubber band, but I know you're on the other end. You can't separate us now."

"The terrible two."

"Fearsome duo." Raine laughed. After a second's surprise, Java joined in.

"You made a joke!"

"I told you, I'm remembering things."

Java felt lazy and careless, regardless of being stretched out on cold concrete in the middle of the night. He grinned up at Raine. "I like your memory."

Raine's eyes twinkled at him. "Me, too." He bent to his knapsack, dragging it up onto the chimney cap's edge. "Yes, this is it. Mine." He caressed the worn fabric. "It looks so old. How many weeks ... months ... has it been since someone gave this to me?" He shook his head. "I feel like I've been lost in the fog for ages. But now, see?" He looked up, pointing. "The sky is clearing."

"It is that," Java agreed, rubbing his thumb against Raine's palm, soft as he'd pet a bird lighting on his hand. Strange, how he'd gone from being freezing to warm as toast, tingles of heat radiating out of his skin and trickling into Java. Better than the first cup of coffee in the morning; the touch woke him and made him feel alive again.

Made him very aware of his bad leg. He winced as the appendage reasserted its sorry state, the cold wind stinging open wounds. Unable to hold back a flinch, he hated how weak the noise made him sound, like he couldn't handle a little inconvenience. "Sorry to be such a hassle," he said, turning his face in embarrassment.

"Stop."

"What?"

"You, a hassle?" Raine laughed, disbelieving-sounding. "You climbed up here to save me, and you're calling yourself trouble? Are you mad?"

Java burst into laughter. What other response was there? He raised his good leg and nudged at Raine's belly with the toe of his sneaker. "So get to work," he teased. "Take care of me for a change."

Raine's eyelids lowered. He shifted, and suddenly radiated waves of pure sex that would have flattened Java if he weren't already lying down. He expelled a heavy breath as Raine looked at him, dangerously tempting. "I'll take you on," he said in a low voice, lowering his hand to catch Java's foot. Slipping the sneaker off, he trailed his fingertips down arch and sole.

Java's cock woke up again, twitching with sparks of lust as his toes curled. "God," he breathed, "You could make me come just from touching there. Do it again."

"Later." Raine dropped Java's good foot, gently, laying it to rest on the concrete slab. With another of his sultry, wicked looks, he turned to the knapsack and pulled the zipper open. Soft fabric, worn from hard use, folded away to reveal a wild collection of odds and ends, and—yes—a small white box with a red cross on it.

"Boy Scout," Java teased.

"Hardly."

"Do you know their motto?"

Raine gave him a slanted look. "I know a better one. *Come* prepared."

Ooh. That shut Java up. He gazed at Raine in amazement and amusement. Damn if Raine wasn't coming out of his fugue ten times better, and he'd been damned amazing before. He acted like a man waking up from a nightmare, bits and pieces of reality slotting into place in his mind. His eyes were still tinged with sorrow, but there was sharpening clarity in them now.

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by Willa Okati

Nimble fingers opened the first aid kit and took out a Ziploc of cotton swabs, then a bottle of rubbing alcohol. He held them in either hand, gazing at them thoughtfully, then down at Java's knee. He shook his head.

"Your jeans are ruined," he said. "Can I cut them off above the knee? That way I can clean all the dried blood off, too." Laying the swabs aside, Raine rummaged deeper in his bag and came up with a pair of rubber gloves in another baggie plus some kids' scissors, blunt-edged. "I'll be gentle."

He paused. "Java? What's wrong?"

Java had scooted back automatically, wanting to draw his bad leg up against himself. Protect. Keep safe. Not to let Raine see. "Do you have to?"

Raine stroked his thigh, easing sudden knots out of the tight muscles. "I'll be gentle," he promised.

"It's not pretty, man ... I have scars." Java's hand stole to his neck, touching the ridged burn marks there. "On my arms, too. My chest. A ceiling beam fell on me when I walked into a fire. God, I was so stupid. Should have checked for the dangers before I went in, but I'd just had a fight with—with someone—and I didn't *think*, I—"

"Java, shh." Raine placed a finger over Java's lips, and followed the move with a light kiss. "I have scars, too. Everyone does. They're badges of who we were." The sadness returned to his smile. "Even if we can't remember why we earned them. Me. My wings. What I am. Who I was. The marks."

Java shook his head. "I don't understand."

"The places where my wings are gone. Do you want to see? They sewed me together before I woke up in the hospital." Raine straightened and turned, peeling off his tattered T-shirt before Java could stop him. He presented his bare back and looked over his shoulder for a reaction.

Java stared. He couldn't help himself, no matter how much he hated having fascinated eyes fixed on his own markings. Raine's back was a mess, scored with dozens of deep puncture scars along with two ragged, jagged marks on each shoulder blade. Someone had tried to hack him to bits, and God, how he'd survived Java couldn't begin to imagine.

"My wings," Raine said softly, reaching over his own shoulder, a move made with the ease of familiarity. For a moment, Java could almost imagine him stroking the pins of twin plumage, brilliantly colored, sprouting from where the worst scars lay. "See? They're gone now."

Raine's voice dropped further. "I don't know why. I still don't know so much. And here, look here." He splayed his fingers out. "By either side of my neck. See?" The white marks of deep gouges scored the tender skin there. "I think someone, maybe one of my people, carried me."

Java shook his head. "Raine, you're not," he said, letting him down easy as he could. "There isn't any such ... you never flew. Men don't have wings."

Raine's eyes darkened with sorrow. "Then maybe I'm not a man," was all he said, before turning back around and bending over Java's bad leg. He slid the blade of his scissors underneath one edge of the torn denim. When Java made a wordless protest, he shook his head, gone flat. No sparkle

left. "You've seen mine. Now I want to see yours. Your badges from the life you lived."

Java hesitated, half-wanting to fight. But could he, really? He'd offended Raine something fierce without wanting to, when the guy had been so open about his own disfigurements. Shaking his head, he lay still and let Raine cut. He bit into the side of his cheek when the wound and the flaming muscles were jostled, though, determined he wouldn't yelp.

When the denim fell away, Java closed his eyes. Bad enough he had to see his own disgust in the mirror, in the shower, in bed. He could hardly bear to look at the burn scars, the lumps where the leg had been in traction and still not healed right, the bumps over where it had been pinned together. How thin the calf was compared to his other leg. He was a monster from the thigh down, and knew it.

Breathless, he waited for Raine's response. Something. Anything. He fully expected a tick of disgust, a gagging noise, but what he got...

Raine's hands, stroking down the defiled leg. "Java," he murmured, rubbing small circles with his thumbs. "Don't. You can't be ashamed with me. Look at me." Pet, pet, pet. "Open your eyes, Java. Look."

Almost afraid, Java did. Raine shook his head, hair flying against his cheeks. "This is nothing to be ashamed of," he said, manipulating the leg. The heat from his fingertips felt better than any massage ever, almost finer than sex.

Java groaned in pleasure, feeling himself go limp—except for one specific part, which began to stand up again beneath



his zipper. Raine followed Java's eyes to the bulge, and smiled another one of his pure sin smiles.

"Touch yourself," he suggested in a low whiskey tone, "while I fix you."

Java swallowed hard. He hadn't ... not with someone watching. Not in months. Over a year. "Raine."

"Do it." Raine was gentle, but inflexible. He poured alcohol onto the cotton swab. "Just let me do this first."

The white-hot explosion in Java's leg almost turned him inside out. He leaned quickly over the side of the chimney, gagging and dry-heaving. The fit left him shaking, tears almost at the rims of his eyelids, too ashamed to look back up at Raine.

"No, Java. No pretending." Raine's hands were there, gentle and warm, easing him back into place. "The worst is over and done. I'm going to bandage you up, and wash away your stains. Trust me. You promised you'd trust me."

Trembling from head to foot, Java let himself be manipulated. Raine kissed a scorching trail down his chest to his belly before crouching, pouring water on a square of gauze and wiping down the length of Java's calf. "Easy," he murmured, over and over again. "Easy, easy, easy..."

Ever so slowly, Java began to relax. Raine's touch worked its magic again, soothing him into a state where all he felt was warm ripples of peace and little starburst zings of excitement arrowing through his belly to his cock. His knee still stung, and his leg ached, but they were small things compared to the warm ocean of sky and stars and Raine he was drowning in.

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*by Willa Okati*

"Finished," Raine said, startling Java out of his reverie. He caressed Java's calf one last time, working down to the foot, cupping it in his palm. "You are beautiful, you know. When I'm with you, I feel like I can fly again. I don't remember anything about myself before I woke up at the hospital, but now I can recall months and months of wandering, no place to lay my head. Finding this roof and sitting on the ledge day after day. Aching to let go and see if I'd sprout wings before I hit the bottom.

"But then," he said, stroking Java's toes, "there was you. You saved me from myself, and maybe I've paid you back a little."

"It's not a question of owing." Java's voice was hoarse. "Don't think that for a second."

Raine smiled shyly. "No. It's a fair trade with no regrets. None at all," he said, standing. Easy as breathing, he had hopped back onto the concrete chimney top and crawled over Java, bracing himself on hands and knees. He dipped down, brushing the hard lump in his own jeans against Java's cock, roused three times without an orgasm. Both men strangled gasps at the bump of sensitized flesh, aching for completion.

"I think it's time we took care of something else," Raine said, mischievous again.

Java, grinning, reached up to take Raine at his word.

## Chapter Eight

"Your taste," Java said, trailing his tongue up the side of Raine's neck. He licked his lips and kissed the underside of a strong jawbone. "Salty. Musky. Sweet. The kind of man you dream about."

Raine shook his head, tendrils of hair flying down to tickle Java's face. He smiled, even while arching his neck for more touches. "The way you taste me ... it's never. I've never. I don't remember."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No! Never stop."

"I won't," Java swore, reaching up to pull Raine closer.

"Not until you say so, or until I've worn you out."

Raine poked him playfully. "You, wear me out?" He nipped Java's cheekbone; Java arched into the sting and the soothing trace of Raine's tongue that followed fast afterwards. "You're exhausted already. Gray. Old man before your time."

"Old? I'll show you old." Java growled, dragging Raine bodily on top of him. Raine went with a glad laugh, almost crowing, splaying his legs wide on either side of Java's hips. His weight, so feather-light, made a dizzying and delicious contrast to the strength in his arms, braced atop Java's.

"What are you going to do to me?" Raine whispered in Java's ear, licking at the curve of the shell. "Are you going to make me fly?"

"Soar."

"Swear?"

"On my life."

"Is that all?"

"You want more?"

"Oh, yes." Raine undulated. "Your life, your body, your heart, your breath, your taste, your soul."

"You don't ask for much," Java said with a groan, arching up as Raine ran slim hands up and down his arms. "What else do you want from me?"

"I want everything you have to give," Raine answered. "Turn yourself over. Let yourself be free." He dropped his voice even lower, whispering barely above his breath. "I want you inside of me."

Java's cock gave a painful jerk at the words. His balls, tight and hot, ached to release what had built up three times already without relief. He made a choking noise, shaking his head. "No stopping this time, Raine. No turning back. If I give you myself, you have to do the same."

"I swear." Raine rubbed his cock along Java's, riding out the waves of intensity and ecstasy, the flare of white-hot sex that darkened his face with lust, breathing as raggedly as Java himself. They shook, supporting themselves and each other, and Java knew Raine was desperate and struggling for control, too.

"Let it go," Java growled low in his chest. "Fly. Be free."

He swallowed Raine's cry of delight down his own throat, drinking down the sounds of joy as if they were crisp white wine, light and airy. They went straight to his head, making him dizzy and half-drunk. His cock throbbed determinedly, wanting its own share of attention. Heavy against his own, he

could feel Raine's prick jumping, wanting out of its denim prison. *Time to play.*

Java shook with an untimely fit of nerves. Sex with Raine felt different than with anyone ever before. After a year, he felt almost like a green boy again, swallowing back the first-time jitters. Nothing like fucking Gary, with their rowdy play, wrestling each other down onto a bed. No need to be careful of bad knees, to play *does he like this?* or *am I doing that right?* Gary let you know, by God, and he did it in a loud voice, no matter who might be listening.

Funny, though, he'd never had a kink for the great outdoors. Java buried his face in Raine's hair, the strands tickling his skin and inflaming his lust. God, he had to have the man, and fast. Screw Gary.

*No, don't screw Gary. To hell with the bastard. He didn't understand me the way I am now, the way Raine does after just a few hours. No wonder I feel like I've known him forever—he understands me. Accepts me. I've turned into a fucking woman, but damn, it means something. I don't have to pretend with Raine. I can just be.*

Raine writhed atop Java, so light, too easy, not hard enough. Teasing dips and swirls, like licking an ice cream cone with the tip of your tongue when you wanted to take a big bite, screw the pain. "Harder," Java ordered—begged. "I won't break. Come on, man! Show me what you're made of."

Raine laughed in Java's ear. "You've seen almost all of me," he answered. "Now I want to know you."

"In every sense?"

"Yes ... and no ... and yes." Raine sat up, weight resting feather easy against Java's pelvis, their cocks nudging together. He took a deep breath, trying to steady himself, then looked down with a predatory gleam in his eye. "I want to see you."

Java's breath caught. "Raine."

"No. Don't."

"It's not—I'm not pretty." Java couldn't resist reaching up to stroke, to touch, sliding his hand across the pale perfection of Raine's chest. His caramel-colored skin looked gorgeous against Raine's ivory vanilla. Delicious. "Not like you."

"Did I ask you to be?" Raine pushed down with his groin, deliberately abrasive, sending Java's eyes rolling back into his skull. "I can feel you against me. Hot steel. You're like this building, crumbling down but leaving the foundations. Everything you are at heart is welded into place, and I want you. All of you."

He splayed his hands out over Java's heart, causing it to speed up even further. "Your blood agrees," he said, fingers curling in and out, kneading the shirt and skin. "The beat of your heart floods my mind. Feel?" He scored his hands up, coming to rest on the top button on Java's shirt. "You make me wild."

Java struggled against the need for Raine, to feel more skin on skin, so hot against the cool air, and the last shreds of sense he had. "Maybe we shouldn't," he said, hating himself for the words even as they left his lips. "Safety. I haven't been tested in months, and—"

"Ssh." Raine trailed a finger up Java's throat to his lips. "We'll be safe. I have other things in my bag." His grin was wicked. "I never thought I would use them. Then, there was you. Don't worry. Fly. I won't let you fall."

"God, Raine!" Java's hands fisted. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You saved me. Don't talk about hurt." Raine bent, sealing his mouth to Java's. Their tongues thrust eagerly against each other as Java gave in and began pushing back with his hips, rough and ready, rubbing cock against cock. Raine whispered against his mouth: "Talk about healing. Talk about want. Talk about me and you."

"Can't string two words together." Java gasped as Raine undulated and he arched into the contact. "Not when you—like that. God!"

"Good," Raine crooned, pure sex and compassion. Not pity, empathy. Warm and wild. Liquid lust, drowning both of them.

Above their heads, a thin mist of clouds began to swirl together. "The stars," Java managed as Raine slowly, torturously began to undo his shirt, one button at a time. "They're going."

Raine's smile was mysterious. "They'll be back," he said. "So will I. Don't ever forget what I'm saying. I swore I wouldn't leave you, and I won't."

"No. Don't. Not ever. Me neither." Raine's fingers scored trails of heat in their wake, ribbons of fire down Java's chest. Healing him, not scarring him.

When the first scar came into view, Raine kissed it. Pressed his lips to the rough skin, laved his tongue across the

ridges, and suckled welts around the patch. "You're beautiful," he insisted. "These are marks of honor. You were a fighter, Java. You just forgot how, for a while."

Java couldn't speak; he could only reach for Raine with shaking hands, fastening on his forearms. His body crackled with a white-hot flame, simmering his blood. Too slow. He needed more, *now*. Forgetting his bad leg, warmed into submission with Raine's touch, he tried to lift his knees—and let out a yell as pain lanced through him. "Goddamn it!" he shouted as Raine jerked back, hands coming free. Java pounded his fists into the roof. "I can't even hold you."

Raine put a calming hand on Java's stomach. "Don't," he warned. "Not yet. It isn't time."

"Gonna explode if I can't. Want to come in you, not on you. Want to be inside you when you fly past no turning back."

"Already been there." Raine scratched lightly at Java's skin. He rocked his swollen cock against Java's. "You don't feel me? Can't you tell I'm already lost? Found, lost, found again. I'm where I want to be. Almost."

Raine gentled Java's seized-up leg back down, the warmth of his touch easing away stabs of anguish. Java bit his lip, arching up. Raine kissed him, running his tongue over Java's mouth. Dipping his tongue in and out, mimicking what Java wanted to do most of all.

"Do you want me, even if I'm broken?" he whispered.

Java nodded, his head full of light and color, fading pain, *want* almost a palpable wave rising from deep inside. "More than anything."



"Then why would you think I don't want you?" Graceful as a swan, Raine raised himself to his feet. He put his hands to his zipper, slowly drawing it down. He looked mischievous as a dark spirit, come to play tricks, but oh, no, Raine wasn't playing teasing games. He pushed at the denim around his hips, and the jeans, too loose for him to any rate, slid off, puddling around his feet.

He kicked them away and stood above Java, naked as a newborn god, scarred and pale and so fucking gorgeous Java thought he might come in his own pants right then and there.

Cupping his erection, long and thick and fair, nested in a thatch of downy bronze curls, Raine gave Java another wicked smile. "Now," he said. "Let me see you."

Java paused, his brain scrambling for—oh. "You mean?"

"I mean," Raine said, running his fingers down the length of his own cock, circling his thumb at the tip. His foreskin had drawn back, leaving a fat head, rosy-dark and wet, gleaming in his palm. "Come on," he urged. "Can't wait much longer."

God, neither could Java. Reaching shaking, fumbling hands to his own fly, he scrabbled for the tap on his zipper. Screwed up a few times, but finally managed to pull it down and shove his jeans away from his hip. Wasn't sexy as Raine's display, but God, he needed so much he couldn't put on a show. He lusted, and wanted his prize.

Grinning a feral grin, a raptor gliding down onto its prey, Raine sank to his knees. He slid Java's jeans down to his knees, careful of the bandages, and gave him just a taste. Pressed their cocks together and made a tunnel of his hands, pushing flesh against flesh.

At the feel of their erections meeting, pushing, pressing hard, Java sucked in a searing breath, feeling as if he were breathing fire. It made him dizzy even as it cleansed him, burning away the dark and ugly tendrils deep inside and leaving healthy tissue in its wake.

"I have known you forever," he gasped, not caring if it made no sense. "Wish I'd waited for you."

"Doesn't matter now." Raine, too, grew terse as he struggled for control, jacking their cocks together, slowly, far too slowly.

Java shook his head. "Can't wait. Raine, please."

"Just a minute—let me get myself ready—"

"Ready? What do you..." Java's voice trailed off as Raine leaned nimbly toward his knapsack. Tearing open the white box, he tumbled the contents over the chimney cap they lay on, rustling through them until, with a little cry of delight, he seized upon a silver foil packet and a sample-sized sachet with a familiar logo.

"You are a Boy Scout." Java laughed through the pounding frenzy of *want, need, now* pulsing through his veins. "God, Raine, hurry. I have to feel you around me."

"Soon." Raine's eyelids dropped to half-mast. "Watch me. Feel me." He tore open one packet and squeezed lube onto his fingers.

"No!" Java caught his hand. "Let me. I want to." Not letting Raine protest, he scraped the silky gel off onto his own fingers, coating them. "Spread for me," he ordered, breath heavy and coming fast. "Open up. Wide open."

Raine seemed to struggle against an internal spasm, his cock twitching, then, groaning, arched up, spreading his knees wide. Java dove for the tight curves of Raine's ass and found the cleft between. Slick fingers probed in until he found the puckered ring of muscle and pushed. Raine's hole took his finger easily as he spread the lube around.

Both men fought for breath, Java struggling against the almost overwhelming urge to come just from being able to touch the man there. Raine pushed down, fucking himself on Java's finger. Wanton, he raised his hands to his chest and squeezed his own nipples. "More," he begged. "Give it to me."

Java spread Raine wide with two fingers, bucking with him when he found the sweet spot and pressed down hard. Yelling with him when the third went in, hot and fast, more lube coating skin and muscle.

Somehow, speared on Java's hand, Raine found the strength to reach out shaking fingers and snatch up the condom. "Here," he said, halting. "You." He bit at the corner, tearing the packet open. "Me, on you."

Java saw white light and stars when Raine's scorching fingers touched his bare cock again, smoothing cool latex down over the length. He kept his hand there, swirling it around, pressing his fingers as if playing a flute, something that would make sounds wild and free as bird song. Sounds like the ones Raine was uttering, more like the cries of a wild falcon than a fucking man. Strange, so strange, but hot as hell, hot as the descending Raine, driving Java wild.

Raine released Java's cock as Java drew his fingers out. He laced his fingers through Java's other hand and looked at him, meeting eye to eye. "Now?"

Java nodded, his head scraping against the concrete. Hair stuck to his cheeks with sweat. He licked his lips and tasted salt. "Ride me," he ordered, hoarse.

Raine, stretched, ready, willing, spread his legs wide, bracing on his knees. He sank down slowly, using one white-hot hand to guide Java, greedily taking in first his broad, mushroom cock head and then the most of his length, letting out a low, hissing keen. Java convulsed, almost doubling up.

"Shh." Raine held out his free hand, holding it in mid-air. "Feel this. Feel me."

Java held still, though it almost killed him. Even through the condom, he could feel every bit of Raine that surrounded him. Even hotter deep inside, molten and swallowing him whole, a constrictor made of fire. Their joined fingers shook hard, like leaves in a gale, as they fought for control.

"Wait for it," Raine breathed, not moving. "Wait ... wait..."

Java groaned from the bottom of his gut. "Can't. Too good. Too much."

"Wait." Raine bore down, squeezing Java's cock. "Oh," he breathed. "Yes."

"God, yes!"

"Harder?"

"Yes, harder, more, now—"

Slowly, Raine raised himself, then lowered once again. Riding Java like a wild horse, like the lightning. His hand

spasmed in Java's as he fucked himself on Java's cock. He did all the work, and they both reaped all the pleasure.

Java thought he would incinerate. Crumble to ash. The feel of Raine's silky, lube-soaked skin, the furnace of his insides, the downy caress of his hair against Java's belly—frantic to do something, anything, Java reached out and took Raine's cock, jutting desperately, into his own hand.

This time, it was Raine who seized up, letting out a low yell. Java jacked him hard, the way he liked to be done. "Wish you were in my mouth," he found the breath to whisper. "Want to suck you off and taste you. But I can't wait. Too good."

Raine exhaled loudly, sucking in another needy breath, one after the other, fighting for control.

"Let go," Java ordered, working Raine's cock, pushing him toward it. A word trickled onto his tongue, and he let it soar out of his lips: "*Fly*."

With a loud cry, Raine let go and let the orgasm swallow them both, an explosion of come from both cocks, filling one and spraying over the other's chest. Java found his vision going dark, but before it grayed out entirely, he felt Raine wrench his hand free and raise both arms to the sky like wings, shrieking like a mad, wild, free bird ready to take flight.

Then everything was dark, and Java floated in a black and airy pool of ebbing ecstasy, swallowed by the force of loving Raine.

## Chapter Nine

The sound of crows, cawing rough and raspy cries, brought Java back to life. Eyes still closed, he registered watery sunlight shining down on him in a half-hearted effort at the beginning of day, and realized he must have slept the rest of the night away after that explosive orgasm in Raine's arms.

God, Raine had been gorgeous when he came. Arms flung up to heaven, wild as the wind threshing them from limb to limb. Java couldn't help grinning as he extended his arms and legs and stretched to his fullest extent. Eyes still closed, he reached out, wanting an armful of his lover to wake up with.

Instead, his fingers touched only cold concrete.

"What?" Java muttered, slitting his eyes open. They watered and stung as a cloud passed away from the sun, sending a beam down into his face. He shook his head, struggling up onto his elbows, and looked around—first slowly, trying to put bits and pieces together—then fast, with rising panic.

Raine was gone. Java could see the whole roof, from one end to the other, and the man he'd fucked, slept with, fallen for had disappeared from sight.

"Shit!" he swore, rising to a sitting position. His bare leg scraped against the concrete. He froze, preparing for the burst of pain ... which didn't come. Java darted a glance down at his bad leg, and, unable to believe what he saw, let his lips part in shock.

Bad? It looked healthy and straight as the other. No lumps, no bumps, no crook. The scars remained, but they'd

smoothed out, just dappled patches on his dark complexion. He grabbed his ankle and smoothed one hand up his calf, poking here and prodding there. Nothing. No pain, no protests from the ruined bones. Just healthy skin, solid muscle, and firm shank.

Java flexed his toes and again, no twinge he'd have lived to regret. "How?" he asked the thin air, shaking his head. "I don't—it couldn't have. Raine?" He remembered the full-body wash of heat that had been making love to the man. A chill trickled down his spine like ice water. He couldn't have, could he? It wasn't possible.

And where had he gone? With the fire escape crumbled into broken Tinker Toys and the escape door rusted shut, he couldn't have gotten down from the roof—not unless he'd climbed down the outer wall, and that would have been impossible without equipment, even for a mountain climber—which he felt pretty sure Raine was *not*.

What of his other marks? Java looked down at his chest. Faded. He looked like a palomino, but other than that he was smooth and whole again, even to the marks on his neck, when he felt at them with eager fingertips. He'd been healed, but damned if he knew how, or why.

"Raine?" he called again, even though he knew the rooftop to be empty. "Raine!"

No answer. Of course. Java shivered again, wrapping his arms around himself. He looked around, desperate for any evidence that the whole thing hadn't been a crazy dream. He found none—and yet he found proof there had once been things.

Too Close to the Sun  
by Willa Okati

His knee bore pink, healed places where he remembered having scraped it open, but no neat bandages. Dried spunk covered his flat belly, and his muscles burned with the unbelievably good ache of having fucked someone's brains out, but he saw no condom wrapper or empty lube packet. His clothes lay in a neat pile on one side of the chimney cap. Raine's backpack had vanished along with his clutter of junk.

Java shook his head, the creepy sensation crawling up into his scalp. None of this made sense, and he didn't like what didn't fit into reality. Yet—he'd liked Raine, if there had been a Raine.

No. He'd *loved* Raine. He could remember being inside the man, consumed by heat, coming harder than he had in years with that downy featherweight on top of him, riding him like he was a prize stallion. Another thrill ran through him, this time shooting down to his half-hard cock.

Embarrassment followed close on the heels of arousal. "Oh, God," Java blurted, flattening himself like a pancake on the chimney cap. Who knew who could see him from the street below, if anyone was out that early? He judged it to be just about sunrise, but that would be about time partiers straggled home from their all-nighters. They might be strung out and drunk, but who'd miss a naked man on a rooftop?

He fumbled for his clothes and, still marveling at the total lack of pain, wriggled into jeans and shirt. His jeans had been cut off at the knee, sure enough, and raggedly—as if with kiddie scissors. His shirt was unbuttoned from collar to cuffs. With the jeans on and fastened, he stood up to put the shirt on. Tugging it over one arm, he looked down at his biceps.



"Oh, shit," he whispered, suddenly having to sit down again. A tattoo had appeared on his flesh. Just a small, sketch-like thing, almost more like a brand in ink than a piece of art. A bird in flight, bursting from a fire.

*Phoenix*, his mind recognized as he gaped at the drawing in shock. It didn't have the red puffiness of a new tattoo like he'd seen on other men, but the ink—ink?—was still crisp and fresh, sharply black underneath his skin.

And it hadn't been there the day before. Java knew that for damn sure.

He waited as another wave of tingling panic swept over him. "Raine!" he yelled. "What did you do to me while I was out?" He was getting angry. *Good!* Better anger than fear and confusion.

Just as suddenly, his fists relaxed. Strike Raine? God, no. He couldn't. He'd never be able to forgive himself if he tried. You didn't hit a guy like him. He was too rare, too unique, too thin to beat on, and he had that hidden strength which made Java think Raine could wipe the pavement with him if he'd wanted.

Java touched the tattoo once more, rubbing his fingers across the skin. Hot! He jerked back, staring. The mark *was* like a brand, still fresh. The devil's mark?

He shook himself hard. Couldn't be. He was thinking crazy, not making any sense. But then, the whole night didn't make sense in the weak morning light.

Had there ever been a Raine at all? Or had Java drunk a tab of something with his awful coffee and hallucinated the whole evening? God, what a spectacle he'd have made of

himself if he'd been lost in a dream. He could almost hear people hooting and laughing at him, fucking no one on the roof of a goddamned abandoned factory.

Java held himself still, listening. No sound from the streets, not even traffic, but that didn't surprise him. Nothing from the roof except a murder of crows, landing along the ledge and staring at him with beady black eyes. Java shouted at them to see them scatter, screeching back at him.

He had the damndest feeling they were making fun.

His jaw hardened. All right, fine. No answers, but at least maybe he could find a way down. With his leg fixed up good as new—and God, he'd think about that later, try and find a way for the healing to make sense—he bet he could kick in the roof hatch and climb down.

Finishing the last button on his shirt, Java walked over to take a look at the remains of the fire escape in the street. Unbelievable that it'd been there all night and no one had come to check it out—

"Shit!"

There *was* no fire escape. Not even the pieces of it. Java would have figured it to have been cleaned up by some crew who managed not to notice him, but as he stared down where the rusty iron had been, he saw two things that chilled his blood: no ochre marks or drilled holes where what he'd climbed should have once been fastened to the wall.

For a second thing, in its place was a neat iron ladder stretching from ledge to ground. It hadn't been there yesterday. Fuck, it looked decades younger than the escape—still old and weather beaten, but solid.

Java swallowed hard, the gorge rising in his chest. "Someone out there better have some answers for me," he muttered, shoving his feet into his sneakers. He slid one leg, miraculously not sore at all, over the ledge, and found the first rung with his toe. "I want to know what happened. Fuck it all, I want to know *now*."

But as he started the climb down, he knew he wouldn't get any response to his questions.

Maybe there wasn't one to give.

Still, if he thought he'd had one shock already that morning, it was nothing compared to what would come next.

Walking back to his apartment took far less time than he'd imagined it would. The year of being crippled had felt so long Java had forgotten what it was like to walk free and fast, eating up the pavement with his strides, all but jogging. God, so good! Better than—he faltered. No, even if he had just been dreaming like a crazy man, nothing could ever beat the memory of fucking Raine.

For all that, this came in a close second best. He felt like if he ran fast enough, he could jump off the ground and fly. Invisible wings attached to his shoulder blades. Wings! He almost laughed out loud, stopped himself when he realized how it would look, and sped up his step.

He smelled the greasy gray billows of smoke a second before he saw them, curling around the corner that would lead him to his home. Fuck! Someone's complex was on fire, or had recently been. That much smoke, the blaze would have taken everything out. His home!

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*by Willa Okati*

Java did run then, skidding around the corner—smack into a small waif of a woman, both of them flying apart to land on their asses.

He had just a second to shake his head, dazed, before she was up and on him, hugging his neck like a lunatic and babbling non-stop: "Mr. Tomas, Javier, Java, oh, thank God, you're all right! We were so afraid you'd been inside, and with your leg, we didn't think you could have gotten out, and oh, you're alive!"

She pulled away for a second to kiss a crucifix dangling around her neck. "Where have you been?" she demanded, shaking him by the forearms. "We've been looking everywhere, except ... except ... where we couldn't, yet," her voice trailed off.

Java barely heard her. Pushing her aside, not hard, but numbly, he took three steps forward and stopped, staring at the wreckage of his apartment building. It had been gutted from ground floor to roof by fire. Experience pointed to signs of arson, maybe, or was he thinking of a gas explosion? The tell tale markings jumbled together in his mind.

Did they matter? The only thing he knew for sure: his home was gone, and with it, all his belongings. The scraps of a life he'd managed to shove together. TV. Microwave. Stash of food. His clothes. A picture of Gary. Fuck Gary, though, he didn't mind losing that bastard's photo. The rest of it ... he'd been wiped out.

He felt the woman's hand curl around his elbow. Dizzy, he inhaled sweet-scented perfume and recognized her: Carly. "When did it happen?" he asked through deadened lips.

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"Sometime in the middle of the night," she said, her voice still a bit shaky, but shoring up. "It burned until just a few minutes ago. Not everyone made it out that the firemen can account for. I thought you were inside. Maybe you'd fallen asleep with a cigarette, or ... something. That damn cheap TV shorted out. Anything. But you're alive."

He felt her trembling. "If you'd been home last night, Mr. Tomas ... you'd be dead."

Java looked at the ruins of his home, and knew she told the truth. He'd have lost not just the trappings of his life, but everything else. He'd be buried in the ashes, burned out with no spark of resurrection.

Only one thing had saved him.

"Raine," he whispered, fingers coming up to touch first the strange tattoo marking on his arm, then the smooth skin on his neck. "Raine, what did you do?"

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, as the sun rose true and strong into a gentian blue sky, Java stood shivering in the arctic blast of central air in a cheap hotel a few blocks away from his home. Carly and the rest of the onlookers had ponied up to give him a couple of nights pre-paid to figure out what he'd do next. Dry washing his hand over his face, Java had to admit: he lacked a single clue.

His stipend? Wouldn't begin to cover another apartment, much less anything to wear, or even food to eat, not if he tried to stretch the money to cover all three. And now, with his leg mended, he didn't even know if he'd be getting those

few dollars. Carly hadn't noticed yet, but she was one sharp cookie; she would, soon.

Did he want to keep on taking money, especially if it were a cheat? Hell, no! Java could stand tall and firm on his own two feet again, so be damned if he'd take another penny that didn't belong to him by right of hard work. He'd only accepted the hotel and a change of jeans from a volunteer because he'd been in shock. Now, standing in the middle of the bland beige room seven stories up, he hated giving in to that much weakness.

What else could he have done, though? They'd swarmed him like ants on a sandwich, every one bubbling over with questions. Too many voices, too loud, asking him things he didn't know how to answer. Where had he been? Why hadn't he come back when he saw or heard reports of the fire? What had happened to his pants? Why wouldn't he let any of the EMT's check him out? He'd been a coward, too glad to retreat.

Well, no more. Jaw sticking out, Java walked to the motel room's window and flung the curtains open. He stared up at the sky, watching birds wheel and soar, black dots against the sunlight. Looked like they were flying out of the fire in the sky, spiraling down to earth. He'd never appreciated birds before.

Raine had taught him more than one lesson, and given him more than one gift.

Slowly, not caring who saw, Java stripped off his shirt. He laid his hand across the phoenix on his arm, feeling the heat radiate through the calluses on his fingertips. Closing his eyes, he admitted it to himself: Raine had been real. No

telling where the guy had come from, or where he'd gone, or even why, but they *had* been on the roof together. They'd wound themselves up in each other's life tight as twins.

Java could still feel the wild copper coil of Raine around his heart, and a tingle in his cock. He'd fucked the man he'd fallen for so hard and fast, and then—God, why had he blacked out? Java slammed his fist against the window, hard enough the glass spiderwebbed. Damn it! He'd have to pay for that, and...

Suddenly weary, he turned away, resting his shoulders against the warmth. The room was too cold, and being inside felt stifling. He'd have given anything to be outside again and free. With Raine.

Maybe the guy had found his wings again. Whatever force of nature had held a grudge against him had let Java's love and spunk make some sort of offering to appease. Maybe he'd come into his wings and, too excited to stay, flown off into the moonlight.

Or maybe he'd just been crazy.

Maybe Java was the lunatic.

So much he couldn't explain. Where had the pieces of fire escape gone? Where had the ladder come from? How had the mark gotten on his arm, and what did it mean? Why would Raine leave without saying good bye? He'd thought the guy had felt what Java had known his own heart did. When he'd climaxed, he'd had the feeling of coming home.

Home. Java squeezed his eyes tighter shut. Would he ever have a home to go to again? Maybe. If he could get his old job back fighting fires, they might let him live in the station

until he could get a place of his own to stay. He could buy new clothes, eat four-alarm chili, and maybe someday find someone to fuck and love.

It wouldn't matter one damn bit, though, because none of that involved Raine, and none of the men he might waltz over would *be* Raine. He'd gone and lost his heart, with no way he could see of getting it back.

"You gave me this life," he said to himself, wishing Raine were there to hear him. "Why? I can't live it with any happiness without you around. I could go on, reborn out of the flames, but without you here everything's fucking frozen." He pressed down on his phoenix. "Where are you, man? If you can, come back to me. Please."

He swallowed. "I need you. Even if you have to fly away every morning, I have to have you in my life." His hand closed into a fist. "Come back, damn it. Come back!"

A soft tapping sounded on the window. Java's eyes snapped open and he jerked away, thinking the spider fractures were about to crack open wide. Wouldn't it just be perfect if he ended his whole adventure by falling from the skies, smack down on the cement? He almost laughed bitterly as he turned to look at the damage he'd caused.

Just outside the window, Raine waited for him. Standing on nothing but air, his palms flattened against the glass. Gray eyes alight with a lusty fire, his smile wide and warm and wicked. Java looked into that face, and while his lips parted with a thousand questions, all he could be was silent.

Because he'd seen behind Raine, and the sight would strike any man dumb. Wings. Huge wings, all colors, fit to



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outshine a peacock. Not like an angel, nor like a bat, a demon or a bird. They were his own, vast and lofty, holding him upright in the air.

Raine backed up a bit and turned in a circle, letting Java see. He drank all the details in, and more—how Raine's wild hair was woven through with feathers, not as if they'd been stuck in, but as if they grew out of his scalp. Naked to the waist, his chest was downy, soft and gray as a dove. His nails were sharp as bird claws, tap-tap-tapping against the window when he put them back to the glass.

His question was clear: *can I come in?*

Java felt the laugh building inside him like an orgasm. He let it burst loose, wild and free, as he found the latch to the window and hauled it open, letting in a burst of city air and the wild smell of Raine. "Get in here," he ordered, catching Raine by the arms and helping him hop over the windowsill. "You, man, have a lot of story telling to do."

Raine's eyes sparkled as he nodded.

"You flew." Java shook his head in wonder. "What are you? What am I, now that I've been with you? What—no." He held up his hand, touching the warmth of Raine's lips. "Everything can wait. This can't."

Java replaced his fingers with his mouth, wrapping his arms around Raine's soft bird-man body, sturdy and solid, fitting into his grip as if he'd been born for it. Together, under the light of the blazing sun pouring into the room, they stood locked in a kiss, lips and tongues dancing eagerly across each other, and knew: life would never be the same again.

Too Close to the Sun  
*by Willa Okati*

It would be better. He'd risen from the ashes of an old life cast aside. He was a phoenix, born anew. And as to what would come?

Raine would show him the way.

END

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