

# **Firecracker: Independence Day**

## **Willa Okati**

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## Prologue

Theodore held Joey's hand tight in his own, tracing the thick veins. A working man's hand. Every day of his mortal life, Joey had done good hard labor, whether constructing the cabin where they met on weekends and holidays, or hefting heavy timbers at the sawmill. He never ceased to thank whatever powers there were, whoever was in charge, that even as a ghost he could feel Joey's hand in his. Warm, rough, ropy. Joey grumbled a bit as Theodore petted him, but he squeezed back.

The two stood gazing down at their special charges -- Joey's great-nephew Ryan, and his partner Thom. Valentine's Day had been the turning point for those two, with a little help from the Saint himself. They'd finally admitted they were more than fuckbuddies. They loved one another, and needed each other. Not just random bumps in the night, they were partners.

Like he and Joey had never gotten to be, openly, while they lived.

"Look at them," he said quietly, though he didn't need to whisper. "They sleep so peacefully in the same bed together."

Joey grunted. "Sleep better in the cabin. My kin doesn't care for this city life."

"Town mouse, country mouse." Theodore tilted his head to one side. "Do you think Thom might give up this penthouse for the foothills eventually?"

"Might do. Might not. Stubborn bastard, he is."

"Guess you're right," Theodore allowed. Curious, he reached forward and brushed his fingers over Thom's bare shoulder. Thom shivered in his sleep, scooting a little closer to Ryan's warmth. "There. Much better."

"Fellas don't have to sleep snuggled up like dolls," Joey grumped. Still, a light twinkled in his eyes. He liked the closeness better, too.

"They have a ways to go yet."

“Ayup. Reckon they’ll make it, though.”

“I hope so.” Theodore drew back. “Ryan and Thom were meant to be together, and for the whole world to see it.” He turned so he could grip Joey’s tough shoulders in his softer hands, and leaned in to brush their lips together. The ghostly kiss tingled. “I only wish we’d had the chance.”

Joey sighed. “Least they do. Reckon that’s why we’re here?”

“Do you think so?”

Both ghosts looked down at the sleeping couple. “Well,” Theodore said, “everyone needs a guardian. Even if we’re not quite angels.”

Joey tilted his head back and laughed. After a moment, Theodore joined him. No one could hear them, save for the other ghosts haunting the world, but what did it matter? They got the joke.

Better still, they had each other. They had a mission.

Ryan and Thom.

## Chapter One

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

*Chuka-chuka-chuka-chuka-wom-wom-wom --*

"Either turn that shitty music off or get me an ice pick," Thom groaned.

"Mmf. Why?"

"So I can stab myself through the temples. It'd be less painful."

Ryan socked Thom in the arm without opening his eyes or moving his face from the pillow. Mmm, comfy pillow. "Heathen. What kind of gay man are you if you don't like techno?"

"One with taste?"

Ryan licked his lips. "Salty."

Thom thumped Ryan back. "Hey, you're the one who's got me eating all kinds of yuppie fruit. I'm supposed to be sweet as sugar."

"You're getting there." Ryan yawned hugely. He switched off the alarm clock without looking, then slitted his eyes open to find Thom staring blearily back. "Morning, lover."

Thom blinked. Ryan would never tell him this, but he looked like a sleepy kitten with his eyes crinkled up from sleep. "Morning."

Ryan didn't mind Thom not calling him lover. Really. He'd started it, and he figured Thom would fall into line eventually. After all, he went along with "pet" when they were playing with their favorite crop, or those nifty little cock cages Thom found online...

He yawned again, stretching. "You wore me out last night."

"Wore you out? You think it's easy playing Master of Pain? All you have to do is lie there and take it."

Ryan grinned. "I know." He ached in the best way, in his favorite places. "Think we could do it again tonight?"

"You're going to kill me."

"So? You'd die happy. I know you love it."

Thom snaked out one long arm and grabbed Ryan, rolling him over until he lay nestled up against his partner. Sleep-warm fingers stroked down his belly. "Yeah," Thom murmured into the curve of his neck. "You know me too well."

Ryan nodded happily. With a deep, contented sigh, he settled into Thom's embrace. He loved mornings best. Well, he loved the nights best, too, but who said he couldn't have more than one favorite? Mornings, though, when Thom's rough edges were softened by sleep and he got in a cuddly mood... well, Ryan wouldn't trade those moments for the whole world.

Unfortunately, they never lasted long enough, especially when they liked to sleep until the last minute. A heavy thumping sounded at the door, followed by the bell chiming, and the rattle of the mail slot being yanked open. They might not be hearing the pitter-pat of little feet any time soon, but every morning, they heard the pat-pat-pat of bills and letters hitting the welcome mat.

"We should really get a P.O. box," Thom grumbled, burying his face between Ryan's shoulder blades.

"Or a mailman who doesn't announce deliveries like the Second Coming."

"Is it my turn, or yours?"

"Yours." Ryan leaned back against Thom. "You don't have to get it right away, though."

"That damn cat of yours is going to chew on the utilities bill again."

"Speaking of edibles..." Ryan snuggled a little closer still, pressing his bare ass against Thom's groin. His lover's cock, half-hard already, stiffened against his skin. "And good morning to you, too."

"You're going to make us late for work," Thom warned.

"Not if we hurry."

Thom laughed against his back. "You're insatiable."

"For you." Ryan wiggled around until they were face to face. Gently, he kissed Thom, flicking his tongue against the man's lips until they opened and let him in. He traced his lover's mouth with tender care, belying all their rough banter, telling Thom in his own way, once again, he loved him. Thom mumbled into the kiss at first, but his hands traced patterns and squiggles down Ryan's arms. Yeah. He loved Ryan, too. Ryan knew it, even if Thom didn't say it too often.

He pulled back for air, grinning. "Tell you what. You get the mail. I'll meet you in the shower."

"Mmm. Want to conserve water?"

"There is a drought this summer."

"Very granola of you."

Ryan pinched Thom's ass. "Anything but vanilla. You want to taste and see?"

"What, are you daring me?" Thom pounced on Ryan, rolling them over and over in the sheets. Fingers scrabbled and tickled. "You think I won't take you up on it? Huh?"

Ryan laughed and squeaked, "Uncle! Uncle!"

\* \* \*

"See? Not just for lesbians." Thom clicked the water pressure on their new shower attachment up a notch and angled it at just the right spot on Ryan's -- *there*. He grinned as Ryan let out a yelp, then arched his back like a rutting lion. "Feels good, huh?"

"Better than good," Ryan panted. He leaned against the tiled wall, bracing himself with his arms. "Thought you weren't -- open-minded, though."

"I can be open-minded. If other things open sesame as well." Thom clicked the pressure up another notch. "I get the water back massage next time."

"Deal." Ryan turned to glance over his shoulder, eyes heavy-lidded. "So... are you going to fuck me, or just goof around with the *agua* all morning long?"

"Decisions, decisions." Thom played the stream of nicely softened water over Ryan's back muscles, watching them ripple under its touch. Playful, he aimed a shot at his partner's ass. "What do you think I should do?"

"Mmm," Ryan purred.

"Translation: 'please fuck me'?"

"Mmm!"

"How lucky for us I have other good ideas, too." Thom reached for their shared shower caddy and pulled out a tube of lubricant. Fresh and full -- Ryan must have replaced it after the last time they'd played in the water. He passed the shower attachment off to his lover, who replaced it above their heads and clicked a switch. Good, hard, driving water pelted down on them, soaking both. Thom laughed as he filled his palm with slippery lube, careful to keep it out of the spray, and dipped his fingers in. "Bend forward," he breathed, nudging Ryan with his free hand. "Let me see you."

Ryan groaned. Bracing his arms against the bar they'd had installed, he bent at the waist, pushing his ass up and high. "Like this?"

"You know what I like." Thom ran his free hand across one of Ryan's pert, taut cheeks. "But I know what you like, too." Dipping his fingers into the lube, he slipped them into Ryan's crevice and stroked, flicking up until he found the puckered rosebud he sought. "Always so tight," he breathed. "Just like a virgin. Do you work out?"

Ryan laughed breathlessly, already beginning to tremble. "That's for me to know and you to find out."

"Bet you do, when I'm not here. I can just see you," Thom said, circling Ryan's entrance with one firm, careful finger. "Squeezing down. Tightening up. Staying snug and tight as a glove, just for me."

"Sweet talker."

"Mmm." Thom used his slippery fingers to anoint his cock, swollen hard and purple, until it gleamed, then guided himself to Ryan's channel. He pressed down with



fingertip and cockhead, applying enough pressure to make Ryan gasp and buckle forward on the bar. "I do other things pretty sweet."

"Then hurry up already."

Thom chuckled deep inside his chest. "Impatient?"

"Need you."

"Then you've got me." Thom felt Ryan's rosebud begin to wink underneath the gentle pressure. He pushed forward carefully. "Slow and steady wins the race."

"God, yes!" Ryan arched. "But fast wins the day."

"You want it fast? Want me to piston in and out of this hot, sweet hole, until you just can't stand it?" Thom slid forward, a smooth sweet slide, seating himself to the root. "Say please."

"Please. Fuck, yes, please!"

"Since you ask so nice," Thom murmured. He drew out until only the tip of his cock was inside, then slammed forward, pistoning his hips. The water streamed down over them, hot and soft and sharp all at once. Ryan moaned, leaning forward.

"Touch me..." he whispered, voice ragged.

Thom reached around and gripped Ryan's cock in one hand. Jutting out hard and proud, it begged for a little TLC. God, he loved morning fucks. "Your wish is my command," he said. "On your mark... get set..."

"Go, already!"

And Thom went.

\* \* \*

Ryan whistled to himself as he got dressed. He'd be feeling a delicious soreness all day long. Not just a long day's night, but a great wake-up call as well. Why had it taken him and Thom so long to move in together? Free-for-all sex at a moment's notice, no need to drive back and forth from city to country or vice-versa. They could fall into bed together when they got home from work if they felt like it, and not move until the alarm went off the next morning. Or they could cook a meal, like Uncle Joey's good,

extra-spicy chili, share a hearty red wine or a nice cold beer, and watch TV or argue over the crossword.

He did miss the cabin, though. They went up there on weekends, as often as they could, but Thom's downtown penthouse just didn't feel quite as much like home as the old, rustic place did.

At least he'd gotten a cat out of the bargain. Granted, said cat liked nothing better than to hide under the couch and swipe at their ankles when they passed, but Rum-Tum was still a cat, and if he felt in the mood, he'd play with the feather on a stick Ryan had bought him. Thom pretended to hate their feline "monster," but Ryan knew better. He'd caught Thom rolling a ball of aluminum foil for the cat, and neither of them ate tuna, but for some reason there were always a few cans in the pantry.

Thom just had his *modus operandi* for life. Ryan understood it, and dealt with it. Tough as nails, rough around the edges, but a marshmallow and a gentle lover once you tapped into his gooey center. Not everyone would see so far. Until last Valentine's Day, he hadn't. Ryan paused as he tugged on his socks, remembering when their relationship had changed from fuckbuddies to partners. A smile quirked his lips. So neither of them had been looking for love. They'd found it, and much more than most people ever got.

Thom wandered into their bedroom, flipping through the sheaf of mail he'd collected from downstairs. "Bill... bill... bill... I told you the cat monster would chew on our utilities... junk... bill... junk..." He paused, frowning. "Definitely junk."

Ryan glanced up to catch a glimpse of what Thom tossed toward the garbage can. Bright rainbow colors fluttered as it flew past on its arc. "Are you sure that's junk?"

"God, am I sure."

"Seriously? It looked like the gay flag to me." Ryan finished with his socks and padded over to the trash. Reaching in, he pulled out a postcard so painfully bright it hurt the eyes. The gay flag fluttered bravely on the front, and someone had added a yellow smiley-face sticker as well as a lavender triangle.

He flipped it over. The thing had been printed with pink ink in a handwriting font.

*Hi, neighbors! Rick and Nick here, inviting you to the first annual Primrose Street Fourth of July c-e-l-e-b-r-a-t-i-o-n!!!*

*We don't know you too well, but we'd just love to get the chance --*

"Rick and Nick?" Ryan queried, glancing up.

Thom adjusted his necktie and rolled his eyes. "The queers across the street. You name it, they've got a finger in it, as long as it's gay or lesbian. Hell, I think they're in P-FLAG, and they don't have kids."

"Oh." Ryan frowned. "I don't think I've met -- no wait, yes, I have. They dress alike, right out of a preppy catalog, right? Identical haircuts?"

"Identical haircuts, matching polo sweaters, Beemers with His1 and His2 license plates, and enough anti-depressants between them to make a senator smile. They probably trim their pubes into cutesy little poodle shapes. Are you still reading that thing? I said it was junk."

"I'm just curious." Ryan ignored Thom's snort and went back to reading.

*This year, we're going all out -- out of the closet! Everyone's invited, from the gay to the lesbian to the straight, to celebrate our own Independence! Yay! We'd love it if you came. Should be a marvelous time!*

*Please feel free to bring your husband, wife, or partner of choice.*

*P.S.: If you want, feel free to bring some fireworks. Let's go out with a bang!*

Ryan choked down a giggle. "Are they serious?"

"Knowing them? Serious as death. Listen." Thom wrapped his arms around Ryan's waist and kissed his cheek. "Those two are the biggest helium happy-heads you ever met. You won't ever catch me hanging out with them, even though God knows they've invited me over for glass after glass of exquisitely chilled Riesling. I don't need smiley faces to reinforce who or what I am. I'm me. Thom. Gay, not insanely gleeful."

Ryan tapped the postcard against his thigh. "Invited you," he said slowly. "Not 'us'?"

Thom's face froze in an 'oh shit' rictus.

Ryan turned slowly to face him. "Just you," he said, searching Thom's face. "They don't know you're gay, do they?"

"I... I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?"

"It never came up."

"Never came up?" Ryan pulled away from Thom. "You say all they talk about is the glory of being gay and it never occurred to you to say hey, you were in the club too?" He swallowed. "Or say you had a boyfriend? A live-in lover?"

Thom reached out a hand. "Ryan, honest, it just never occurred --"

"Don't give me excuses." Ryan kept out of touching distance. "Does anyone around here know you're gay? Or do they think you just picked up a fairy roommate?" He snapped the card at Thom, catching him in the middle of his chest. "Here I've been thinking we were equals. Partners. I've been telling people I live with my lover. What have you been doing? Telling them 'yeah, my roommate's gay, but I'm okay with it'?"

Thom ran a hand over his face. "Ryan, you're overreacting."

"Damn right I am. How do I know you mean any of it, now? Everything you've said means *I love you* could just be *this is a convenient way of getting him to bend over*."

"Okay, now you're going too --"

"It's already gone way past *too far*." Ryan ran a hand through his hair. Brushing past Thom, he shoved his feet into shoes and stalked down the stairs. "I know who and what I am, and so does the world. I thought I knew who you were, too."

"Shit. Ryan!"

"I'm going to work," Ryan snapped. "You know where to find me if you get anything figured out."

"Ryan, wait --"

Ryan ignored him as he headed out the front door. *Dammit, Thom!*

\* \* \*

Theodore glanced at the floor. "This doesn't bode well."

"Oh, you think? Foolish pride." Joey's face was set in an ugly downturn. "All that trifling we went through with the Saint's about to be undone."

"No." Theodore shook his head. "I wasn't aware Thom hadn't... but no. We'll have to see this gets put right."

Joey snorted. "Sure. Got any ideas?"

Theodore sighed. He squeezed Joey's hand. "Not yet. But give me some time."

Joey returned the pressure, palm to palm -- then softened his grip. "Well, now," he said thoughtfully. "Could be I've a notion in mind."

Theodore glanced up in hope. "You do?"

"Could be. You just follow my lead..."

## Chapter Two

Ryan sank his fingers deep into the rich loam of potting soil. Despite his best intentions, his mood softened. How could anyone stay pissed off when they touched the earth? If he closed his eyes, he'd almost be able to feel the life in his pot of heavy, black dirt. Hear the ladybugs and plants talking to one another. Feel the impending birth of blooms on the stem, almost ready to burst into bud.

He loved his job.

So maybe every queer who worked with flowers came in for a few extra giggles on the straight market. Ryan didn't care. He'd been his happiest pottering around in a garden ever since he stood knee-high to a sprinkler system, and Great-Uncle Joey -- very old Great-Uncle Joey by then -- had been the first one to teach him how to pot a rose. He'd died not long after, but Ryan's love for growing things lived on.

But Thom... His face hardened. Thom didn't get it. Maybe on purpose, maybe not. He'd gotten a kick out of the one freak bunch of cock-marked blooms, but Ryan hadn't been able to duplicate the Rorschach blotch on any other flowers, so he'd lost interest. Thom just smiled at Ryan as he put on his worn T-shirt and jeans to head off for the day's work in his old truck.

Then -- Ryan scowled as he tamped down the soil a little harder -- he'd probably adjusted his tie, gotten into his sporty little sedan with a wave over the fence to Rick and Nick, and headed off to his shiny chrome office without a second thought.

Never taking a picture of Ryan to put on his desk. Not mentioning his name at the water cooler. Probably getting invited to tons of corporate functions and turning them down because, well, he was an antisocial bastard, but also not even considering that Ryan might like to go.

Okay, he wouldn't have wanted to go, either. But still, Thom could have said, "I have plans with my boyfriend/lover/live-in love monkey." Ryan would bet every penny their prize cock roses were worth it just hadn't ever crossed Thom's mind to say a word about it. Never once, when Ryan almost burst with pride from having him as a partner, and told the world about it.

Prick.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Manny, one of his nursery co-workers, cautioned as he passed with a box of lilacs. "Go easy there. You'll break the pot!"

"Oh. Hey, sorry." Ryan swiped a hand over his forehead, leaving behind a grimy streak. "It's been one of those mornings, you know?"

Manny's face crinkled into a grin. "What, your lover-boy go to snoring again? You kick him out of bed, wake up all cold?"

"Not so much."

"Ah, but there's trouble in paradise, Manny bets." The bronze-skinned man rested his lilacs against a stack of burlap bags. "You run out of dick roses or dick itself?"

"Nice, Manny." Ryan wiped his hands on his thighs.

Manny grinned. "Come on then. Nice day, no boss man to rush us. You sit down on a stack of something and tell me all about it."

"You give advice to the lovelorn now?"

Manny rolled his eyes. "Sweet Mary, he describes himself as lovelorn. Listen, amigo. I may not be so young anymore, but my Alberto, he teaches me a lot about how to deal with the one you love. So. Sit, talk. Tell me about it. Then we work on solving your problem."

Ryan regarded his friend uncertainly.

"Sit," Manny insisted. "I know best. Age and experience, it has a lot you can learn from."

Careful not to crush anything, Ryan sat. He twisted his hands together, and he talked.

\* \* \*

Thom settled down at his desk. Adjusted his company logo coffee cup on its battery-operated warmer. Aligned a pad of sticky notes at a perfect right angle to his computer. Stared at the screen with its list of things to do.

Wondered if his face was going to freeze in a permanent scowl.

Where did Ryan get off pulling a prima donna act, anyway? He'd been buddies with the guy for years, partners for months, and he'd never gone off the deep end before. So Thom had forgotten to hang a gay pride banner over his cubicle. It wasn't like he'd tried to keep his orientation a secret, either. It just hadn't... come up.

How had a morning that started off so well gone so wrong?

"Hey, Thomas!" Mikey, one of the interns, leaned inside his cube door. "The pastry cart's early today. Do you want a cruller?"

See? Case in point. Thom hated crullers. Ryan loved them. He always picked one up and wrapped it in a napkin, then brought it home. He'd feed it to Ryan with baby-bird bites, or if his lover had had a hard day, let him tear into the pastry and watched him go with a grin. Little things like those didn't matter to him?

Thom turned back to his screen. "I'd rather burn in hell."

"Ouch. Okay, but you could be a little ruder about it if you tried." Mikey sauntered in and leaned against the filing cabinet. God, Thom hated cube-hoppers and chronic visitors. Mikey wouldn't get anywhere with all his hail-fellow-well-met shit. He'd be better off concentrating on his work --

"I got a promotion, did you hear?" Mikey asked with a grin that lit up the four gray walls. "Head Intern."

To his credit, Thom only blinked once, choked down a hearty *What the fuck?* and even managed a smile. He clicked on one task with the mouse. "Yeah? Good for you."

"I heard you were Head Intern when you first came here." Mikey's grin was open and friendly. "You could probably teach me a lot."

"I was," Thom allowed. "And maybe." His mind had already drifted away from Mikey and his chatter, back to Ryan. The man had acted as if he doubted Thom's love for him. Come on. What says *I love you* better than remembering a man's favorite lube?



Knowing he liked ribbon floggers better than leather? That he liked to snuggle? Even feeding his monster cat tuna to keep him fat and happy.

Did he have to hang a banner from his cube saying: "Hi, I'm Gay! Ask Me About It!" to prove himself?

"Hang on." Mikey shoved himself off the filing cabinet and zipped outside. After a moment, he stepped back with a napkin-wrapped cruller in hand. "Here. Take this home to your boyfriend."

Thom had been taking a sip of his coffee. He choked on it instead. Coughing, spluttering, turning bright red, he fumbled for the bottle of water in his desk drawer. Ryan was always after him to drink less coffee, more water. He'd had the same bottle of spring-fed in there for months, but water didn't go bad, did it?

"Hey, hey, take it easy!" Mikey-on-the-spot was there, pounding his back with one hand as he put the cruller down. "Did a swallow go down the wrong pipe?"

Thom choked and nodded, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Sorry," he croaked. "Just -- what did you say?"

"Your man." Mikey tilted his head. "Oh, God, I'm sorry. I didn't think you were still in the closet."

"I'm not." Thom wheezed. "How did you know about Ryan?"

"Is that his name? I wondered. I've seen you guys. In the park, or taking lunch outside. When you kiss a man on the lips, it's a pretty safe bet he's your big squeeze. You know?"

Oh, yeah. There had been an al fresco about a month ago. Nice, sunny day. Ryan had been all dressed up as a nursery sales rep, in a suit and tie Thom had lent him. He looked almost dapper. Really someone to be proud of, not that he didn't like Ryan just as much in muddy jeans and a ripped T. But Ryan had come around, proud as could be, with a picnic basket and a twinkling smile, asking him for a lunch date. They'd shared little deli sandwiches and mouth-puckering dill pickle chips outside on the sunny terrace. He'd wondered why no one else had come out to enjoy the day.

They were probably all inside, sipping their diet sodas and watching the show. Figured Mikey would have seen their embrace.

Well, so what? Thom uncapped his water and tilted it back. Huh. Mineral springs special could go flat. Or was it supposed to taste stale? Feeling the heat in his cheeks return to normal, he nodded at Mikey as casually as he could. "Yeah. Ryan's my live-in."

"Way cool." Mikey grinned. "You're lucky, you know?"

"Lucky?"

"Heck, yeah. He looked like a really decent guy. A little rough around the edges, but you're not Mr. Congeniality yourself."

"And you, uh... the bosses... no one said anything?"

Mikey shrugged. "Well, there was a pool going on you being single forever, but I bet on the underdog and won." He grinned. "I knew there had to be someone in your life. You softened up around last Valentine's Day. Not everyone saw it, but I did. Then tall, blond and cute shows up, and I knew. He was the one. Your 'one.' It's a good thing, Thom." He grinned wider. "So was the three hundred I won."

He stretched. "I just wish I could find a guy like yours."

Thom blinked again. Twice. "You mean you're...?"

"Oh, yeah. I thought you knew."

Acutely aware of the irony, Thom shook his head. Mikey laughed. "You really have to pull your head out of the sand, man. I mean, everyone knows you're gay. Everyone knows I'm gay. Everyone knows Louise down in accounting has a girlfriend, and so do Sharon the secretary and Elizabeth the IT lady. It's not a big thing."

"Says you," Thom muttered. To his horror, he found himself blurting, "We got into a fight this morning. Ryan doesn't think I love him just because I don't shout it from the rooftops, or something."

Mikey tilted his head. "Well, it wouldn't kill you to have a picture of the guy on your desk. He probably noticed when he visited. I don't think he misses much. Look." He grabbed Thom's visitor's chair and spun it around, sitting down. "Kick me out if

you want to. But I think there's a few things you need to know about being in a relationship nowadays. First off, you have to realize it's OK. No one's going to hang you by your thumbs. If you're out of the closet, be out and proud." He paused. "I can go on. Should I?"

Thom eyed the intern warily. Slow and careful, he took another sip of water. "Okay," he said at last. Damn it. Why *didn't* he at least have a snapshot of Ryan somewhere around? The kid had a point. "Talk."

\* \* \*

Theodore and Joey met halfway between their charges' workplaces, in the middle of a sunny sidewalk. Theodore tilted his head back to feel the warmth seeping through his spectral form. It felt good. Almost as good as Joey's warmth, when they touched.

And speaking of which, as the love of his life stumped toward him, idly rubbing his hands as if he'd been potting plants himself, Theodore broke into a smile. "It went well with you?"

"Ayup. He's talking with Manny. Spilling his guts. Manny's setting him straight about a few things."

"I think I did a decent job with the young intern and Thom. Thom can be difficult, but at least he's listening."

"Still say we shoulda gone with Muffy and Fluffy, or Pooter and Scooter, whatever their names are."

"Nick and Rick," Theodore corrected. "And no. A good thought, but Ryan would have gone to pieces, and Thom would have run for his life. Touching base with gay men they know, even if they didn't know those men were gay, is better."

Joey's weathered face looked doubtful. "Hope you're right." His expression shifted a little, becoming mischievous. "Best be glad Manny wasn't around when I was young and led around by my cock strings," he said. "He's one hot potato."

Theodore mock-frowned at him. "Trying to make me jealous, now?"

Joey twinkled again, then shook his head with a grin. "Nah. Never been anyone for me but you, kid."

"Good. These boys just have to realize how lucky they are, able to live and love and be open about it. They have to seize their chance. The chance we never had."

"Ayup. If we can just pound it through their damn fool heads."

"I think we're on the right track. We'll see them at the neighborhood block party yet, love."

"You think?"

Theodore smiled and bent to brush a kiss over Joey's tough cheek. "I really think. Come on, now. We have a few hours before the boys get home. I'd enjoy spending some of this sunlight with you in the apartment. Alone."

Joey cackled. "Randy old devil!"

"Have I ever denied it? Besides," Theodore twinkled, "a little extra lust charging the air won't hurt the boys when they come home from work."

"No peeking when they get down and dirty this time."

"On my word."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Joey tugged Theodore by the hand. "Last one to the penthouse has to scare the cat back under the sofa."

Laughing, Theodore followed his lover. An afternoon's delight, and then the evening show. Manny and Mikey, working their "inspired" magic on Ryan and Thom. Things were looking up.

With Joey urging him on, they only looked to get better.

## Chapter Three

Ryan slid the key into Thom's -- their -- door lock with a sort of hesitation. It took nerve coming back after mincing off like a diva queen. Manny had whacked him upside the head, almost literally, after Ryan had told him the whole story.

"You? A fool, my friend," Manny had informed him, waving his fist. "Moron. You don't think this Thom loves you? Look around you, *estupido*. He makes his home your own. Feeds your cat. Shares the shower. So he doesn't dance down the streets singing fairy songs. He loves you still. Take a good hard look at what he does do, not what he doesn't. You get me?"

Ryan had. And he admitted... Manny wasn't wrong. He'd been crazy to get in such a fit over something like the way Thom's head chronically lived buried in the sand. After all, he'd known the guy for ages, and he knew Thom's faults. He kept his private life private, but not out of shame. Just because that was Thom.

And in private... whoa, Nelly. Floggers and strawberry lube and fleece-lined handcuffs. Slow, lazy screws on the couch, legs draped over one another. Hard, fast fucks in the shower. Nights in bed where they soaked the sheets with sweat, breathed as if they'd been running races, and held off orgasm until it exploded out of them.

Fucking.

Having sex.

Making love.

Being *in* love. Those crullers he always brought home. The way he stocked Ryan's favorite movies in their collection. How he didn't laugh when Ryan gave in to temptation and bought a romance novel to read in bed while Thom went over the business pages of the paper. Feeding his cat tuna.

Thom loved him. Ryan knew it for a fact.

"Part of freedom is saying yes, I will shout this to the world, and part is the right to say no, it's my own damn business," Manny had informed him. "So your Thom keeps himself to himself. You gonna hate a man for not wanting to be all firecrackers and hoo-hah?"

He wouldn't. He couldn't. Literally couldn't. Thom had grown into his heart. A part of him.

Now he just had to make amends. How, he wasn't sure. But as he clicked the door open, he guessed he'd figure out a way. Something Thom would understand. Something --

*Holy shit!*

Had Thom turned the heat on by mistake? A blast of supercharged air gushed out the door, enveloping him in a humid cloud. Ryan coughed, waving his hand to create a small breeze. It had to be ninety degrees inside.

"Thom?" he called tentatively, edging into the hallway. The cat darted across his path, hissing, and ducked under their mail table. "Thom, are you home?"

\* \* \*

Thom stood with his face buried in the freezer compartment of their refrigerator. God, he could almost see the steam rising off his skin as the blast of cold air hit him. He'd already stripped down to boxers, but his skin glistened wet with sweat as if he'd been running a race, or having a marathon session with Ryan. "Damned landlord," he muttered. "Top-of-the-line units, my ass. Can't even fix the central air!"

"Thom?" he heard from the hallway. "Are you home?"

*Well, shit.*

Ryan. This was so not how Thom had planned to greet his lover's coming home. On Mikey's advice, he'd intended to be dressed in something tight and sexy, maybe some sinfully snug jeans and a fitted silk shirt. Leaning up against the wall of the hallway. Just waiting, with a little smile telling Ryan exactly what was on his mind.

Not bed. Not yet. He'd planned to take Ryan by the hand, even if it was smeared with dirt after a day's work, and walk over to Nick and Rick's. Take them up on their

offer of a glass of chilled wine and some light if annoying chat by their pool. Show Ryan that no, he wasn't ashamed. He had his freedom to do what he wanted, and part of it was knowing what he should do. Ryan deserved to be shown off to the world. The happy homo neighbors would have been a great start.

Instead, there he stood, sopping wet, his face pressed up against a foil-wrapped lump of leftovers to try and cool down.

Thom groaned into what he suspected was tuna noodle casserole. "In here," he called back. "The kitchen."

He glanced up from frosty heaven to see Ryan stumbling in, his face already beading up with sweat. "What the hell?" he asked, clearly baffled. "Why is the heat on?"

"It's not. Or it's not supposed to be. The central system broke down. Apparently, the gremlins think it's December and they've decided we want heat instead of A/C, despite the fact I've almost screwed the knob off the thermostat pointing it to 'cool'."

"God." Ryan joined him, reaching for a frozen flank steak. He pressed it to his forehead. "Did you call the landlord?"

"I did. He's already been by. Seems like it's not just us. The whole complex has gone tits up. They're trying to fix it, but he said not to expect any miracles before the weekend was over."

"The weekend!"

"Yep."

"Thom, we're going to melt. Or run out of makeshift ice packs." Ryan dropped his flank steak and reached for a bag of peas. Setting them on the counter, he yanked his T-shirt over his head and unbuttoned his jeans. Skinning out of them, he kicked the pile of soggy clothing aside and started rubbing the peas over his chest.

Thom raised an eyebrow. "Are you trying to turn me on?"

Ryan gave him a wry look. "Funny." He pressed the bag to his cheeks.

They stood in silence for a long moment. "This isn't exactly how I pictured tonight turning out," Thom said after a while.

Ryan stole a glance at him. Shy, adorably shy. "Me either, actually."

"You had plans?" Thom joked, dabbing at his face with a chunk of melting ice.

"Not so much. More just saying I was really sorry for being a drama queen, then hopefully repeating the shower scene from Pre-Psycho this morning." He brightened. "Shower! Cold water!"

"I tried already. Everything's off. The best I could get was lukewarm water instead of scalding."

Ryan deflated. "No ice-cold water?" he asked wistfully.

"Not a drop. Sorry." Thom shifted. "Look, I know it's hot, and you're probably going to kick me across the room, but..." He turned toward Ryan and wrapped an arm around his waist. He squeezed lightly. "I just wanted to say. You know. That I. Um."

Ryan let out a long sigh, but with a smile. "I think I can read between the lines," he said, slipping his hand around Thom's hips, pulling him close, letting him feel the forgiveness. They leaned their damp heads together, breathing in the rapidly warming air from the freezer. "I'm sorry," he said after another pause. "And you don't have to say it. I know."

"I'd never hurt you, Ryan. Not on purpose. Believe me."

Ryan's fingers stroked his hip gently. "It's okay. I do believe."

Another pause. "Are we good again? I'll try harder not to be so dumb. Let you, and the world, know I love you."

Ryan kissed Thom's cheek. "Thank you."

"No more making mountains out of molehills?"

Ryan shook his head. Damp strands of hair clung to his cheeks. He smiled again, and nuzzled his cheek against Thom's. "Only in a good way." His arm reached a little further around to caress Thom's cock.

Thom couldn't help laughing. "I never thought there would come a day when I'd turn down the offer of sex, but..."

Ryan laid the forefinger of his free hand over Thom's lips. "Don't say no yet. I have something in mind."



Thom liked the sound of those words. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." Reaching back into the depths of the freezer, Ryan pulled out a package of store-brand ice pops. He pulled one out and poked it out of the wrapper. Nice, long, cylindrical, smooth -- and *cold*. "Necessity is the mother of invention."

Thom's grin grew bigger. "You're not serious."

"I think I am." Ryan drew back to trace the tip of the Popsicle across Thom's lips, then squiggled a pattern across his cheeks. "Oops, messy. I'll have to clean you up."

Thom squirmed. "Mouths are kind of hot."

"Not a problem." Sliding the Popsicle between his lips, Ryan lowered his eyelids and began to lick and suck at the sweet ice. After a moment, he pulled away and then lowered his cold, blessedly cold lips to Thom's. Thom groaned into the cold, sugary kiss.

"You like?" Ryan whispered against his mouth.

"Much," Thom said, voice soft. "Do it again."

Ryan trailed the slick tip of the ice down Thom's chest, circling his nipples. "We've got a whole box of these, lover," he said. "And we can do whatever we want with them."

Thom swallowed. "Could we, uh..."

The hand on his ass slid across to run down the length of the seam between his cheeks. "I think we could. It's a free country." Ryan's eyes twinkled. "You up for it?"

"Suddenly very up." Thom leaned forward, catching the last of the chill on Ryan's lips. "I am so taking a picture of you in to work on Monday. And one of us together. The one we took at your cabin, with the timer. Your head in my lap. Me with my hand on your stomach. Leave nothing to anyone's imagination."

"Thom, you don't have to."

Thom shook his head. "Not the point. I want to. And I can."

He got his reward as Ryan smiled, shyly at first, then with the brilliance of a firecracker going off. "You mean that?"

Thom stole another kiss. "I do. And we're going to Rick and Nick's block party, too. We'll boogie down with the happy homos and the painfully PC producers of progeny. Not just for your sake, though. For mine as well."

Ryan brushed cool lips over Thom's cheek. "Thank you," he whispered.

They stood for a moment, holding one another, the Popsicle dripping sticky red syrup between their chests. "You said something about clean-up?" Thom suggested when it began to puddle and drip into his shorts.

Ryan glanced at him. "I have made a mess, haven't I?" His grin turned wicked. Popsicle still in hand, he slid down to his knees, tugging Thom's boxers down to his ankles as he went. He slipped the cherry ice between his lips again, suckling it, working with his tongue. Thom threaded his hands through Ryan's hair, waiting, savoring the anticipation.

"Ready?" Ryan whispered.

"For you? No matter what you throw at me, yeah," Thom said, rubbing Ryan's scalp with his thumbs. "I'm ready for you."

Ryan opened his mouth again, cold, red lips at the ready, and slid them over Thom's cock. The mixture of heat and chill had Thom buckling at the knees, but Ryan was there to steady him, to hold him up. Mouthing his cock with all the practice he'd learned since they first met. Tonguing the big vein running underneath. Nibbling him like an ear of corn. Tickling at his balls and the strip of skin behind them with chilly fingers. Probing past his cheeks, pushing against his opening with sticky-sweet fingers. Sliding in, slick and cool, to caress a favorite, perfect spot that made Thom shout and thrust against his lover. Pausing every now and then to fellate the Popsicle as well. To suck his brains out via his cock the way only Ryan could.

His orgasm felt like the first bite of ice cream in July tasted. Cold. Sugary. Perfect. White and smooth and pure. Hard and soft, where Ryan swallowed his expulsions and where his tongue lapped at Thom, cleaning him off.

That was good, but better yet, there was almost a full box of assorted flavors left to go. When Ryan showed Thom something else he had in mind for use with the

smooth, rounded ices, Thom's legs did give out from beneath him. Ryan caught him, though, easing him gently to the ground. He rolled Thom over onto his belly and drew patterns down his damp back with the Popsicle, then slid it smoothly between his ass cheeks, pushing the tip at his hole. Thom laughed, squealed, and bucked up into the cold intruder, guided by Ryan's chilly fingers.

They did things with those Popsicles which God and the manufacturers never had in mind, letting each one melt to a sliver of ice before starting fresh. Where the Popsicle had been, Ryan's mouth followed, clever tongue licking and sucking up spilled juices and pressing syrup-sticky kisses to his cooling skin. They fucked the rest of the daylight away, first with cold, and then with heat, spilling over deep inside.

They shared kisses, icy tender and flavored with fruit. They rolled against one another, making a mess and not caring about who'd clean it up later.

In the end, they sweated a lot more than intended before they were finished with the Popsicles, but both of them figured it was worth it. The lukewarm shower water felt good after all their exertion. On an impulse, they dressed in short shorts, T-shirts washed soft and thin, and headed off to find a fireworks stand.

On their way out to the car, they waved at Rick and Nick, sitting on their patio and drinking something expensive from crystal glasses. The perky couple waved back, their smiles growing larger as Ryan and Thom held up interlinked hands.

"Happy Independence Day," Thom murmured as he held the car door open for Ryan.

Ryan's smile made the whole day, every bit, worth it all. "Same to you."

Thom slid into his own side of the car. "I wonder if they make firecrackers for gay men," he mused as he started the car.

Ryan's hand stole onto his thigh. "Maybe. But if not, we can always make our own."

Thom had to agree.

## Epilogue

Joey stood with his arm buried up to the elbow in the central air system. He looked up as Theodore returned, grinning from ear to ear. "Well? Right, wasn't I?"

"Right as always." Theodore dropped a kiss on Joey's cheek. "Nothing like a little extra heat to turn up another sort of heat."

Joey withdrew his arm. "Good. Reckon they're back on track now?" he asked, roughly grabbing his ghostly lover around the waist.

"I reckon so," Theodore said, dipping down for a kiss. "They're even planning to celebrate the holiday."

"That a fact!" Joey looked impressed. "Good for them. I -- hang on a sec." He stuck his hands back into the machinery and fiddled for a moment. It hesitated, coughed, wheezed, and then began to hum again. "There!" he said, satisfied. "Good. Should be cooled off by the time they get home."

"They did a fair, creative job of it themselves."

"Thought you promised no peeking."

"I kept my back discreetly turned. I couldn't exactly block out all the noise, though."

"Varmint," Joey grumbled under his breath. Still, he slid his arms back around Theodore, bringing them together, chest to chest. "Reminds me of one summer back when we were boys."

"You too? I had wondered if you might like to..."

Joey seized his hand. "We've got time. Nice and dark and cool down here, anyway. Let's make the best of it. Might not have had the independence our boys have while we were alive, but damned if we're not free to do what we want now."

"I doubt it's what the forefathers had in mind."

"That a no?"

"Not on your Nelly." Theodore kissed Joey a second time, deepening the embrace until both would have gasped for breath, had they needed to breathe. "Let's celebrate our own Fourth a little early. What do you say?"

"I say, time to set off the firecrackers," Joey cracked back. "All's right with the world."

"Until the next holiday comes around."

Joey groaned. Theodore drowned it with a kiss.

Very soon, they forgot all about anything else.

But they'd be around, if they were ever needed again. After all, Halloween was right around the corner. Both of the ghosts had a sneaking suspicion they might be needed on All Saint's Day...

**The End... *for now***

## **Willa Okati**

Willa Okati has far too many ideas for her own good, but is having the time of her life writing them all down. She has a very patient husband who puts up with seeing his wife pounding on the keyboard at 5 a.m., a hard-used coffee pot that she calls her best friend, and cats who think she's quite insane, but as long as she feeds them, will put up with anything. She adores anything that goes bump in the night, especially if it lands in the bed.

Willa loves to hear from readers. You can reach her at [willshenillshe@gmail.com](mailto:willshenillshe@gmail.com) or visit her website for more information, excerpts, and links to other books at [www.willsheornillshe.com](http://www.willsheornillshe.com).