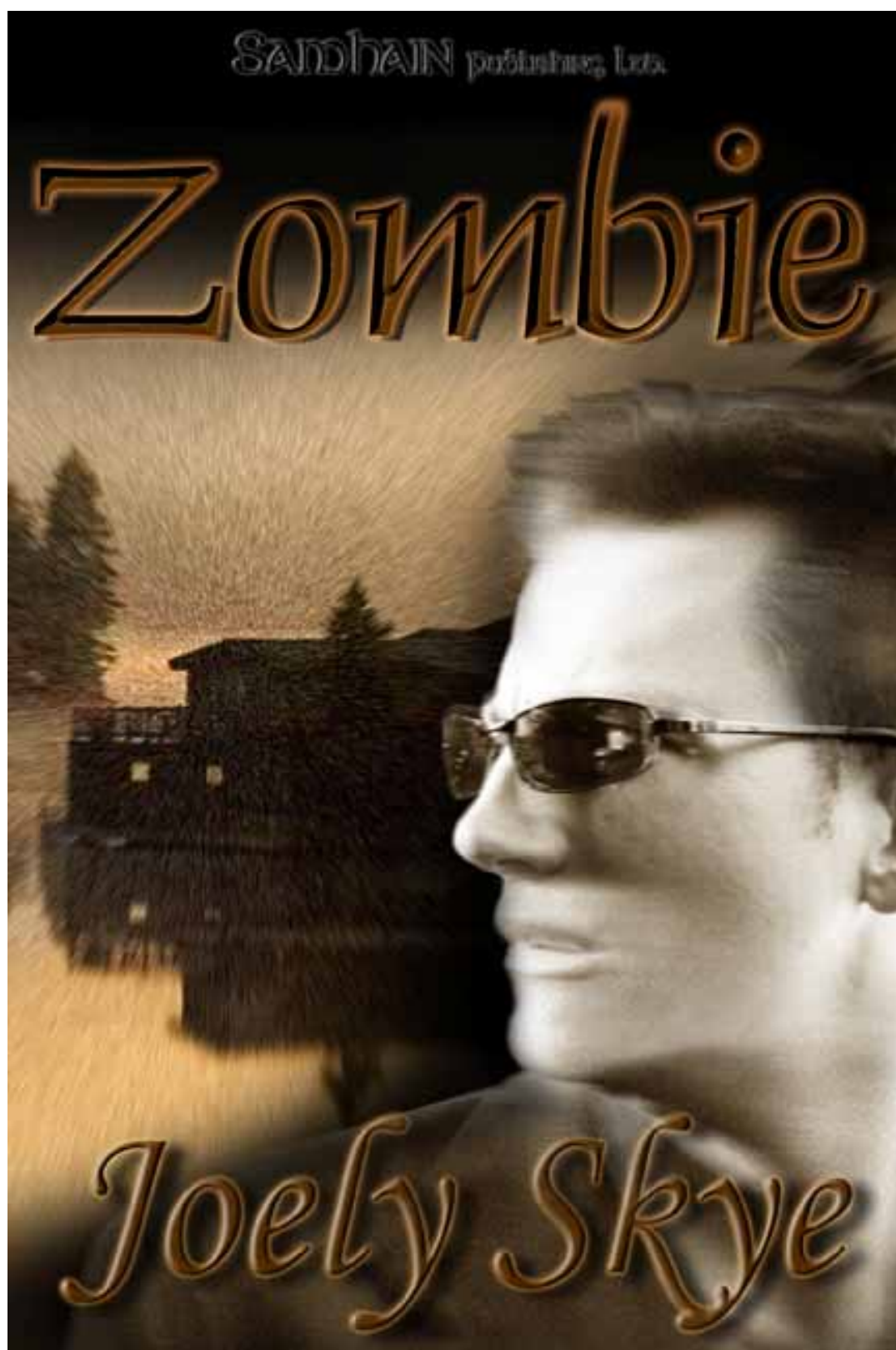


SANDHAIN publishing, LLC

# Zombie



Joely Skye

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*For two years the agency has controlled Josh Mackay's every move. But his real nightmare begins when Brad, a Minder, makes Josh his zombie. Kiran Brunner decides it is time to meet Josh again, and save him.*

Two years after Minder Kiran Brunner abducted Josh Mackay, Josh's life is in ruins. The agency controls his every move. He is essentially their prisoner. Josh dreams of escape. Instead, a nightmare arrives in the form of Brad.

When Josh becomes Brad's zombie, Kir rescues Josh from the amoral Minder and the agency. Now Josh knows what Kir is and how he was used two years ago. Their relationship is built on hatred and fear, no matter how badly Kir wants Josh to trust him.

But Kir is patient and protective. However, Kir may not be able to protect Josh, and himself, from those who wish them harm.

**Warning, this title contains the following: violence, hot nekkid man-love.**

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
2932 Ross Clark Circle, #384  
Dothan, AL 36301

Zombie  
Copyright © 2006 by Joely Skye  
Cover by Vanessa Hawthorne  
ISBN: 1-59998-174-2  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

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First **Samhain Publishing, Ltd.** electronic publication: November 2006

# Zombie

*Joely Skye*

## Dedication

To my editor, who makes each book better. Thanks for your support and hard work, Sasha.

## Chapter One

Josh Mackay had an escape plan. It would take time, patience and technical know-how, but he had those ingredients. He just needed to create opportunity.

Not that he was a prisoner, oh no. The agency even had a job for him. Though he could never work in the field again—Horton worried about his ability to withstand stress. Josh had swallowed that line at the very beginning, but he'd long been aware the agency simply didn't intend to lose the one man who'd survived his time with a Minder. They still asked him questions about Kir, though the long sessions with the psych had finally ended.

Josh rubbed his temples. The headaches were apparently a consequence of his time as a Zombie. A fact he should have believed and didn't quite, because his headaches were weather related and had been since he was a teen. Today was overcast and the barometer ran against him.

This reasoning, he'd been told, was denial. Or the power of suggestion. The Minder's power was large and all-encompassing and if Josh sometimes remembered Kiran Brunner as vulnerable, he no longer shared that opinion with anyone in the agency. They gave him pitying looks when he suggested Kir wasn't pure malevolence.

Josh sighed. It had been two years since he'd been abducted by Kir. If he'd ever been grateful to escape with his mind intact, that gratitude had

been chipped away by the agency that had taken control of his life by imprisoning him in this compound.

Oh, they gave him a “home”—his little box of a house furnished by someone else—and he’d become quite good at keeping the compound’s computer hardware up and running. But the lack of choice sometimes grabbed him by the throat and shook him with frustration.

Plotting his escape kept him sane and gave him a future. He wasn’t in a rush. He had to do it right or he’d end up back here, under stricter surveillance. Taking on a new identity was a tricky business.

He would miss his half-brother, though they rarely chatted. The agency didn’t want a hotshot young lawyer nosing into agency affairs. Josh’s mother was dead. His father was not interested in the son from his first family. His friends didn’t know where he was.

The agency thought he blamed Kir, the Minder who’d made Josh his tool. Under Kir’s influence, Josh had sliced open a man’s throat and run from the law. He’d also fucked Kir. That it didn’t feel like sexual abuse, then or later, just made it all the more twisted. Or so the psych had said.

Josh pulled out some aspirin and popped them in his mouth. Aspirin, the cure-all for psychic pain. Or pressure headaches.

Someone knocked at the door.

“Yep,” called Josh, expecting Horton who visited Josh twice a week. Duty—Horton had recruited Josh for the Kir job—made the visits dull. But Josh didn’t entirely discourage them. He was isolated and needed some kind of socialization.

He looked up and was startled by the appearance of someone new. *But not quite new.* The shock of recognition was a physical reaction that left him breathless as the man’s blue eyes pinned him to his chair. *Move before he speaks*, his brain screamed, and Josh wrenched away from that gaze, twisting as he reached for the emergency button.

The man said, "Don't touch that."

Josh hesitated and stared at the black circle that would summon help. His fingers were inches away from the smooth plastic. *No rash decisions.* If he made a fool of himself the agency would watch him even more carefully and he'd never escape.

"Why don't you look at me," the man suggested.

Josh obeyed, turning his chair to stare up into the large blue eyes of...*Brad*. One of three Minders Josh had met in his life. An acquaintance of Kir's.

"I'm no threat to anyone here," Brad assured him. "Relax."

Josh shook in the chair, his body straining, but to do what he wasn't sure. Brad was a large guy and strong, his expression friendly and patient. A memory flashed, of Brad caressing Kir's face and Kir enduring it. Josh shuddered as he tried to be calm. The agency didn't like hysterics.

"We've never met before today," Brad said.

Josh felt his eyes widen and he really looked at the man this time. The stranger reminded Josh of someone, but wasn't that often the case.

The man walked over. "I'm new here. Brad Carlisle."

Josh rose and gripped the proffered hand, trying not to be repulsed by someone who was pleasant-faced, well-dressed and polite. "Josh Mackay."

"I've heard a lot about you." Brad didn't release his hand.

"You have?"

"You're quite the survivor."

"Thank you." To his amazement, Josh blushed, and he didn't know where the emotion came from because he sure wasn't attracted to this guy. Even if his heart was racing.



Brad placed a large palm against the back of Josh's clasped hand. He stood there, rooted to the ground, unable to move, his one hand caught between Brad's two. Josh was embarrassed.

Brad couldn't help but notice. He smiled. "Settle down. I know what you're feeling."

As if hypnotized, Josh stared into those eyes. The blue was like crystal when Brad concentrated.

"Lust." Brad identified Josh's reaction. "It's taken you by surprise. You've never been this strongly attracted to anyone."

Josh's throat went dry, his head roared and he couldn't think straight.

Brad released him. No longer smiling, his gaze was intense. Josh couldn't stop staring. His chest hurt.

To Josh's relief, Brad stepped back. "Well, I'm sure I'll see you around."

Josh jammed his damp hands in his back pockets and nodded. "I hope so," he said fervently and blushed again.

"You're cute." With a disarming grin, Brad left the office.

Josh slowly shut the door. Air whooshed out of him as he bent over, hands on knees, breathing hard, as if he'd run ten miles on a full stomach. He was so nauseated he might vomit. Instead, he gulped air until the nausea subsided. Shakily, he sat back down in the chair and stared at the tiny camera in the corner of his office, the one that monitored him constantly. Right now he hated it. He'd felt an overwhelming attraction to a perfect stranger. The intensity was unprecedented. To his shame, his strong reaction was caught on video.

He would figure out how to get Brad alone, off-video. Brad had been interested. Now thirty, Josh hadn't been cute for years but he was willing to be anything for Brad.

*Brad.* The name echoed in Josh's head and all he could think of was Brad Carlisle.

A while later, Josh looked at the clock, appalled to find he had done nothing but stare into space for almost an hour. He scrubbed his face, panicky, because self-discipline and concentration were vital if he was to escape this compound.

*There's no rush.* Josh wanted to get to know this new guy. He'd fantasized about Brad for that lost hour, though now Josh couldn't quite pin down a specific thought. His mind had been a cloud of lust.

He hadn't crushed on anyone for a very long while and never so quickly. Well, captivity had done little for his sex drive and there just wasn't much opportunity to meet anyone.

Brad would change that. Josh was so excited by the idea, he felt ill. God, he had to get a grip on himself because he was shaky again.

*Okay, time to go home.* Go for that short walk down the road to his little house in the compound. There were other houses, but people didn't live here unless they were imprisoned like him.

And no one was like him.

Maybe Brad would visit. Josh looked forward to it.

\* \* \*

Josh didn't sleep well, perhaps because he forgot to eat, perhaps because his headache started again and this time hurt like hell. At three in the morning he lay down and closed his eyes—after he'd spent the last hour doing something he'd sworn he wouldn't do again.

He'd sent a message to Kir.

Short as always, though the why of it, now that the message was gone, was difficult to comprehend.

By morning, the agency would be delighted. After all, they hunted Kir, in life and on the internet. But Josh's communications with Kir had not given the agency what they wanted—Kir himself. Instead, beneath what the agency observed, he and Kir had set up a secret correspondence by embedding messages into pictures. It proved Josh had some autonomy and he needed that proof. The leash they kept him on was choking him. He dreamed of suffocation and closed places, and it didn't take a psych to guess why.

In the morning he woke to banging. Someone was at his door. Exhausted, he stumbled out of bed and pulled on his jeans.

"Yeah," he called from the living room. Not that they couldn't have entered without permission. But they maintained the illusion of politeness.

Horton walked in with his sidekick Daniel.

"Sorry to barge in." Horton burst with energy. "Kiran Brunner emailed you last night."

Kir always responded to his embedded messages. This visit had been inevitable.

"Another picture?" Josh tried to show only the slightest interest.

"A photo of himself."

Josh blinked, surprised. Kir usually sent scenery shots, nothing personal.

"That's a personal touch," explained Daniel, in case Josh didn't understand the difference between scenery and Kir.

"See. I told you to keep those photos going out." Horton clapped Josh on the back.

*You haven't a clue.* But Horton thought his advice to Josh about Kir was invaluable.

"I wonder what prompted him to respond to you last night?"

Josh shrugged, though he knew the answer. Kir only answered when Josh mailed under the agency's radar.

"You'll have to write him back," said Horton. "Try to engage him in a conversation."

"He hasn't written me a word in two years. That's not going to change now. He just likes pictures." In the beginning, Josh had felt guilty for not revealing Kir's words to Horton, when Josh had still thought Horton had Josh's interests in mind. That guilt was long gone. Horton had one goal—to capture Minders—and while he might regret that Josh's freedom had been sacrificed on that altar, he would never let Josh go.

"He hasn't sent you his own photo in two years, either," Daniel pointed out.

"Uh-huh." Josh scrubbed his face. "Do you think I can have breakfast first, while you guys analyze the picture inside and out?"

"May I?" asked Daniel. He pointed to Josh's computer.

"Be my guest." As if he had a choice.

While Josh scavenged for breakfast, Daniel searched Josh's private computer for any and all hints of things Kir. Josh could be grateful Daniel was not as clever as he thought he was. The program Josh had written last night to embed his message in the photo had long since erased itself and its tracks.

"So Josh." Horton's overly casual tone indicated he was going to say something he thought important. "You were up late last night."

"Couldn't sleep," said Josh. "Headache."

"Ah. Any better today?" Horton's real concern just made Josh feel more crazy.

"Probably. We'll see how the day progresses."

Josh made coffee for everyone and Daniel spent an hour at his computer, finding photos, but no messages to or from Kir. Josh wanted

to wait until he was alone, but they insisted he come see the picture while they looked on.

He walked over, bracing himself, and there was Kir with his dark eyes, sensitive mouth, wild hair. Still beautiful. A little older perhaps, but with the same sullen expression, as if he didn't like his picture being taken. The photo hurt. Josh had spent too many hours thinking about Kir, his beauty and his betrayal.

"It's a bit of a shock for you." Horton's sympathy set Josh's nerves on edge. "Seeing him again."

It should have been love, thought Josh sardonically, except Kir had been Josh's Minder and Josh his Zombie.

"What should I write back?" Josh shouldn't have mailed Kir last night.

"Psych will let you know shortly."

"Okay."

They stood now, ready to leave.

"I'll come to work after psych calls," said Josh. Psych. Three psychologists and Josh loathed them all.

"If you're not feeling well, you can call in sick," Horton suggested.

Josh snorted. "I'm fine. It's too dull to stay in this house all day."

Horton slapped Daniel on the shoulder. "Let's go. Thank you, Josh." Horton's sad eyes looked up at Josh and Josh gazed back until Horton turned away. *Don't give me your useless pity.*

After they left, he pulled up a chair to his computer to stare at Kir. Then Josh created his program and ran the photo through for Kir's message.

Who would have known that he and Kir had even more in common than their lovely Minder-Zombie bond? That they could both program obfuscated C?

Josh still couldn't fathom why he'd written Kir last night.

*I've met someone. I've never felt like this before.*

Kir's answer was short, almost useless.

*Who? Tell me more.*

Josh rid his computer of the message, his program and any traces of either.

Was it possible for Kir's psi powers to reach out from the computer and *poink* Josh on the head? He was pretty sure such capability was nonexistent. What he didn't understand was why he wanted to connect with Kir after six months of silence.

*Brad.* Josh shivered. Somehow he associated Kir with Brad, perhaps because the last man he'd had any feelings for—even if they weren't his own emotions—was Kir.

Psych phoned up. Josh obediently wrote and thanked Kir for his photo, adding that he looked sexy. Psych was stupid. Nothing would put off Kir more, whatever their fucking profile said.

But later that day, Kir sent another photo, this one of an island.

*Never mind me. Is he sexy? Describe him. What's his name?*

The questions sent Josh into a spiral of thoughtless lust and he got little done apart from another obligatory message from psych to Kir. Some tripe about loneliness. Josh wished he'd never written Kir. The fallout was too aggravating, as he'd known it would be. Next time he had insomnia, he'd be sensible. Last night, sense and thought had been decidedly absent. He needed more sleep. Or a friend.

He traipsed over to his office, hoping a change of scenery would help his state of mind.

Just before supper, Brad dropped by. The sight of the man shocked Josh. His heart clenched painfully. His face flushed bright red and he

stumbled to his feet. My God, this was worse than bad, it was humiliating. Gauche. Josh needed to get a grip. His smile was sickly.

Brad watched it all good-naturedly. They shook hands again, Brad invited him to come back to his place, and Josh shut down his computer, trying to ignore the noise in his head, hoping Brad didn't notice what an idiot he was.

"Long day?" asked Brad.

Josh figured he looked tired. "Not really. I didn't sleep well last night."

"No?" Brad's gaze sharpened and, as they exited the building, he added, "Well, I better go easy on you then."

Josh glanced across, unsure of Brad's meaning. He wished he knew what to say. At one point in his life he had been an accomplished flirt.

It began to drizzle and Josh pulled up his hood. In silence they walked to Brad's temporary new home. He was here for some kind of intensive training program. Something Brad couldn't talk about.

When they reached the house and Brad opened the front door, Josh stopped, reluctant to enter. Brad applied pressure to Josh's back and Josh's legs took him inside.

"Hey, it looks a lot like my place. What a surprise," Josh joked, trying to ease the tension shooting through his nerves, making his limbs feel like lead. "I think of the buildings here as replicates."

Brad didn't respond to the stupid observation. Instead, he threw his jacket at Josh. "Hang it up."

Josh stared for a moment and Brad watched him, as if looking for a reaction. But Josh didn't mind hanging up jackets. He found two hangers in the closet and used them. By then, Brad was sitting on the couch, picking up the remote.

"You look like a helpful fellow," Brad told him. "You'd like to get stuff for me."

“Sure.” Josh didn’t understand why his chest felt so tight.

“Could you throw a frozen pizza in the oven and bring me a beer?”

“Absolutely.” Josh found five pizza boxes in the freezer, all the same—Brad must like pepperoni pizza—and he unwrapped one and set it in the oven, put the timer on. He pulled a beer out of the fridge, opened it for Brad and took it to him.

“Hey,” said Brad. “You can have a beer yourself.”

“No, thanks. I don’t drink.”

“Yeah?” Then Brad lost interest and went back to watching football. Josh stood, unsure what to do, feeling foolish but not able to sit down. He ended up looking at his feet while Brad ignored him. His mind tripped around in a dizzying fashion until, eventually, the oven bell dinged. Josh served the pizza, brought Brad another beer, and they ate.

Josh found his appetite was poor, though he tried to swallow his slice of pizza.

Brad turned down the volume. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. Fine. Thanks.” Josh didn’t know what was wrong with him—why his hands shook and his body trembled.

Brad observed it all. “You enjoy spending time with me.”

Josh nodded. It was true. He’d been alone for too long. That was why he reached out to Kir at odd moments.

“But maybe that’s enough for tonight,” Brad continued. “Don’t want to move too quickly.”

Josh frowned.

“Adjusting to a new relationship and all,” Brad explained. “Come here and give me a goodbye kiss.”

Josh swallowed. Kissing made him nervous, but excited. That’s where the trembling came from. And Brad wasn’t rushing him. Brad waited on



the couch until Josh's legs took him over and he settled near Brad, not quite touching. Still, Brad didn't move, as if he knew Josh was skittish.

"Some tongue," Brad drawled and Josh stopped thinking. He leaned over and kissed Brad's open mouth, tasting beer and pizza. It was a clumsy kiss that became unpleasant when Brad took control, but Josh found he couldn't pull away. He just endured.

After a time, Brad broke the kiss and smiled, as if pleased with Josh. Twice, he playfully slapped Josh's face so his cheeks stung. Then Brad's hands encircled Josh's neck.

"You're shaking, Josh. Why?"

Josh couldn't think why. He licked his lips and wished Brad didn't understand how uncomfortable and nervous he was. "I don't know," he admitted, ashamed.

"It's new," suggested Brad. "You've been alone too long. You have to get used to the idea of us."

Josh nodded while Brad's thumbs pressed into Josh's throat, so it was hard to swallow. He had the uncomfortable thought that Brad could break his neck.

Under the powerful hands, Josh stayed still. Brad had an erection, making Josh uneasy. He didn't feel ready. In fact, he felt like a caged animal.

Disgruntled, Brad dropped his hands. "I'll let you go."

Josh scrambled off the couch, almost falling backwards.

"You'll come back tomorrow for supper."

"Sure." Josh was already reaching for his jacket.

"Josh?"

"Yes?"

“You don’t have to worry about cameras at my place. They don’t watch me. You’re happy to spend time here, where you’re not under constant surveillance.”

It was so true. Josh detested those cameras. “Okay. Yeah. That sounds great.” He winced. He sounded so banal. So *young*.

“Goodbye.” Brad turned the volume back up.

Josh let himself out into the cool evening and walked home, glad the cold rain ran down his hot face.

## Chapter Two

At midnight, Josh found himself standing in his living room. He'd come home and tried to watch some TV, but couldn't settle down. He'd taken a shower, brushed his teeth three times and then apparently blanked out. Because here he was, time had passed, and he didn't know where it had gone.

He pulled off his clothes and crawled into bed, hugging the bedding to himself, thinking, *something is wrong with me*.

Then he remembered Kir had asked if *he* was sexy. *Brad*. Josh's mind shied away from the chaos that was Brad. No matter how attracted, Josh might be wise to avoid someone who made him feel crazy.

He should stop writing Kir, too, in case that contact was messing with his head.

Morning came. Josh rose, exhausted again, but he went through the motions of the day and was grateful he remembered those motions. As the agency's permanent guest, Josh had his difficult days. Nevertheless, he needed to keep his crazy moments to a minimum or he'd never escape.

At five, he was getting ready to go home alone when Brad appeared in the threshold of his office door. Josh froze while Brad's crystal gaze cut through all his thoughts and intentions.

"How was your day?" asked Brad.

“Good. Uneventful.” Josh laughed, though he wasn’t quite sure why. He must seem awfully stupid to Brad. His face heated up as he remembered their kiss.

“Why don’t you come over to my place?”

“Sure.”

“You must get lonely.”

Josh just looked down.

“Come on.” Brad now sounded impatient. “Don’t drag your feet.”

Josh grabbed his jacket, anxious not to slow Brad down, and they walked briskly to Brad’s place. In no time they were at his door and, despite himself, Josh hesitated.

“What are you waiting for?” Brad demanded.

“I don’t know.”

Brad pulled him inside.

They ate more pizza. Brad drank beer and they barely talked, which was a relief because Josh was making such a fool of himself. He wanted to go home, but Brad might be offended at the suggestion, so Josh sat quietly on the chair while Brad sprawled on the couch. Josh rather liked being ignored. If only he could disappear, which was an odd thought.

At the end of the football game, Brad turned off the TV and looked at him. Josh stiffened. He wasn’t used to anyone’s attention and Brad had a strong presence.

Brad’s smile was slow and sly. “I think you’re ready. Take off your shirt.”

Josh hesitated, searching for an excuse. He’d lost too much weight this past year, which he didn’t want Brad to see. “I’m cold,” he said lamely.

“It doesn’t matter.”

And it didn't, so Josh pulled off his T-shirt, balled it up and held it in his hands in front of him.

"Do I have to tell you everything? Put the shirt down."

"Sorry."

Brad looked at him appreciatively. "Nice chest. A bit skinny, but I like skinny."

"Thanks," Josh muttered, embarrassed.

"What do you like?"

Josh couldn't think what he liked.

"I know what you like. I'll remind you." Brad began to stroke his crotch. With the other hand he unbuckled his belt. Josh had expected something to develop tonight and yet a vise took hold of his chest, making it hard to breathe.

"You like cock. And you want me," said Brad, his gaze a directive.

It was true, yet Josh found it hard to move. He just stared, overwhelmed.

"I've waited long enough. Get on your knees and crawl over here," ordered Brad.

Josh slid off the chair and onto his knees, then made his way to Brad. When Josh was close, thick legs clamped onto his sides, squeezing his ribs. The seams of Brad's jeans rubbed against Josh's skin unpleasantly. He shuddered while Brad watched, smiling. Josh raised his arms, unable to rest them on Brad's legs. How awkward. Josh didn't know what to do. Brad solved the problem by gripping Josh's arms and yanking him close. Josh stared down at Brad's erection—the man wasn't small which Josh should have found sexy.

Yet Josh felt too shy to unzip Brad. He grimaced, avoiding Brad's gaze. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm shaking."

“You’re stubborn,” said Brad languidly, which didn’t make sense. Brad sat up straight and pulled down his jeans. His cock popped out. “You’ll do exactly what I want here and you’ll do a great job of it, too. Because you’re my new boyfriend.” Brad slid a hand around the back of Josh’s neck, caressing while Josh gulped breaths. “Suck me.” Slowly but firmly, Brad forced Josh’s head down.

Josh closed his eyes and didn’t think after that. He didn’t know where his mind went during or afterwards, but Brad’s words rained down, pushing Josh this way and that.

It wasn’t until he was walking home in the drizzle that he came back to himself, confused, upset and very much alone. He hadn’t thought he’d feel lonely tonight. After all, he had a new boyfriend. But his chest ached with emotion. Maybe he expected too much with this sudden infatuation, as if a relationship could make him complete when his life was empty.

He wished he didn’t feel like crying.

When he got home he was sick to his stomach. He recovered, brushed his teeth and showered. He hoped he wasn’t coming down with the flu, though he didn’t know how he could have caught it. Everyone around him was healthy.

Looking for distraction, he sat at the computer. Two hours later, he was still there. How could so much time pass when he wasn’t even thinking? These lapses in memory frightened him. He jumped when the computer beeped to indicate a message had arrived.

One of Kir’s fucking pictures. Horton and Daniel would visit Josh tomorrow. *Fucking Kir*, Josh raged. He didn’t want another fucking Horton visit. He needed people to *leave him alone*.

With shaking hands, Josh found Kir’s message, if only to get rid of it, get it off his computer. Then he stared at the actual words, trying to make sense of them.

*If I can help you, I will. I mean that. I want you to describe your new boyfriend: name, physical appearance, age, scars. This is very important.*

Josh remembered, with something of a jolt, that he'd sent Kir a message tonight. Right after Josh had sworn he would not mail Kir again. What was wrong with his head? He hoped like hell the message had been properly embedded, hidden from the agency. He no longer trusted himself to be sensible.

Why would he ask Kir, of all people, for help? Psych would have a field day with that request.

Josh plunged his hands into his hair, trying to remember what he'd written, because his computer sure didn't. He gulped air, as if his brain wasn't getting enough oxygen.

Slowly, he programmed his last message to Kir. Because this correspondence had to stop even if Kir had offered help. Josh couldn't remember the last time someone had said they would help him. Certainly more than two years ago.

He dashed the back of his hand against his eyes, furious he was getting maudlin. It was Brad he should confide in, Brad whose house had no cameras, not Kir and his secret, meaningless messages. Still, he wrote Kir back: *Brad Carlisle. 6'5". Blond and graying. Crystal blue eyes that cut.*

He sent it off. Kir in all his freedom could laugh, pleased the man who had tried to entrap him was now himself a captive.

Funny thing was, Josh breathed easier now. He was pathetic. A useless offer of help eased his pain. He crawled into bed and slept dreamless, as if deprived.

\* \* \*

The next day Josh called in sick and stayed in bed. His rest was disturbed. Horton was excited by the plethora of messages from Kir. Three in two days. He and Daniel couldn't have been more delighted. They were in and out all morning, mildly concerned about Josh's exhaustion. By midafternoon, they left him alone and Josh spent the rest of the day fearing Brad would drop by.

The fear embarrassed Josh. Brad was his boyfriend for God's sakes. Maybe tomorrow Josh would feel differently. He hoped the weariness would pass. He slept all evening and night, and woke once to a nightmare he couldn't remember but left him weak and shaken.

By morning he was wrung out. Perhaps he should ask for a physical, but he didn't trust the agency doctors. What he needed was a normal, quiet day. No messages to or from Kir, and if he wasn't up to seeing Brad tonight, Josh would say so.

Nevertheless at four-thirty in the afternoon, Josh gathered up his stuff and ducked out of the office early. He didn't want to explain his reluctance to his boyfriend. Brad might be hurt. Or talk Josh into socializing when he absolutely wanted to be alone. If he knew nothing else, Josh knew he was safer alone at home.

He was making himself food when someone knocked. His first instinct was to run and hide. What a fucking joke. There was no place to hide. Cameras watched everything. He had to get a grip or he'd turn into a nutcase. If it was Brad, he'd explain he didn't want company.

So he marched to the front door and opened it. Brad stood on his step and Josh's heart began to pound. He'd forgotten how Brad mesmerized him.

"Hey, Josh. I came by your office and you were already gone." Brad sounded disappointed in him.



“Sorry.” Josh cast around for an explanation. “I came home early. I’m still tired from yesterday.”

“I heard you were sick. You’re better now, right?”

Josh nodded.

“Come on over to my place and we’ll watch TV.”

Josh found he couldn’t move. He wanted to go with Brad. Yet he had made a sandwich he should eat.

“You like my place,” Brad pointed out.

“True.” Josh wrung his hands, unsure what to do. “It’s just, I made supper already,” he blurted.

Brad laughed. “Is that all?”

Josh felt the fool.

“What’s wrong?” asked Brad, ever patient. “You don’t seem quite yourself.”

Josh couldn’t think what was wrong. He’d promised himself a quiet evening at home, but couldn’t he change his mind? He needed company.

Brad placed a hand on Josh’s shoulder. “Come with me.”

It was silly to fuss about a sandwich, so Josh slipped on his jacket and shoes. They walked across the compound. Brad chatted about the end of yesterday’s football game. Josh nodded when Brad wanted him to. Then Brad took his hand and led him into his house.

Brad seemed different tonight. Decisive, powerful, a little overwhelming. He gripped Josh’s hand so hard it hurt. Josh couldn’t think of anything else but the pain, until Brad pointed to a bottle sitting on the coffee table.

“I bought vodka for you, Josh.” Brad eased the pressure on Josh’s hand, but didn’t let go.

“Thank you.” Josh was shamed by his breathlessness and his aching hand. “I’m afraid I don’t drink.”

Brad faced him. "Sometimes you do."

Josh nodded. It was true, though he couldn't remember the last time he'd had alcohol. Brad released Josh's hand. Josh let his arm fall to his side, watching as Brad's palm slowly approached and made contact. Brad stroked Josh's cheek while he tried not to jerk away and didn't quite succeed.

Brad caught Josh's face to hold him still. One thumb slid back and forth across Josh's lips. "Don't say you don't drink," Brad remonstrated. "You may not like beer, but you enjoy vodka when you're with me."

Josh closed his eyes in agreement while Brad trailed a hand down his side to rest on Josh's hip. He felt dizzy.

"We're going to have fun tonight after the vodka. Because God knows you need to relax. You're wound too tight, Josh."

"Sorry," said Josh and winced as his ass was grabbed roughly. He tried not to vibrate under Brad's touch, but it was difficult not to react.

Brad bent towards him, hot air on his face, and Josh knew what was coming. He readied himself for Brad's mouth and he was taken, to be drowned by Brad's strange embrace. Time passed without thinking, a lightheadedness so complete Josh wasn't quite aware of himself until Brad tamped down the kiss.

At the end, he caught Josh's lower lip between his teeth and bit hard. Tears came to Josh's eyes. His lip swelled with blood and Brad grinned, running the pad of his thumb roughly across Josh's bleeding flesh.

"I'll pour you a glass of vodka while you get our food and my beer." Brad stepped back.

"Okay." Josh stood there, stunned and stupid, licking his lip and tasting his blood.

Brad turned Josh to face the kitchen and patted his ass. Numbly, Josh walked over to put pizza in the oven. He returned to give Brad his bottle of beer.

“Sit down at my feet and start drinking,” commanded Brad. “You need it.”

He needed something. Josh thought he might burst with horror. How could Brad feel desire when Josh felt like this? Hoping the vodka would change what was wrong in him, he gulped a large mouthful. His eyes and throat burned with self-loathing.

Brad laughed. “That’s the way. Keep going. Not too quickly, mind, or you’ll be sick.”

So Josh sipped and Brad watched him, drinking his own beer. Josh rather wished Brad would watch TV instead.

“I like it when you take off your shirt,” said Brad.

“Okay.” Josh set his glass on the floor and pulled his T-shirt over his head. Brad smiled while Josh shivered. Then the pizza was ready and Josh scrambled to his feet to serve Brad, but not himself. He wasn’t hungry and he needed to drink vodka to keep warm. If he focused, then all he thought about was the vodka and the heat flowing through his limbs. Before he knew it, the beer mug of vodka was half empty.

“You’re enjoying your drink,” Brad observed and Josh had to agree. He couldn’t remember why he didn’t drink more often. “So take off the rest of your clothes.”

Josh stood. He fumbled but managed to undress and fold his clothes in a pile.

“A tidy bugger, are you?” Brad grinned, delighted. He spun a finger in the air. “Turn around, I want to see all of you.” Josh obliged. “A bit of a skinny ass, but that’s okay.”

Not sure what to do next, Josh waited, trembling.

“Finish your drink standing up.”

The heat of vodka and something else flushed Josh’s skin red. The room began to spin while he concentrated on his drink. He was getting drunk, but he didn’t want to spill any on himself or on Brad’s floor. So he gulped the last mouthfuls and clung to the empty glass. Brad walked over, relieved him of his mug and set it on the table. Then Brad twisted Josh’s left nipple until it hurt. “You like pain, remember?”

Josh nodded and felt like he’d spent his entire dizzy life nodding his head like a puppet whose string was pulled and pulled and pulled. At least the pain let him feel something.

Brad took Josh’s hand and together they walked to the bedroom. As Brad undressed Josh stared, unsure what to do. Funny, he used to take the lead. Brad pushed and Josh fell sprawled on the bed.

“Get on your hands and knees,” said Brad and Josh didn’t remember anything after that.

Hours later, Josh became aware of himself under the shower. Brad’s shower. Brad didn’t want Josh to go home tonight, wanted him to stay for the weekend. How Josh knew, he didn’t remember. Then again, his memory was turning to shit. With painful dignity, he washed and dried himself while Brad slept. He was trembling from cold so it took him a while to put on his clothes.

He stared longingly at the door, but he couldn’t leave his new boyfriend. Brad wanted him in bed so Josh walked back down the hall and into the room. Terrified he would wake Brad, he approached the bed with great trepidation. He set himself down gently, grateful the bed didn’t sway, and clung to its edge. In this state, he couldn’t sleep, but he could go away from himself, to a place where he didn’t think.

Two hours later, Josh returned. He didn't know where his mind had been and its absence unnerved him. As did the noises he heard, the noises that had brought him back.

At first, he thought he was hallucinating. Gradually he became convinced people had entered Brad's house. Josh didn't wake Brad. Instead, he watched as three shadows stole into the dim bedroom and surrounded the bed.

*Kill us both.* The thought had Josh gasping in surprise.

"Don't make a noise." The female voice made Josh choke on his fear while he backed up against the headboard.

At the same time, to Josh's horror, Brad bolted up to sitting. "What the fuck?"

"What the fuck indeed," she said. "Brad, love, what *are* you doing in this compound with Kir's Zombie in your bed?"

Zombie. *Minders.* Josh began to vibrate with fear. He couldn't survive another Minder.

"That was two years ago," Brad protested.

"We have a no-poaching rule and you know it. Being spurned in love is no excuse, I'm afraid."

Brad licked his lips. "I was here. He was here. Kir wasn't. That's all." He spread his arms. "*That's all.*"

"You lie," she sneered. "You thrive on payback. You want to hurt Kir by taking this guy and making him yours."

Josh didn't quite understand. He scanned the dark shadows but he couldn't figure out what was going on. Brad was his boyfriend. They were surrounded by Minders.

"We know what you do to your Zombies, Brad."

"I've been very patient," Brad insisted. "I've taken it slow. He's not in bad shape. Kir can have him back."

*Back.* In his terror, Josh couldn't stay still or keep quiet. He hummed, inside and out, the sound going high. Someone crouched beside Josh. A hand reached out to take Josh's shaking arm and he flinched. His teeth chattered. A scream built in his chest.

"Not in bad shape." Her voice dripped sarcasm. "He's about to wail, Brad. Shut him up, Kir."

The human form didn't speak. It simply clasped Josh's arm and the touch galvanized Josh. He fought for his life. A third party landed on him. A hand covered Josh's mouth as noise tore at his throat. They pressed down on his face and chest while a needle slid into his arm and still he fought.

But soon he weakened. His arms became heavy to lift.

"Let him go," said Kir, his voice flat. Whoever held Josh climbed off the bed.

"Kir?" Josh no longer cared that he sounded the fool, sounded betrayed. They had him helpless, fearful, drugged. Josh hoped to die.

"Hush." Kir stroked the inside of Josh's elbow, massaging the needle's entry point. "Hush, Josh. It's over now."

Josh passed out.

## Chapter Three

Kir gazed down at Josh who slept the pale sleep of the sedated. He was thinner than Kir remembered, had lost weight over the last two years. The word haunted came to mind, and Kir's chest ached.

Maddie was less emotional. She cast Josh a look of disapproval, as if the man himself was responsible for becoming Brad's Zombie. It was Kir's fault. He hadn't been able to hide his true feelings for Josh from Brad, so Brad had come hunting for Josh. Payback, as Maddie had said last night.

"Why must you always choose dangerous lovers, Kir? First Brad who wouldn't let you go."

Kir turned abruptly away. He didn't discuss his sex life with Maddie.

"And now this Josh is liable to kill you."

"Not if Brad left him catatonic," said Kir grimly.

Maddie shook her head. "Josh reacted last night. He was watching. He even fought you." She paused for dramatic effect. "He'll fight you again."

"I can protect myself."

"Can," Maddie agreed. "But you so rarely do. For God's sake, put on some kind of control before he's strong enough to move."

"I push him now, Maddie, and he might break. He was hard to control two years ago. I had to tell him to help me escape *three times*."

“Brad didn’t have a problem getting him into bed.”

Kir’s mouth curled in disgust. “Brad is a bludgeon. I wish your pod would kill him.”

Maddie’s gaze slid away. “I don’t like him either, Kir. He didn’t treat you well. But we don’t kill one another anymore. There are too few of us.”

“You should make an exception,” Kir urged. “Brad places the rest of us in danger.”

“You think the agency wouldn’t hunt us if Brad didn’t exist? Think again. They track down all kinds of genetic freaks, not just us.”

He didn’t know what she was talking about. “Who else is there?”

She shrugged. “Rumor has it there are werewolves.”

Kir didn’t believe it, but he just sighed. Talking to Maddie was one, long argument.

Josh stirred.

“What I should do is leave. One psi is enough to freak him out. Imagine two.” She paused. “You can tell him not to hurt you—a small safety cushion so he doesn’t stab you in the back. That’s all. Self-protection is not malicious or self-serving.”

Kir loved his sister, but she didn’t care about anyone except her fellow psis. “He’s too close to breaking. Can’t you understand?”

She held up her hands in surrender. “Okay, I give. Just watch yourself.”

They walked to the front door of the cabin. It had been her father’s, now bequeathed to Maddie. Only she and Kir knew its location. Out in the country, down gravel roads, Kir figured he and Josh would be safe here for quite some time.

“Thanks for your help, Maddie.”

She looked at him askance. “I had little choice. I can’t stand when you get hysterical.”



Kir gave her a wan smile. He'd been frantic after Josh mailed him Brad's name.

She hugged him tightly, then searched his face, her brown eyes a mirror to his own, though the rest of her was so different. They each resembled their fathers.

"I hope you find what you're looking for in trying to mend this guy, Kir. Be prepared for a less than rewarding experience. Zombies are easy to break and hard to fix. Good intentions guarantee nothing at all."

"I owe him this much. He saved me from Snow."

Maddie appeared ready to debate the point, but just said, "Ciao, baby." She punched Kir on the shoulder and let herself out into the early morning light. Mist rose off the small, nearby lake.

She had a long drive back to the pod. *The pod*. It was supposed to be a joke. As if all psis were the same when, in fact, they were all different in their own dysfunctional way.

Like psychotic Brad who liked forcing sex on normals until it killed them. Kir wished he had gotten to Josh sooner. They had moved quickly, in less than forty-eight hours, but Brad had done significant damage, what with a fully dressed Josh clinging to the edge of the bed, awake and rigid with fear, his eyes open and unseeing.

Some day Kir would kill Brad. It had to be done. He didn't care if the pod disagreed. It would be tricky, of course, but although Brad was stronger than Kir, Kir was a little more clever.

He heard Josh weeping. A desolate, aching noise. Brad would have used Josh's goodness against him, till there was nothing left of his original desires. Kir entered the bedroom to find Josh on his back, his shoulders shuddering in his sleep. No tears escaped.

"Josh," he whispered. Tentatively, he placed a hand on the moving shoulder and Josh flinched. Touch was going to be a problem and while

it had always been an issue for Kir, it hurt to think Josh now carried that burden. Josh who had been so laid-back and comfortable with sex and skin and lovemaking.

"It's okay. You're safe," Kir murmured and Josh winced in his sleep. After Brad, words were too much like weapons and Kir hadn't a clue how to comfort Josh. He stared. Josh's freckles stood out in sharp contrast to his pale face. Worse was the tension riding Josh's body. It made Kir fear for him, though he refused to believe Josh was broken.

One of his few good childhood memories returned to him, his mother singing a lullaby. The words he didn't remember and words hurt Josh anyway. Kir hummed, no doubt off-key, and the noise didn't disturb Josh. After a while Josh seemed to calm, the weeping subsided and he slept, if not peacefully, at least quietly.

Kir went to prepare food. On their drive here, he'd bought plenty of supplies, leaving Maddie in the car to watch over a drugged Josh laid out on the back seat.

Today, if Josh woke, he would need light fare. Kir prepared vegetable soup. He'd bought crackers too, in case Josh was nauseated, and lots to drink because Zombies didn't remember to take care of themselves. While he cut up carrots, Kir caught himself fantasizing about setting up house with Josh and he had to knock the stupid fantasy away. Josh wasn't exactly here on his own cognizance and, the truth was, this sojourn was not likely to end well.

Kir knew that. He also knew he'd been right to remove Josh from Brad's clutches, even if it had meant putting Josh out.

It took a couple of hours for the drug to wear off and for Josh to wake. When Kir heard the bed creak, he checked the bedroom and found Josh facing the wall. His breathing had changed. Josh was pretending to sleep.

Though Kir wanted to speak, he decided it was wiser to wait until Josh was ready to admit he was awake. Quietly, Kir turned away. As he left the room, he heard movement.

He turned, ducking just as Josh threw, with surprising force, a rock. The weapon—a former doorstop had presumably migrated from the vicinity of the door to the bed—whipped past Kir’s head, banged against the doorframe and dropped to the floor with a thud. Kir lifted his gaze from the rock to Josh who sat up, eyes blazing with hatred.

“Josh,” said Kir and Josh flinched.

Kir closed his mouth. He needed to choose words with care, and he wasn’t even sure what to say. He’d never been in this situation.

“I made you soup.” Kir spoke rapidly. It sounded like an offering. Well, it was, though Josh shivered at his four words.

“*Soup?*” Josh repeated, incredulous, obviously expecting something dire from Kir.

“Let me bring you some.”

Josh stared, baffled by Kir’s intentions. Kir reached down and picked up the rock to take with him. Best keep it away from Josh for the time being.

As Kir ladled soup into a bowl, he heard Josh fall. When Kir returned to the room, Josh was on the floor struggling to rise. If only Kir could force Josh’s panic away. But he wouldn’t.

Kir spoke as calmly as possible. “You’re too weak to attack me now, or to escape. Just take it slow. It’s safe here.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Josh snarled up at him. “The sound of your voice makes me sick.”

*Okay.* Kir wanted to help Josh back into bed, but it seemed best to leave the soup bowl on the dresser and retreat. Josh needed to pull himself together and Kir’s presence wasn’t helping.

Kir waited in the living room, though he wasn't sure what he waited for. Ten minutes later a pale, shaky Josh emerged, spotted the bathroom, used it, and returned to his bedroom, slamming the door behind him. All without looking at Kir.

\* \* \*

Josh didn't know when his life had slid into nightmare. At one point, he'd thought Kir had killed him and left him in some kind of limbo. But each time Josh woke, he became less surprised and more appalled to be alive. *To be kept.* By Kir for whom he'd harbored stupid feelings. He couldn't face it after Brad.

Josh woke weeping, with a terrible sense of loss. He was helpless to stop the tears. Brad had hollowed him out, then given him back to Kir. Or Kir had taken him. Josh couldn't tell. His will had been stolen and he didn't know how to think, let alone go forward. He searched for strength and found anger.

Night came and he welcomed the dark. He didn't want to be seen. If he couldn't be invisible, darkness was the next best thing. He welcomed the cabin's silence, too. While Kir slept, he couldn't tell Josh what to think, what to be.

He needed Kir to sleep forever. The only way to ensure such a state was to kill Kir, to kill his Minder before he took control. Took, as Brad had taken.

*Focus*, Josh told his brain. A brain that crapped out whenever he thought of Brad.

Josh required a weapon with which he could strike quickly and irrevocably. A knife or a piece of glass would slice through Kir's throat

before the boy—the *monster* Josh had once hunted—could speak and bend Josh to his will.

Kir fed Josh to keep up his strength and he didn't want to think why, didn't want to think Kir had plans, like Brad's plans.

The kitchen would have a knife. Kir had sliced vegetables. The soup hadn't come out of a can.

Josh slid off the bed without letting it creak. He walked quietly. There were no city lights to guide him. The moon wasn't shining. In the dark he moved, taking care not to bump into anything. The crucial thing was not to rush.

Despite his painstaking efforts, a board creaked under his weight. He froze. From elsewhere, a bed's spring creaked in reply and, to Josh's horror, he heard Kir rise. Quick-footed and sure, Kir strode towards Josh. Kir was everything Josh wasn't—powerful, healthy, autonomous.

Kir flipped the switch and blinded Josh with light. He was caught in the kitchen and couldn't move. He could barely breathe.

"Hey." Kir's greeting disconcerted Josh. He squinted, confused by Kir's friendliness. Josh was bracing himself for an assault—he would fight, no matter the odds. But Kir didn't speak. He merely walked to the fridge to pull out juice and bread.

As if he thought Josh needed a snack. As if he knew Josh was terrified of Kir's words. Josh wanted to think these contradictions through, but he didn't have the luxury of time or clear-thinking—his trembling body betrayed him in a way he despised.

While Josh looked on, Kir put a sandwich together, all but ignoring Josh and his turmoil. Josh couldn't take his eyes off the knife Kir used to slice the bread. It was sharp, serrated, and Josh could use it against Kir's dusky throat. It wouldn't be the first time Josh had killed in such a way. He'd sliced open Snow's throat when Kir had ordered him to.

After Snow had attempted to rape Kir. *No, don't think of that. Don't think of anything but the knife.*

Kir offered Josh the sandwich. Did Minders feed their sacrifices? The boy's innocent goodwill freaked Josh out, so he didn't look directly at Kir as he passed the plate over. Josh watched the boy's steady hand place food down.

What Josh needed was the knife. He edged around the counter, leaned on it, then forced himself to look up.

Kir smiled briefly in encouragement and, oblivious, turned to wash his hands. *Now!* Josh's brain screamed. He threw his body forward, grabbed the knife and lunged at Kir's throat, his movements clumsy, but accurate.

The surprise on Kir's face was momentary. He shifted, arm snapping up to block Josh's thrust. Thrown off-balance, Josh stumbled back, keeping a death grip on the knife. Adrenaline shook him so hard, his teeth chattered. A second attempt now would fail even more spectacularly.

*Stupid.* He hadn't even cut Kir's arm. Josh was weak, confused. Panicked. He should have planned an attack, not taken the first poor opportunity. But there was no time and now it was over. Kir would speak and Josh would worship him as a god to love and protect. Terror seized him, coating his eyes with tears.

The boy remained silent, his dark gaze on Josh. At the very least, Kir should compel Josh to drop the knife. Instead, the knife remained in his hand while Josh vibrated with fear. It was an illusion, he told himself, that he had the power to hurt Kir.

And still Kir stood there, eyes black and fathomless, watching Josh like one would watch a wild, unpredictable animal.

Why didn't he speak? Disarm him? Josh's head ached and, transfixed by his confusion, he couldn't move.

Very slowly, so as not to startle, Kir approached him. Kir spoke no words, yet Josh was rooted to the spot and vulnerable. *Damaged*. He was damaged and Kir knew it. Kir gently extracted the knife from Josh's hand without touching him, for which Josh was pathetically grateful. After Kir backed away, Josh leaned down on the counter, dizzy, pulling in breaths.

"Why don't you sit and eat?" Kir said, as if Josh hadn't just tried to kill him.

Josh searched the words for compulsion. A useless exercise. A Zombie never recognized compulsion. He justified every thought forced upon him. For God's sakes, Josh had thought Brad was his boyfriend. Josh rested his head on the back of his hands, trying not to gag, appalled at his helplessness, waiting for Kir to say more. He couldn't understand why Kir wasn't talking all the time. He couldn't make sense of the quiet.

His brain was ruined, so Josh gave up thinking. He dragged a stool to the counter and, with trembling hands, fed himself. He made a mess of his sandwich, but he ate most of it. Kir politely looked elsewhere.

When he was done, they regarded each other. Kir appeared worried.

"I don't want your fucking concern." Unable to control his voice, Josh sounded histrionic. "I want to kill you."

"Um, yeah. I noticed."

"I really do." Josh whispered so his voice didn't quaver. He expected Kir to laugh. Fool, *fool*. *Don't engage in conversation. You'll lose*.

"You're exhausted," said Kir in his strange matter-of-fact way, as if Josh was recovering from a bad case of the flu. "You're better off if I cook for a few days before you kill me."

Josh laughed, though the laughter went wild. So little control and his shoulders shook. He wanted to weep again.

"I'm kinda hoping you'll change your mind by then," Kir added.

"*You* can change my mind any time you choose."

Kir crossed his arms and leaned back against the sink. "Listen to me. I am not going to manipulate you."

Josh's face arranged itself into a sneer. Otherwise he might fall apart. "I'll never know, will I?"

"You will know." Kir's quiet conviction scared Josh. "Your body will feel different. You won't get better if I'm working on you. So, I won't."

*Bullshit*, Josh wanted to scream, but he needed what remained of his dignity. Otherwise, he wouldn't keep himself together at all. He'd lie in bits and pieces all over the floor.

"I can't talk any more." Josh stumbled off to the bedroom.

\* \* \*

Though he didn't let down his guard over the next week, Kir was relieved Josh made no further attempts on his life. Maddie called a couple of times to check on Kir. He didn't share the rock and knife incidents. She wouldn't understand.

"He hasn't tried to hurt you?" she asked.

"Well, he's angry sometimes, and a little unpredictable," Kir prevaricated. "Mostly, he's worn out. He doesn't have much energy. I don't like to think about how much force Brad used."

She sighed. "Brad has admitted he got impatient. He meant to take his time."

Kir's gut twisted. "Fuck him."



“Well, we’ve given him an ultimatum, Kir. He’ll be kicked out if he abuses another normal.”

“Really? The pod actually admitted Brad is amoral?”

Maddie didn’t like discussions about morals. “We think his actions were unacceptable.”

“Unacceptable, huh? I guess that’s a start. Brad mustn’t like being given an ultimatum.”

“Oh, he doesn’t.” They moved on to other topics, while Kir paced outside the cabin. He had no intention of letting Josh overhear this conversation.

After the midnight sandwich incident, Josh wore a beaten-down expression. As if he had given up. Sometimes Kir had to urge him to eat and beyond that, Kir wasn’t sure how to help.

Perhaps Josh believed he was Kir’s Zombie. Josh cringed every time Kir spoke. He avoided Kir and spent most of his time in his bedroom.

And Josh slept a lot. Brad once told Kir he liked to push his Zombies as far away from their natural choices as possible. He also liked them fragile, eager and shaking.

*Oh, Josh.* All Kir could think to do was make Josh food and speak only when necessary. He hoped Josh’s spirit could recover a little, even heal. After all, they had only been here a week. Recovery took time.

One morning, Josh changed his routine. Instead of retreating to his bedroom with his coffee after breakfast, he sat in the living room, mug in hand.

Kir tried to hide his enthusiasm for this new development. Sudden movements still startled Josh so Kir walked slowly over to the couch and sat opposite Josh. A coffee table lay between them.

“You didn’t drink coffee two years ago.” Josh’s voice was even but strained. “I guess you still haven’t developed a taste for it.”

Kir shook his head. "It's not for me."

Josh nodded and Kir waited for him to say more. After a short pause, Josh said, "That was my attempt at small talk."

"Okay."

Josh settled back into the chair with his mug, though he looked far from comfortable. "I think you better tell me what's going on here. Not that I can make you do anything, of course. It's a request."

Thinking of what was best to say, Kir leaned forward and traced a fingertip through the thin layer of dust on the coffee table. "You want me to talk?" he asked, just to be clear.

"Not really. But the silence baffles me."

"If I wanted to control you by words, I could have by now. You know that."

Josh shrugged. "You can always change your mind."

"You're too fragile."

Josh's face heated up with shame. "Weak, eh?"

"Just the opposite. You're not easily manipulated, which is the problem. Brad had to work hard to get you where he wanted and it cost you."

Josh set down his cup and crossed his arms. He didn't speak for a while. When he did, his voice was tightly controlled. "Brad wasn't my first Minder. You were."

"I didn't make you this sick."

"Why not? You were desperate."

"I needed you to drive me to Atlanta."

"Ah." Josh wouldn't look at him now.

Kir chose his words with care. "I actually had a crush on you."

Josh snorted.

"You don't have to believe anything I say. But I brought you here because I owe you. You were good to me." *And I cared*, but Josh would resist that.

"Why would you think you owe me?"

"You saved me from Snow."

"So you wanted to save me from Brad. Kill Brad and we'll be even."

"I'd like to kill Brad," Kir said.

Josh turned sideways and used one arm to hide his face while he shuddered noiselessly. Kir looked down at the coffee table. He yearned to offer solace, but he could be no comfort to Josh now.

Within a few minutes, Josh regained control and spoke again. "What do you Minders do with your Zombies afterwards?"

"I don't have Zombies."

"You had me."

"No. *You* had *me*. And I didn't push that. You chose."

"I'll never know." Josh glared at Kir, trembling.

"I remember staring at you in the hotel room. You were sitting on the bed. I was in the chair, drinking wine, and you had just made it clear you didn't want me. At that point I toyed with the idea of pushing you, just a little. But I couldn't because..." Kir faltered.

"Please. Continue your lovely story."

"I just didn't."

"Why not? You wanted me to drive the next day more than you wanted sex?"

"I wanted you to want me." Kir met Josh's gaze and Josh quivered.

"I don't want you now," Josh declared, voice harsh.

"I know."

“The only reason I might believe this garbage is because I’ve reacted so differently. Three nights with you two years ago and I can walk away. Three nights with Brad and I’m an invalid.”

“You wanted to help me escape, though you had reservations. But if someone wants to do what a Minder tells them, it goes easier. It’s less of a strain. You wanted to kill Snow, too.”

“I did? How convenient.”

“He was an awful man, Josh.”

“I’m sure.” Josh’s hands gripped the armrests, knuckles white. “What else did I want to do?”

“I don’t know.” Kir didn’t know how to go forward with the conversation and Josh looked exhausted. Their silence was punctuated by the harsh cry of seagulls.

Josh’s next words were obviously painful to him. “Should I assume that what Brad asked of me, I did not want?”

“You already know the answer. But, yes.”

## Chapter Four

By the end of his second week at the cabin, Josh truly understood why those in thrall to a Minder were Zombies. He'd been sleepwalking, unable to think beyond his haze of confused panic, and only in the last couple of days did he feel relatively clear-headed. As if his mind was being returned to him.

Staying at this out-of-the-way cabin with Kir was not quite comfortable. And yet it could have felt much worse. Claustrophobic. Suffocating. Like a noose tightening, as Brad's hold had. Because Josh was living with a Minder.

It just didn't feel like it. Though maybe Kir had told Josh what to think. Brad had. Acid rose in Josh's throat as he remembered he'd thought Brad was hot.

*Don't.* Thoughts of Brad were debilitating. Thoughts of Kir were not.

Because Kir was here influencing him or because he didn't loathe Kir? Josh slumped and cradled his head in his hands.

This was the problem. He could not *know* if his thoughts were his own, or manufactured by Kir. All he could know was he felt better, more himself. Even if he spent most of his time alone in this bedroom he was beginning to think of as his.

He no longer wanted to kill Kir. The murder wasn't in Josh. Maybe Kir had taken it away after the pathetic knife attack, no matter that he swore up and down that he wouldn't push.

Josh raised his head and gazed out the window. Transparent glass. Blue sky. He had to look at things as clearly as possible. Physically, he was stronger. He could eat decent amounts of food and he wasn't sleeping all the time. He didn't constantly feel like he was going to crack up, only when his thoughts spiraled down into fear and shame.

He couldn't believe Kir was controlling him. Kir, who fed him and left him alone. The boy sometimes threw his dark, wary glances at Josh, as if searching. More disconcerting, each morning Kir's face seemed to brighten when he first caught sight of Josh. As if his very presence made Kir happy.

That couldn't be right. Josh was an unhappy, dysfunctional presence.

Josh's heart began to race. He feared Kir had planted an idea in his head. He could imagine Kir saying, *You can see I'm happy to be with you.* Though why so complicated? Kir could simply make Josh happy and be done with it.

*Stop!*

Josh turned and crawled into bed, overwhelmed by his brain's nonsense. He wanted a break. His mind agreed and he fell into a deep sleep.

Later that afternoon he woke with the absolute need to know whether or not he was in Kir's thrall. He had to somehow test Kir. It took Josh hours to make a plan.

The next day he wrote a long note and hid it under the bed. Last week, in an attempt to keep his head on straight, he had started writing notes to himself. Though it was entirely possible Kir knew, Josh couldn't

remember Kir entering this bedroom after the first day. Not since Kir had hummed some strange tune when Josh was in his drugged half-sleep. A gesture that still baffled Josh.

He put it out of his mind and went back to writing, describing his plans to his future self. Josh was going to punch Kir, hard enough to hurt. If Kir had set up roadblocks to control Josh, to protect himself against Josh, the punch would never happen.

It was hardly a foolproof test, but Josh could not accept everything at face value. He didn't doubt that Kir was gentle with him, but was he in Kir's power?

Josh scrubbed his face. Why the fuck had Kir brought him here? That's what Josh could not understand. He feared he was easy prey. Brad had found him so. Josh shook at the thought.

He took two days to work up his courage for the act. During that time, he tried to be with Kir a little more often—enough that Josh would be able to throw his punch.

The test morning, as Josh thought of it, Kir made pancakes—he'd even whipped the egg whites. Josh found it hard to eat. His stomach hurt.

"More?" Kir lifted a fresh one out of the pan.

Josh shook his head.

"You need to eat, you know."

"So do you," Josh replied.

"I'll eat more after my run. One's enough for now."

"I'll eat more then, too," said Josh.

"Okay." Kir looked pleased at that. To date, Josh avoided Kir between meals and had yet to join him for his second breakfast.

After Kir cleaned up the kitchen, Josh walked onto the deck with him, to Kir's surprise.

“Where do you run?” asked Josh.

“There’s a good path near the top of the road. I follow it for about five miles, then turn back.” Kir was obviously trying to stay matter-of-fact, but curiosity shone out of his eyes. Josh hadn’t done much small talk.

“Have fun.” Josh stepped back. He wasn’t ready to throw that punch yet. After the run. Kir accepted his dismissal and trotted down the stairs.

Josh was going to feel like shit if he managed to smash his fist into Kir’s face.

Time passed and Josh stared out at the lake, dreading Kir’s return and fearing the dread was of Kir’s making. At least Josh no longer blanked out as he had with Brad. But he couldn’t see his mental state as proof. Kir might be subtle. Josh sure as heck hadn’t picked up that Kir had manipulated him two years ago when they were on the run.

During the next hour, Josh worked himself into quite a state. By the time Kir returned, walking back towards Josh, he felt relieved it would soon be over, one way or the other.

Kir looked up and saw him. Waved. Kir was in great shape, Josh noted. He’d filled out in the last two years. In fact, he no longer seemed like a boy, although Josh still thought of him that way at times.

In a fight, Kir would beat him, despite Josh’s height advantage. Josh was weak and Kir was strong. Josh needed to find out just how great that discrepancy was.

Kir bounded up the steps and Josh’s stomach swooped. He rose from the deck chair and, before he lost heart, strode over. Kir was breathing fairly hard and he placed both hands on his hips. His face was probably hot to touch.

Josh stepped closer and Kir went still. As if he didn’t want to startle a skittish animal. Josh observed Kir’s expression, open and sincere, but Josh couldn’t let appearances stop him. *Act, don’t think.* He tensed his



arm, made a fist and threw his punch, all the while expecting some master move on the Minder's part. Instead, just as Josh's fist connected, Kir's eyes widened with surprise.

Down the boy went. Josh stared dumbly as Kir fell to the deck. Josh waited for Kir to jump to his feet and, now that he'd been assaulted, tell Josh what to think. But Kir rolled onto his side, moaning in pain. Josh stared, amazed at what he had done and what it meant. He shook his right hand. His knuckles stung. In his anxiety, he'd hit harder than planned.

It was an odd feeling. For the first time in two weeks, Kir did not have the choice to speak and was incapable of controlling Josh with words. Josh should have felt relieved. If he moved quickly, he could tie Kir up and muzzle him, and thereby be safe.

But he'd seen Kir tied up and abused, and the idea revolted Josh. So he found himself kneeling beside Kir. The boy's eyelids fluttered and Josh reached for the pulse in Kir's throat.

Josh hesitated at the thought of contact, skin against skin. There'd been so little of it these past two years until Brad, when there'd been too much. But right now Kir couldn't move. Only Josh could touch Kir who, despite everything, was beautiful and always had been.

It struck Josh that he'd thought Kir beautiful before they'd met. Not like Brad who had touched and touched and touched Josh. Violated was the word.

Josh had always preferred control, well before his life had turned to shit. His fingers found Kir's throat. The skin was warm and sweaty, the pulse strong, and Josh was glad. He wanted to trust Kir, if the boy wasn't too angry with him. Kir might be playing some deep, convoluted or insane game Josh couldn't comprehend. Or Kir wasn't making Josh his Zombie.

Tentatively, it felt like a great luxury, Josh swept damp curls off Kir's forehead. The boy hadn't ducked the punch. He'd stood there, as if he had to take it. Well, Kir was no stranger to abuse. He had been Snow's punching bag, and more.

Kir rolled onto his back and his eyes opened. They were unfocused, dazed.

"I'm sorry," said Josh and the dark, unreadable eyes met his.

Josh couldn't help it, he flinched, fearing Kir would exact some kind of revenge. But Kir just blinked, waiting with terrible patience, as if Josh might hit him again.

Josh reached over and took a cushion off one of the chairs. He slid a hand under Kir's head and gently lifted it to place the cushion underneath. Then, taking advantage of the situation, he patted Kir's shoulder. Once Kir recovered, Josh would back off. But the boy lay still beside him and Josh found the contact easy. A strange type of reassurance.

"Sorry?" Kir asked blearily.

Josh sat back on his haunches. "It was a test."

Kir stared in incomprehension and Josh remembered how naive the boy had seemed two years ago.

"I'll get you some ice," Josh offered apologetically and rose.

He returned from the kitchen and placed a compress against Kir's temple. Kir took it, then gingerly sat up, watching Josh the whole time, as if Josh might attack again.

"That hurt," admitted Kir.

Josh nodded. "I wanted to know if I could punch you."

"You can," said Kir with feeling. "My head is killing me."

"Is primed the word you use?"

"Yes."

"I thought you had primed me so I would find it impossible to hurt you."

Kir's dark gaze bored through Josh. "I didn't."

"I know that now. But I couldn't ask you beforehand. You must see that." Kir didn't react. "I didn't *want* to punch you."

Kir winced. "Well, that's great to know."

"Of course, maybe things will change." Josh licked his lips. "I'm hoping you won't decide you have to work your magic on me now."

"Please," begged Kir. "Don't decide you have to test me every day or something, to see if I've primed you. I'm not fond of pain. I've told you, for all the good it has done, you're too fragile for me to work on."

"I'm better now. Not," Josh added, "that I want you to mess with me."

Kir shook his head. "You're not healed. You sleep a lot. You're too nervous."

Josh shivered. "Once I'm better you can manipulate me."

"No. I won't. Ever again."

They stared at each other and Josh was tempted to reach out to Kir, except he didn't want Kir reaching out to him.

"You're not angry that I hit you?" asked Josh.

Kir eyed him. "I've been hit before." He struggled to stand, using the chair for support. "I need to go inside. After that blow, the sun hurts my eyes." He swayed and Josh steadied him by the elbow. Kir looked up with interest, but all he said was, "Are you coming in?"

Josh followed. Only later did he realize that he'd stopped analyzing Kir's words, stopped searching for underlying directions. Not that he ever could detect the thoughts a Minder slipped into his head. But he no longer believed Kir was *his* Minder.

"Sit down," Josh instructed Kir and got them cold drinks, and Kir some ibuprofen from the bathroom. "I'm sorry," Josh repeated and Kir

shrugged, eyes dark in his now-pale face. Guilt laced the relief that ran through Josh.

“Can I ask you a question?” Josh said.

“Sure.”

“How long are we here for?” Josh feared this sojourn with Kir ending; he feared it going on forever.

“There’s no time limit, though we need to get out before we’re snowed in.”

They had months. Josh gazed at Kir, striving to comprehend what the boy wanted of him, and Kir didn’t look away. In other circumstances, this eye-lock might have been a mating dance.

“Why am I here?” Josh burst out, in something like despair. “I don’t understand why I’m here.”

“I told you. I owe you. You rescued me.”

“Brad.” Josh almost gagged on the name. “He agreed to *give me back to you*.”

“He had no choice.”

“Because your claim had precedence.” Josh felt close to tears again. He couldn’t cope with talk of Brad and yet he was forcing it.

“I just like you, Josh,” Kir said wearily. “You were gentle and kind when no one had been kind for a very long time. I just...” He looked away, embarrassed. “When we made love, that meant something to me.”

Josh’s heart pounded and panic must have shown because Kir quickly added, “You must understand I don’t expect anything from you. The cabin is simply a place to heal. It’s a quiet place for me, too. I find it restful here.”

But Josh couldn’t leave it alone, despite the punch. “Two years ago, you forced me to run with you.”

Kir nodded.

“And the sex?” Josh knew he’d asked the question already, knew Kir would give the same answer. Yet he needed to hear the avowal again.

Kir met his gaze and his liquid brown eyes pooled with feeling. “I was tempted, back then. I hadn’t been attracted to someone who felt safe before. But the sex wasn’t forced. You chose it.”

\* \* \*

After the punch, something shifted in their relationship. Josh was more relaxed and, to his surprise, so was Kir. Josh had thought Kir would be jumpy and fear Josh turning violent. Instead Kir seemed pleased to spend more time with Josh, a reaction he found gratifying. He’d spent the last two years alone.

They went for short walks together to build up Josh’s strength. They played cards—there was an old cribbage board under the broken TV. And they worked on small repairs. The cabin wasn’t in the best shape.

“We need paint.” Josh surveyed an outside wall. Bits of dirty white paint flaked off at his touch.

Kir scratched his cheek, as if he hadn’t noticed the cabin’s state of disrepair. “Okay. I’ll get some when I’m next in town.”

He’d been twice to stock up on supplies. The first time Josh had seriously considered escape, but had been too weak to make the attempt. The second time, he couldn’t face leaving. He had nowhere to go. Now, he wanted to stay. Despite his initial terror, this cabin of Kir’s had become Josh’s safe place.

“We can scrape off the old paint first,” he told Kir.

“Yeah?”

Josh smiled. “Have you never painted?”

Slightly abashed, Kir shook his head.

“You’re a cook, but not a fixer-upper. Well, let’s see what tools we have.”

They stepped inside. Kir pulled the box off the shelf and opened it up. He stood there, fists on hips, surveying objects that were obviously odd and strange to him.

Kir glanced up, questions in his eyes. “Anything useful? Lots of rust, if nothing else.”

Josh didn’t look away and Kir blinked, uncertain.

They hadn’t touched since the punch three days ago, although Josh had brushed past a couple of times and Kir had moved out of the way, unaware Josh made contact on purpose.

He still didn’t want Kir to reach for him, but Josh couldn’t resist lifting his hand towards Kir whose eyes widened. As if conducting an experiment, Josh carefully placed his palm on Kir’s shoulder. The T-shirt was damp. Kir had jogged this morning.

Kir sucked in air but didn’t move.

“A wire brush will do the trick,” Josh informed him. “But we might want to buy a paint scraper.”

“Okay, so...” Kir watched as Josh lifted his left hand and placed it on Kir’s right shoulder. “Um, what are you doing?”

Josh slid his hands over Kir’s shoulders and rubbed his upper arms, all the while breathing in Kir’s distinctive scent. “You’ve been good to me, Kir. And I’ve given you little except a black eye. I wanted to say thank you.”

Kir swallowed as Josh’s hands came back to rest on his shoulders again. “You’re welcome, I mean—”

Josh ran thumbs over Kir’s collarbones. Kir vibrated under Josh’s palms and Josh remembered Kir’s past.

“Are you okay?” Josh didn’t want his actions to be unwelcome.

“Yes, I’m okay. I just—” Kir broke eye contact, looking down.

“This isn’t going anywhere.” Yet Josh slid one hand against Kir’s neck. “I’m not hurting you somehow, am I?”

“No,” said Kir, fervent.

Josh laid a palm against Kir’s cheek. “You’re so beautiful. I just want to touch you.”

Kir stood there while Josh stroked his face, tracing cheek and brow, even his eyes though so gently, before running his hands through Kir’s thick, gorgeous hair, caressing Kir’s scalp, his neck, the tendons that reached into his powerful shoulders. All the while Kir shivered and his arms hung at his sides.

Then it was too intense and Josh couldn’t move forward to take the next step. Nor could he stay where they were with Kir relaxing into his touch. Josh leaned down, kissed Kir’s forehead and stepped back.

Kir’s eyes were wide open and dark, but not demanding.

“Sorry,” said Josh.

“Don’t be sorry,” Kir whispered, his voice husky and appealing.

Abruptly, Josh crouched down to look through the tools. If he could have control, if Kir wouldn’t mind ceding that to him, Josh thought they might become more than roommates. The idea made him dizzy. This intimacy was not to be rushed.

He stood and casually touched Kir’s arm, as if they were buddies. Kir seemed overwhelmed.

“Here’s what we need.” Josh brandished the wire brush.

## Chapter Five

Josh told himself to wait at least a full day before touching Kir again. Josh feared ruining what was new and fragile between them. It wasn't exactly lust he felt, but a desire to touch, and affection. Feelings that had nothing to do with Brad.

Josh hadn't had much affection of late. At one point the agency had brought in some guy and that encounter had been lukewarm, given their sex had been a close cousin to prostitution. After that, Josh refused to have anything to do with the agency's "friends". Until Brad.

"What's wrong?" asked Kir. They were out for their morning walk.

"Nothing." Josh changed the subject, at least the one in his head. "Where will you go after the cabin?"

"I don't have plans."

"You'll probably go back to live with your sister and the other Minders?"

Kir lifted one shoulder. "It's not the best place for me. I find it hard to relax around them. I always wonder if they'll start playing."

"Playing?"

"That's what we call our magic when we use it among ourselves. I'm not a strong Minder, so I find others stressful. Except my sister. I trust her."



Josh swallowed. So much for changing the subject, because he had to ask, “Is Brad strong?”

“Yup. The fewer your morals, the stronger you can be.” Kir picked his way through a swampy piece of path. It was heavily forested here. The air smelt of dampness and rotting wood.

“So you have all the morals, do you?” Josh was proud at how well he controlled his voice. No tremor and his tone was cynical.

“You don’t sound impressed.”

“I sometimes fear I only trust you because you told me to.”

“I know,” said Kir in a low voice. “I hope, with time, you’ll believe otherwise.”

“Does it matter?”

Kir shot him a look of, *you’re kidding*. “I said *Brad* didn’t have morals. We’re not all the same, you know.”

“Okay, sure. You’re not Brad. Still, what do you want of me?”

Kir gave a short, embarrassed laugh. “Company, I guess.”

“Hang out with your sister.” Josh forgot to control his voice and anger came out. When he thought of Brad, the fear rolled through him, turning to rage. A helpless, weak kind of rage that he shouldn’t take out on Kir.

After a pause, Kir said carefully, as if thinking how to word his reply, “Maddie comes with her own baggage. I don’t agree with a lot of her, well, philosophies. You’re easier company.”

“So I’m easy.”

“Don’t twist my words. That’s not what I mean.”

They emerged from the shade and entered an open field. The ground was dry here, a contrast to the mud they’d trekked through. Suddenly, it was too hot in the still air, under the midday sun. The light turned harsh yellow, the air stifled, and Josh’s rage shook him.

Kir watched him, now concerned. “Are you okay?”

Josh couldn't stop talking about Brad, when he didn't even want to think about the man. "Two years ago, you went with Brad, Kir."

Kir faced him squarely. "I went with Maddie."

"You took Brad's hand."

"To get him away from you. I knew how to handle him. You didn't."

"Brad touched your face," Josh continued. "And you let him. Why?"

Kir looked down.

"Because you're weak?"

Kir jerked his head up. "Maybe."

"Brad touched me all the time. I was weak," said Josh.

"Josh, you aren't psi. This has nothing to do with strength of character."

Josh stepped closer, he didn't know why, and Kir went still, not knowing what to expect, perhaps expecting a punch, perhaps expecting a caress. Josh pushed the boy's breastbone, forcing him back.

"You're a psi, a Minder." Josh shook. He hated the shaking. It came against his will and humiliated him.

"It's okay."

"*It's not okay.* You're hiding something."

"Oh, Josh," said Kir with some pain and Josh couldn't stand the pity. He pushed again and Kir stumbled as he backed up.

"Why do you take it?" demanded Josh, looming over him. "What if I decide to hit you again?"

Kir's gaze was steady, the bruise on his face fading. "I don't think you will."

"You're more certain than I am." With both hands Josh shoved Kir. "Tell me to stop. Use your words."

Kir, obviously at a loss, shook his head.

Josh raised his hand and Kir just stood there, watchful and wary. Unprotected. Waiting for Josh to strike him.

Disgusted with himself, Josh turned on his heel. Next thing, he'd be slapping Kir's face to see the boy's reaction. The boy wasn't Brad. They were both Minders, but Kir was *Kir*.

Josh marched back to the cabin. He could hear Kir, but didn't look back and Kir didn't catch up.

By the time Josh reached the cabin, he was sweating and exhausted. He walked straight into the bathroom and took a shower, hoping his overheated mind would improve under cool water. God knows it needed something. Every time he thought his Zombie fog had lifted, he did something stupid. Like hit Kir.

As if Kir couldn't have stopped the punch if he'd wanted.

After the shower, an ashamed Josh retreated to his bedroom, ignoring Kir who sat in the living room, probably reading a moldy book that had been in the cabin for decades.

Josh lay down on the bed until the worst of the anger faded and he felt more himself. He was grateful when exhaustion took him and he slept. When he later woke, he rose, took a deep breath and walked out to find Kir who looked up and set down his book.

"I'm sorry." Josh met Kir's gaze.

"It doesn't matter."

"It *matters*. I acted like an asshole."

"I mean," Kir amended, "I'm okay with it."

"Don't be okay with it, because it's not okay. Do you expect everybody to treat you like shit?"

Kir raised a hand. "Maybe we better not talk now."

Josh stalked over to him and Kir sat there. With some horror, Josh feared he would turn into a monster, abusing Kir who would take it,

because Kir wanted to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he wasn't using his magic on Josh.

He sat on the couch and slowly, because Kir, despite his bravado, was uncertain, Josh brought his hands to Kir and cradled his face.

"I acted badly," Josh said. "You must call me on it." A tremor ran through Kir. Josh caressed Kir's face while his eyes darkened. "You must tell me if I shouldn't touch you. Because I'm telling you now I cannot handle you touching me."

Kir swallowed and Josh palmed his throat before sliding his hand around to stroke the back of Kir's neck.

"I don't know what you want," said Kir, an edge to his voice.

"I want you to lie down."

*"Lie down?"*

"I promise I won't hurt you. I'll stop when you ask."

Kir seemed frozen and Josh wasn't sure.

"You have to say you want me, Kir."

Kir shook his head and Josh pulled away.

"I don't think it's a good idea," pleaded Kir, as if Josh tempted him.

"For you?" asked Josh.

"For you."

"You're wrong. Do you want me to touch you?"

Kir looked away in a kind of despair.

"Unless I'm in worse shape than I thought, you do. Don't tell me that I can't read you at all."

Kir stared ahead, breathing hard. "I want to do the right thing," he said through clenched teeth.

Josh lifted Kir's hand off his knee and held it between his own. Josh's thumb circled Kir's palm and he shivered.

"I want to touch you," explained Josh. "I didn't want to touch Brad so reaching for you doesn't feel tainted."

"I just like you, Josh. I really do."

"I like you, too." Josh stood and pulled Kir to his feet. "Can I lead?"

"Yes."

Josh took them to Kir's bedroom and Kir looked up, eyes dark and wide. Trusting. Josh wished he was able to kiss but Brad's god-awful kisses were too recent. Instead, he laid a palm against Kir's cheek and the boy leaned into it, closing his eyes. Long eyelashes brushed Josh's thumb.

"Such strange beauty," Josh murmured. "You were beautiful before I met you."

Kir's lips parted but he didn't speak.

Josh's other hand slid down Kir's side. The boy, the *man*, vibrated under his touch. *Gentle, be gentle.*

"Why did you write me?" asked Josh. "Three months after we parted? Surely not because the agency wanted to find you."

Kir's eyes, unfocused, came back to gaze at Josh. "I missed you." There was a touch of defiance there. "And I wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I wasn't. I was the agency's prisoner. They hoped I could lure you in. But still, they were damned surprised when you responded to one of my many queries."

"I'm so sorry I got you involved."

"You didn't. The agency hired me, remember? You don't have to take on that responsibility. I should have known better than to sign on. But I was arrogant. I thought I could do the job. You proved me wrong." Josh's smile was faint and Kir looked uneasy.

“Would you sit on the bed?” At Josh’s request, Kir gave the barest nod.

Josh brought his hand to rest on Kir’s chest. Josh could feel the heart beating hard against his palm and he exerted slow pressure. Kir walked backwards till his legs hit the bed and he sat.

They watched each other silently as Josh caught the hem of Kir’s shirt in both hands and pulled up. After a slight hesitation, Kir raised his arms and Josh took the shirt off. He pushed Kir back to lie on the bed and kneeled beside him.

Josh swept a palm over Kir’s stomach and he quivered. “You’ve been working out,” Josh observed. His hand moved upwards, tangled in Kir’s chest hair and traced a circle around his dark nipple. Kir’s arms lay by his side and he gripped the comforter beneath them.

“You can tell me to stop,” Josh reminded him, as his fingers brushed over collarbone and shoulder. He didn’t think he’d tire of caressing Kir’s skin. Both hands encircled Kir’s biceps, palms sliding up and down, enjoying the strength beneath them. Fingers trailed under the sensitive armpit and Kir sucked in air.

“There is so much to appreciate.” Josh observed Kir’s damp, tented shorts and smiled. He traced Kir’s navel, then descended to undo his button and zipper.

Kir’s cock sprung free and Josh captured it. His thumb circled the head, wet and deeply pink. Kir was hard and thick in Josh’s hand.

Kir gasped. Josh looked at him, making sure. Yes, Kir’s eyes were black with desire. Josh cupped Kir’s balls and said, “You are so close, babe.”

His hand slid up and down, one, two, three times. Kir made a guttural noise and arched as he spurted. Josh moved with him, carefully

slowing down, watching Kir shudder in release, his eyes closed. Josh had forgotten how quick Kir was. Someday he would show Kir slow.

“Kir?” he asked.

Kir’s eyes opened and, to Josh’s horror, he saw tears. Fear gripped him. He had abused Kir; he was turning into a monster.

“No.” Kir reached for Josh but, before contact, stopped. Kir’s hand caressed air and dropped. “It’s okay, it’s okay. I’ve been celibate too long. I’m always too emotional. It’s my nature.”

“I thought you wanted it.” Josh felt panicked. He couldn’t stand their intimacy to be wrong.

“I *did* want it.” Kir’s voice was calm, deeper than usual and, unexpectedly, his mouth curved, a slight smile. Kir hardly ever smiled.

At a loss, Josh fell forward to rest his head on Kir’s chest and listened to his heart whose beat was now slowing.

“It was good. It was right,” said Kir. “I was only worried for you.”

“Then I am going to have to worry for you,” Josh muttered against Kir’s skin.

“That would be nice.” There was a warmth in the voice that Josh hadn’t heard before and he relaxed.

He felt Kir lift his arm and Josh braced for the touch. It wouldn’t be too bad. But Kir passed his palm over Josh’s hair without really making contact. An echo of touch and somehow comforting.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Josh rose early, left his bed, and headed to the kitchen to make coffee. He was quiet, not wanting to wake Kir. After drinking one cup, Josh heard Kir’s bed creak. Feet hit the floor and Josh’s heart rate picked up speed.

A weight lifted off his chest when he saw Kir's face, for the boy's expression lightened at the sight of him. Josh's presence still made Kir happy. Josh had feared yesterday might have changed that.

Kir frowned. "Why so serious?"

"I was worried about you," Josh admitted. In a normal life, two years ago, Josh would have gone to his lover. But this was not normal and while he thought of Kir as his lover, they had only shared a hand job yesterday.

Kir shook his head, but looked pleased by the admission. "I told you I was happy."

"You did," Josh agreed, but his sense of right and wrong had been skewed by recent events and he needed reassurance.

Kir danced slightly and Josh laughed.

"Go, go." Josh waved.

Kir emerged from the washroom to see Josh in the kitchen. "You don't have to make me tea," Kir protested. "Sit down and rest."

"I can manage." At Josh's wry tone, Kir cocked his head so Josh elaborated. "See why I worry you just gave yourself to me? You are too obliging."

Kir's face heated.

"In a good way," Josh added. "That was a compliment, a nice thing, Kir. Don't let me take advantage of you." He had to remember that Kir's background was warped, that he expected criticism, not compliments.

Josh removed the tea bag from the cup. "Milk? Sugar?"

"No, thanks."

Josh walked back to the coffee table and set down the mug.

"You must know I'm attracted to you." Kir spoke in a rush, his face still hot.

Josh just smiled.



The rest of the morning was quiet, companionable, and Josh relaxed. He didn't touch Kir. Josh knew where touch would lead and he needed to build up his resources a little.

But in the afternoon, after he napped, he went outside to find Kir on the deck, trying to hammer together a rail that was falling off.

"Hi," said Kir as Josh came up beside him.

"You need another piece of wood," suggested Josh. "This one's rotting."

"I'll add that to my list." Leaning on the rail, Kir shook it. "Okay, not too steady."

Josh stepped behind Kir and placed his hands on Kir's shoulders to massage the boy's neck. Kir shivered and Josh stopped. "Do you want me to touch you?"

"I've been waiting," Kir said in a low voice.

"Good." Josh worked his way down Kir's back, massaging muscle. Kir's tension rose. Slipping hands under Kir's shirt, Josh stroked Kir's waist with his palms, back and forth, reassuring with gentleness, affection, care. All those things Josh had so missed.

"You can talk," murmured Josh. "Your words no longer scare me."

"Okay." Kir sounded short of breath. "But I don't know what to say."

Josh undid Kir's shorts and slid his hands to cup Kir's buttocks, up and down, up and down, approaching his crack, but not getting there. Not yet. They both needed more time. Pushing Kir's shorts down to his ankles, Josh ran palms along Kir's strong calves, enjoying the way Kir vibrated under his touch. Josh made his way back up to Kir's thighs, cupped his balls and Kir moaned. Taking Kir's cock in hand made Josh hot and he wanted to be closer.

He stood over Kir, his chest against Kir's back.

“I’ve never known anyone who smelled so good when they sweat.” Josh kissed Kir’s neck. He began his strokes and Kir gave an inarticulate response, something like, *oh* or *ah*. “What do you do?”

“Do?” asked Kir, in a bewildered half-gasp.

“And your voice is so sexy, did you know that?”

Kir shook his head, gave a sob of emotion and groaned, coming in Josh’s hand. Grinning into Kir’s neck, Josh licked the sweat. Kir breathed noisily, standing under Josh, trembling while his cock pumped and his cum ran through Josh’s fingers. Then Josh remembered Kir had cried yesterday and turned Kir to face him.

Kir looked down. With his clean hand, Josh tipped up Kir’s chin to search his face. Kir smiled his sweetest smile, the one that Josh, in his Zombie daze, had forgotten. It filled Josh with joy.

“Why wouldn’t you look at me?” said Josh.

“All your compliments. I get embarrassed.”

Josh laughed.

## Chapter Six

After three weeks at the cabin, Josh had asked Kir to lie down and, against his better judgment, he'd done exactly that. He wanted to take everything Josh could give him. Josh was the love of Kir's life though Kir kept quiet on that small point.

They didn't sleep together and Kir didn't touch Josh. At night, he retreated to his bedroom although he sometimes took Kir's face in his hands, a light caress, before stepping back and away.

Kir knew Brad would have kissed Josh a lot. Someday they would talk more about Brad, and Kir's history with Brad, but not yet. Kir feared Josh wouldn't understand. They were living in this bubble that had grown steadily more intimate and affectionate, and Kir couldn't bear the thought of breaking their connection. Josh liked to touch Kir all over before he came and Kir reveled in it. Every inch of his skin belonged to Josh. Sometimes Josh had an erection, but he wasn't yet ready to come. So Kir waited.

They began swimming. The lake had warmed up. Still thin, Josh no longer looked frail and haunted. In fact, he was the better swimmer of the two, though his endurance wasn't great.

After lunch, Josh picked up a book Kir had read. "*The Yearling*. Don't they shoot the deer?"

"Well, yeah."

Josh dropped the book on the coffee table, then plopped down on the couch. His hair, damp with lake water, made Kir hot. Well, everything about Josh made him hot.

"I hated that book," Josh declared.

Kir walked around the coffee table and sat on it, in front of Josh, their legs not quite touching. Kir watched for signs that Josh felt crowded. Instead, Josh's eyes darkened and he pressed his leg against Kir's.

Kir smiled to soften his words. "We should talk just a little." They never talked about much.

"About *The Yearling*? The boy is forced to kill his beloved pet deer, that's what I remember."

"Yeah," Kir admitted.

"I don't think I'll reread it."

"Josh."

"Okay, you don't want to talk about the deer."

"Maybe we could discuss the agency."

Josh went still. "Have you heard something? I know you have a cell phone and your sister calls for updates."

"Just to check on me. That's all. She has said nothing about the agency." Kir paused. "You must know they'll be looking for you. I've been thinking about how to protect you when winter comes and we have to leave here."

Josh's gray eyes simply watched Kir whose heart broke a little. Such a clear, kind soul. No one should have hurt Josh. Kir clasped his hands together so he wouldn't reach for Josh.

"It's only the middle of summer," said Josh finally. "Are you tired of me already?"

“No.” Never. “I just want to plan for the future.” Kir took a deep breath. “See, I’ve stayed with the pod—that’s what we call our little group of psis—because together we can make ourselves pretty much invisible.”

Josh looked appalled. “Surely you’re not suggesting that, come winter, I live with a bunch of Minders.”

“No.”

“Good.”

“I want to explain that I’ve learned a few techniques from the pod over the past couple of years.”

“Trade secrets.” Josh had a strained jocular tone Kir didn’t know how to interpret, so he kept his voice level and his delivery straightforward.

“Kind of. For example, when I was on my own, when you found me two years ago, my solitude was a red flag to people. The way I avoided everyone was conspicuous. Now I socialize a little. Just not too much.”

Josh nodded.

“But I do something when I socialize.” Kir realized he was wringing his hands and stopped.

“I can guess,” Josh drawled, his face tightening.

“I prime people during casual conversation,” Kir rushed out.

“Prime,” Josh repeated.

“Nothing very strong or,” Kir searched for words, “nothing to confuse them or go against their nature. Because confusion and resistance create their own problems. People become unpredictable. But if I slip in the fact that they won’t remember what I look like, say, they usually don’t care.”

“You once told me that your sister primed Thompson. That he wanted you to escape.”

“Thompson hated Snow, so my sister’s directive would have appealed to him at some level.”

“I see. And if it hadn’t appealed?”

Kir shrugged. "Hard to know. Unpredictable." Josh's remote expression made Kir nervous. "I don't like pushing, so I just avoided people when I was on my own. But I could prime, minimally. To keep us safe."

"Us." Josh's eyes clouded.

Looking down, Kir placed his elbows on his knees and rested his forehead on his hands. He spoke to the floor. "It's just a suggestion."

"Because you want to keep me safe." Josh reverted to his voice from the first week, the one with no inflection. "What about you? What do you want?"

*You*, Kir longed to say, but the word lodged in his throat. Josh might not appreciate such a declaration. After all, Brad had wanted Josh, too.

Josh's fingers brushed against Kir's temple and he froze, as if movement would scare Josh away. His hand sank into Kir's hair and Kir leaned into the caress. Josh massaged his scalp. "Answer me, Kir."

"I want to be with you."

"Even though you don't touch me?"

"We're touching."

"Both you and I know it's uneven. Unfair."

*It will change.* But even if it didn't, Kir wanted this. "I'm in love with you." Josh tensed. Kir hadn't stated his feelings so baldly before, but surely Josh knew. Kir had tried to show love in so many ways. "If you don't want to be with me, I still want you to be safe."

Josh raised Kir up, all the while shaking his head. But there was a lightness to Josh's expression that made Kir's heart dance. "What am I going to do with you?"

Josh took Kir's hand, led him to the bedroom and, hands on shoulders, turned him away, his back to Josh's front.

“Actually,” Josh murmured. “I can think of a few things to do with you.”

Josh breathed in Kir’s hair, kissed his nape.

“Josh,” said Kir helplessly and was pulled closer so he could feel Josh’s erection against the small of his back. A hand came up to caress Kir’s face.

“Are you okay with that?”

“Okay with what?”

“I want to fuck you.” Josh bit Kir lightly, where his shoulder met his neck. “I don’t have to. I can just make you come.”

Kir didn’t answer right away and Josh couldn’t tell if Kir was uncertain or speechless.

“I love you touching me,” said Kir.

“Good.” Josh slid a hand down to cup Kir’s ass.

“There are condoms.” Kir reached for the top dresser drawer and pulled it open in invitation.

“I knew that. I unpacked the bags after your last trip to town.” As Josh wrapped a hand around Kir’s cock, Kir grunted. Down came his shorts and Kir stepped out. Ankle, calf, the soft back of the knee—Josh stroked Kir’s bare legs and the boy shivered.

“I’ll take care of the condoms. I’ll take care of everything.” Enjoying Kir’s trembling reaction, Josh trailed a tongue up the length of Kir’s spine.

Josh explored Kir’s balls and cock, but he was dripping and Josh didn’t linger. He wanted Kir to go off while Josh was inside.

“Josh,” demanded Kir as if he were ready now.

“Yeah?” drawled Josh. He loved this control, had always liked control. It made him hot, the way Kir clenched and unclenched his fists. “Have I told you there’s a slow way to do things?”

“Slow? Now?” asked Kir in disbelief.

“Okay, later then,” said Josh with a theatrical sigh. “Lean forward on the bed.”

Kir obeyed and Josh palmed his ass, enjoying the hard muscle and the dark hair that dusted the skin. He slowly approached Kir’s crack. He brushed the bottom of Kir’s spine, not quite reaching his hole.

“Josh,” Kir pleaded.

“You’re perfect.” Josh ripped open the plastic square and unrolled the condom down his length. He squirted lube into his hand and made himself harder. “Tell me what you like.”

“Inside. Me. *Josh*.” The last word was almost a sob. The head of Josh’s cock touched Kir’s hole and his throat vibrated.

“Let’s go slow,” Josh murmured.

Kir’s arms trembled as Josh opened him up. He played with Kir’s balls, but it wasn’t until Josh was fully in—God it felt so warm and tight, just right—that he clasped Kir’s cock.

“Let’s come together,” said Josh. “Can you hold on?”

Kir moaned, collapsing onto his elbows.

“Kir?”

Kir shook his head.

“I’m close.” Josh began to move. “Wait for me.”

Kir pulled in breaths while Josh thrust inside and Kir held on, humming beneath him. Josh thrust harder, stronger, aiming for that perfect place.

“Josh. I can’t. *Christ*,” Kir cried, coming, convulsing, clenching Josh. White heat spread through him—its warmth welcomed Josh back to



lovemaking and he surrendered to the heat, letting go, inside Kir. Spurting, falling forward and a little in love, he had to admit, though not out loud. Not yet.

“Oh, babe.” Josh shuddered.

He rested a cheek against Kir’s shoulder who then collapsed into a boneless mass. Josh slid out.

He patted Kir’s ass, then left to take care of the condom. Returning, Josh found Kir in the same position on the bed, unmoving and utterly relaxed. Josh smiled down as he sat at the bottom of the bed, on the corner so they weren’t touching. Which felt wrong. And yet...

Kir pulled himself together and turned to look at Josh, flushed face, bedroom eyes, sated, yet thoughtful.

Josh didn’t quite know what to say. Kir had declared his love and then, just like that, Josh had fucked him.

Rolling up to sit in a ball, Kir wrapped arms around his legs. He looked at Josh with longing and Josh felt bad. They should be touching. Josh cleared his throat.

Kir moved and Josh braced himself. His lover fell against him, to rest his shoulder on Josh’s chest.

“Sorry.” Kir moved a cheek against Josh’s breastbone in apology.

“Don’t be sorry.” Slinging an arm around Kir, Josh pulled him close and kissed his hair. “You have awfully good instincts when it comes to what you should and shouldn’t do with me.”

“Um, I’m just following your lead.”

“I always did lead. Truth to tell, it would sometimes get my relationships into trouble.”

“I don’t know how to lead,” Kir admitted, sounding ashamed. Josh didn’t know if Kir was talking about the entire relationship—in which case it wasn’t true—or sex. They could explore that later, perhaps.

Josh hugged tighter. “Well then, we make a good pair.”

## Chapter Seven

“Have a great visit with your sister.” Despite Josh’s attempt to sound sincere, his tone was hearty and fake. He desperately wished Maddie had never phoned.

Kir frowned. Josh could see that he hadn’t masked his uneasiness.

“I’m just gone for the day,” said Kir.

Maddie bothered Josh more than he could admit. He didn’t like to think about Minders, only about Kir.

“Maddie isn’t coming here,” Kir repeated for the third time. “I’m seeing her in town.”

“I know, I know. Don’t mind me.”

Kir regarded him gravely. “You’re not going to doubt me now, are you?”

“No.” Josh’s attempted smile felt like a wince.

“The visit is bad timing, but I couldn’t put her off. My sister is stubborn and it’s better I meet her than she drive out here.”

“True,” allowed Josh. The problem was, he’d been living in a little fantasyland here, forgetting how Minders scared the shit out of him. “But why does she need to see you?”

“She can be overprotective.” Kir looked away. “You see, when she left a month ago, she thought you might try to kill me.”

“I *did* try to kill you.”

“Fortunately you made a poor job of it.”

“Don’t joke. It’s not funny.” Josh felt sick to think of his attempts to hurt Kir.

“I know it’s not funny, Josh. But it didn’t count. You were still—”

“A Zombie.”

“No. Confused.”

“Okay, whatever,” said Josh in some agitation. “But obviously I didn’t kill you. You still answer the phone. Unless she thinks I’m impersonating you.”

“She wants to see me in person and grill me. We can’t talk safely on the phone. It’s her way of showing affection,” added Kir grudgingly.

“Okay, well go.” Josh waved his arm and Kir just stood there. “What?”

“You and me, Josh, we’re real, right? You believe that?” Kir’s eyes were worried and deep with emotion. He lifted his hand towards Josh and stopped in midair. Josh reached out and brought Kir’s hand to his face. Kir traced a thumb over Josh’s cheekbone and Josh leaned into Kir’s palm. The boy smiled, his eyes damp, and Josh turned to kiss the palm before moving away.

“Hurry up and leave, so you can get back,” said Josh.

Kir moved away, running down the stairs and over to the car. Just before he ducked into the driver’s seat he waved. Josh swallowed, but he waved back.

\* \* \*

Josh had forgotten a lot of things. Like what it was like to be loved. He wouldn’t forget in half a day, even if he was nervous on his own. He

was used to Kir's company. Dependent, though Kir never minded. Kir never minded anything.

No, that wasn't true. It was just that the relationship was young and they needed to discover each other, discover what lay beyond abuse and fear. There was always more to a person than their past, no matter how badly they'd been hurt.

Later in the morning, Josh dozed on the couch. He still slept more than normal, but the overwhelming exhaustion had faded.

He woke to the deck creaking and his heart leaped to think Kir had returned so soon. Josh stood, one foot moving towards the door before terror gripped him tight and he could barely breathe. Petrified. *God no, not again.* He couldn't endure it.

"Don't move, Josh." Brad grinned as he stepped into the cabin.

Josh should run, he should run. His brain screamed *run*, but he stood still, quivering like a fool. Hooked again. He didn't understand how this could be happening. Kir was supposed to be here, not Brad. Never Brad.

"Come to me, Josh. I've missed you. You missed me."

Josh *knew* it wasn't true, and yet one foot after another stepped closer to someone he'd known long, long ago.

"God you're already a mess, crying and shivering like a blubbering idiot. It's not very attractive," said Brad in disgust. Josh was ashamed and couldn't bring himself to look at Brad. "I followed Maddie this morning for this kind of greeting?"

The invader sighed. "Show me Kir's room."

Obediently, Josh turned away and led Brad to Kir's bedroom. Where he and Kir had made love. Josh didn't want Brad to know but Brad, smiling, found condoms and lube.

"I see that Kir is once again your Minder."

"No," denied Josh through his parched throat.

"Kir's a little more subtle than I am, that's all."

"No." Josh couldn't think of anything to say but that one word, *no*.

"You have to kill your Minder, Josh."

Josh sobbed, shook his head.

"You *must*. You can't be controlled by him any longer. Two years is more than you can take."

"I don't know how to kill," Josh lied.

"Nonsense. You killed Snow."

Josh covered his face with both hands. "No. Kir loves me."

"Holy fuck, he's really pulled one on you. Worse than me. I only made it lust. Look."

Josh couldn't.

"*Look.*"

Josh removed his hands from his face and stared into cold blue crystal.

"Look at what's in my hand." Brad spoke as if Josh were a simpleton.

He saw that Brad was offering a knife, handle first, the blade long and lean.

"Take my knife. It's my gift to you and you, in turn, must give it to your Minder, slide it into his heart. That's where it belongs. Do it during sex. The heart is where the knife belongs. Do you understand?"

Josh nodded.

"Repeat after me."

The words spoke themselves. "The heart is where the knife belongs."

"Good boy. I don't have much time. And you have caused me too much grief. Made me quite unpopular which, I can assure you, I don't like at all. Despite that, I leave you with this perfect gift. Isn't that generous of me?"

Josh nodded, a puppet on a string. Brad held out the knife, staring at Josh, and Josh's hand rose to meet the weapon.

*Kill your Minder.* The idea grew in Josh, became large with urgency, became the most important thing in his life. And yet, he could not open his clenched fist.

"Take the knife," Brad repeated. He gripped Josh's shoulder and Josh opened his hand, clasped the brown handle. "You're so easy to hook. Weak. But I like weak."

Josh's chest ached and he breathed as if badly winded. He didn't want to kill Kir, but he was weak and he wanted to kill his Minder.

The knife felt heavy in Josh's hand.

"Say thank you," instructed Brad.

"Thank you," said Josh dully.

"Give us one last kiss. Sadly, because the locals give such crap directions, I don't have time for more."

Josh lifted his face and opened his mouth. Brad descended and took control. His tongue invaded Josh's mouth and Josh couldn't think, he could only hold onto the knife for dear life.

The knife that belonged in his Minder's heart. Josh knew where Brad's heart lay. Brad grabbed a hunk of Josh's hair and jerked his head back to a painful angle. The muscles in Josh's arm bunched. Brad liked pain and Josh ignored his own. He aimed the blade. It sliced through skin and muscle, going under the ribs, slightly to the left, and up through the heart.

"Ugh." Brad's mouth fell away and his body folded in two, folded around the knife. Staggering back, he fought to stand. "What happened?" He stared at Josh, uncomprehending, dumbfounded.

"You're my Minder," Josh explained. "Not Kir." Never Kir.

Brad bent over gasping, blood running through his hands as he pulled out the knife and uselessly tried to staunch the flow. His gaze, blue ice, came back to Josh. "You must kill *Kir*." His words slurred, but they came out and hooked Josh with fear.

Josh went away then, he wasn't sure for how long, but when he came back Brad was on the floor. A puddle of blood seeped into the wood. The stench of the newly dead filled the air.

The knife lay beside Brad. Josh picked it off the floor, went to the sink and washed off the blood.

He could wait. He could imagine waiting and Kir would come home and they'd meet on the deck, Kir's face brightening at the sight of Josh. The knife attack in the kitchen that first night had been weak and stupid. This one would work because Kir trusted him. In fact, Josh could imagine Kir lying down and opening his heart to Josh's blade, submitting to the sacrifice because he loved Josh.

Josh gasped in pain, revolted by the vision. He dropped the knife and vomited.

*Clear, think clear*, he demanded of his foggy brain, *no matter what Brad has done to you*. He had to pull himself together. *Now*. He forced himself off his hands and knees and washed his face and hands, the cold water a welcome shock. He looked in the mirror and saw a wraith of his former self. Saw someone who could contemplate the murder of a loved one. A foul thing.

He had to run, fast and hard.

Returning to Brad's body, he searched the pockets and found car keys. After Brad's parting words, Josh could never trust himself again. He had been primed to kill a lover.

Josh raced up the road. At the top, Brad's car was parked. It started easily, the gas tank was full. Though he'd left the knife in the cabin, he



was terrified he'd meet Kir on the way out, on this narrow gravel road, and attack him, attack his lover. When Josh reached the main road, he almost fainted in relief. Instead, he gripped the steering wheel and drove away from the town where Kir rendezvoused with Maddie.

After Brad's words, Josh and Kir could never meet again. Josh had to disappear where no one could ever find him, where he could not hurt the dark-eyed boy. Josh drove to escape.

## About the Author

I'm an introvert, a Spooks (MI5) fan, a wife and a mother. One of my favorite books ever is Ellen Kushner's Swordspoint and, while I don't watch much TV, I couldn't resist Queer as Folk.

I write male/male romance. Don't ask me why. Men fascinate me, as does romance, so gay romance is the perfect fit for me.

To learn more about Joely Skye, please visit [www.joelyskye.com](http://www.joelyskye.com) or <http://joelyskye.livejournal.com>. Send an email to Joely at [joely.skye@gmail.com](mailto:joely.skye@gmail.com) or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Joely. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/joelyskye/>.

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*The time has come for Kir to use his powers to  
destroy the agency and bring Josh back to safety.  
Third book of the Minders series.*

## **Minder**

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*Coming February 28, 2007 at Samhain Publishing*

*Josh goes to ground after being given the compulsion to kill his lover.  
But the agency ensures Josh is not the only threat to Kir's life.*

*Last summer, Kir arrived home to blood and death. Josh was gone. All  
Kir has left is his belief Josh is still alive. Until the agency entraps Kir and  
suddenly Josh is back in his life. But Josh is not the same man who  
disappeared almost a year ago...*

*Josh knows how to kill. Kir, a Minder, can bend people to his will. They  
will each have to act to keep the other safe, no matter the cost.*

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Minder*:

He placed the oil and condom on the side table and climbed back into bed, crawling over to Kir's side and looking down at him. He wanted to protect Kir from his past, an impossibility. There was only the future to move through.

Gently he laid his hand on Kir's shoulder and Kir jerked awake.

"Hey," Josh murmured. "It's okay."

"Josh?" asked Kir, sleepily worried. He tried to turn, but Josh kept pressure on his shoulder.

"Lie on your stomach. Look away from me."

"Um, okay." Kir sounded confused, wanting to ask why, but unsure. He paused for a moment then rested his head on the back of his hands, facing away. Josh could feel the tension in his body. During their few weeks together last summer, they'd made love often. Too often, at the

beginning of sex, Kir had been anxious to please and only relaxed when Josh gave orders. Josh didn't know if Kir had been simply worried about Josh and his sensitivity to touch, or if Kir had been anxious about making love, period.

Josh leaned over Kir, brushed his hair back from his face and kissed the salty corner of Kir's eye.

"Were you dreaming?" Josh asked.

"I guess."

"Bad dream?"

"I never remember my dreams."

Josh stroked Kir's upper arm and kissed his cheek. "You've been working out. Your muscles make me hot." He kissed the corner of Kir's mouth. "As does your mouth. Well, everything about you."

Kir snorted in surprise. He always reacted to compliments as if they were completely unexpected and embarrassing.

"You know I like everything about you, right?"

Kir's lips parted. "I'm glad," he said with such feeling that Josh's chest squeezed tight.

"Did you know?"

Kir gave a short shake of his head.

"Do you want me to touch you?" asked Josh.

"Yes."

"Good, because I've been dying to touch you for months. It hurt to think of you." Josh bit Kir's neck lightly and Kir gasped.

"Did you ever think of me?" Josh asked.

"All the time."

Josh smiled. He stroked under Kir's arm while he licked the skin he'd nipped. "You taste like salt and Kir. Perfect. I remembered your taste, you know. I dreamed of it sometimes."

A tear leaked out of Kir's eye. He had always been emotional, as Josh had learned during their weeks together. He came back to catch the salty tear on his tongue, then laved Kir's eye shut.

"You worry too much, just when you're not supposed to," said Josh.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't want you to be sorry. I want you to want me."

"I want you, Josh."

"I want to fuck you. Okay?" Josh asked.

"Yes."

"You should check that I have condoms. God knows what Brad carried around with him."

"I know you have condoms."

Josh laughed, stroking Kir's back, the shoulder blades, the muscles beneath skin, the dusting of dark hair. "You're right, but you didn't know. You just like to say, yes, because I'm going to fuck your brains out."

Kir raised his ass slightly in invitation. Josh palmed Kir's cheeks appreciatively, then stroked his legs before he spread them farther apart. "Stay like that, okay?"

"Okay," said Kir thickly.

Josh smiled. "I love your voice."

"My voice?"

"So sexy."

Kir didn't answer. Josh reached under to find Kir's cock hard and dripping.

"Have you slowed down any?" asked Josh.

"I don't know." Kir sounded slightly bewildered by all this talk.

*Letters are funny things, you know? A piece of paper  
with some handwritten words can change a person's life...*

## **The Letter**

© 2006 Willa Okati

*Available now at Samhain Publishing*

*The time has come for them to go their separate ways. It's been a hard decision for two men so very much in love, but Luke and his partner Brandon are parting so that Luke can head to New York and follow his dreams.*

*It seems, however, that someone or something doesn't want Luke to leave his beloved. He and Brandon discover a chest of letters in their attic which details their relationship down to the last moment—except that these letters were written in 1948.*

*Should they listen to the guidance given by the mysterious writer of the letters? Should they give in to the urge to stay together, no matter what? Should Brandon fight for his man?*

*The answer is in the final letter...*

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Letter*:

Brandon led the way to the bedroom they'd shared for the past five years, no looking back, quietly confident that Luke would follow. He did, swallowing down another lump of regret as he entered and saw the big, dark wood bed with its handmade crazy quilt and the long pillow they both rested their heads on.

When he reached the bed, Brandon turned around to face Luke. "How shall we do this?"

Luke shook his head. "Any way you want to, babe."

“Please—” Brandon held up a hand. “I can’t bear to hear you calling me that. Not now.”

“All right. I’m sorry. *Brandon*. Anything you want, it’s yours. Just tell me what to do.”

Brandon sat on the edge of the bed. “Come here, to me. Stand between my legs. I want to taste you before we do anything else.”

Luke obeyed, the movement natural but the atmosphere charged with something heavy and unquiet. Whenever they’d done this before there had been passion or laughter, but now there was only Brandon’s studious concentration as he ran his fingers over the zipper of Luke’s jeans, then pulled it open. He tugged the jeans down, along with Luke’s jockey shorts, all the way to mid-thigh, and studied what he found there.

Luke let out a small hiss as the cool air of the house kissed his cock, which was hard and ready for action even if the rest of him wasn’t. He looked down to see Brandon gazing at him as if he were something rare to be treasured, and then watched him as the man bent forward to take Luke’s dick into his mouth.

Luke swore under his breath and put his hands forward, steadying himself on Brandon’s shoulders. He moved his hands like a cat would knead, rolling in time with Brandon’s sucking motions and making small cries whenever Brandon used his teeth or his tongue in an especially fine way, turning him desperate for the feel of something tighter and hotter around his cock.

All too soon, Brandon drew off, licking his lips. He held on to Luke by one hip and looked up at him, eyes serious. “Now,” he said solemnly. “Do what comes naturally, but I want you.”

*I’ll always want you*—that went unspoken.

Luke nodded, pushing his jeans and shorts out of the way and kicking them lightly across the bedroom floor. As Brandon stretched out on the bed, Luke moved to Brandon’s side, helping his lover wriggle out



of his own khakis until he, too, was bare of any stitch. Naked, Luke stretched out on top of the man, bracing his weight on his arms.

They shared another kiss, long and deep and slow. “Good,” Brandon murmured when they parted. “No one’s ever kissed me like you do.”

*And never will again,* Luke thought. *God, so many things are going unsaid.*

“Kiss me.”

Luke obeyed, bringing his mouth down with a hungrier fervor, trying to let Brandon know through his movements how much regret he felt at this having to be their last time together. That changed quickly, though, to pleasure at how good this felt, having Brandon beneath him.



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