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**Advance Review Copy**

Minder  
© Joely Skye

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# Minder

*Joely Skye*

## Dedication

To critique partners, past and present.

## Chapter One

The first time Trey Walters found him, Josh Mackay tried to put an ax through Trey's chest. He didn't quite succeed. The ensuing wrestling match lasted long enough to do damage on both sides. In the end, Trey's height and bulk forced Josh down, face in the dirt, knee to his back. Josh waited for Trey to break his arm. Instead Trey said, rather hoarsely, "I am not bringing you in."

It took months for Josh to believe that. By then the agency had not come after him and Trey had tracked him down again, bringing a few key items necessary for Josh's winter survival.

"How did you find me?"

Trey's smile was tight. "My special skill."

"What the fuck are you doing?" asked Josh when Trey threw down army rations and propane canisters for his stove.

"No sense you starving to death now."

"That's what *I* think. Why do you give a shit?" After all Trey, with Horton, had imprisoned Josh in the agency's compound for two very long years. He'd just recently been freed. By Kir. "Does your boss also approve of my new survivalist lifestyle?"

"Horton doesn't know." Trey dug out a few bags of coffee.

Josh's mouth ran dry. Months ago, right after he'd killed Brad, coffee had become a luxury he couldn't afford to carry with him.

"I didn't mention your lifestyle to Horton," Trey added. "Or to anyone else for that matter."

"Why not?"

"I have my own agenda." Trey was an agent, a good one, and Josh couldn't fathom why he was handing out coffee and food to someone the agency wanted brought in.

He scratched his jaw in confusion. "Yeah? That includes bribing me with coffee?"

"And what would I bribe you for? I'm just doing you a good turn. Guilt works in strange ways."

Josh didn't bother to hide his astonishment. Hard to believe stone-faced Trey felt guilty.

Trey waved away Josh's disbelief. "You haven't asked about your Minder boyfriend Kir."

Josh stilled, wondering if Trey would try to control him through his ex-lover.

"Can we make some coffee?" asked Trey.

"What about Kir?"

"The agency can't find him. Or his sister, or the rest of the psis. I thought you'd like to know he's free."

Josh hid his relief, though he didn't think he was fooling Trey.

"They found Brad though," said Trey.

Brad. Josh's dead Minder. Josh forced himself to meet Trey's gaze.

"You didn't tell me you killed Brad."

"No." Josh hadn't exactly been in a talking mood last time he'd seen Trey. Worry for his own survival had topped his list. Giving the agency information hadn't fit his plans.

"It took the agency a while to realize who Brad was. They think another Minder killed him. Internal power struggle is their theory. They suspect you're dead. However." Trey held up his hand. "You're not home free. They keep an eye out for you. Especially Horton who thinks you belong to him."

“How do you know I killed Brad?”

Trey turned his hand over, palm up, his kind of shrug. “Kir and you stayed at that cabin. Kir isn’t much of a killer.”

“Two and a half years ago, I was hired to bring Kir in *because* he was a killer.”

Trey looked irritated. “No, because he was a Minder. You and I both know that Kir’s a softy. *You* kill more easily.”

Josh went cold at the thought. Brad’s final vicious instructions to his then-Zombie Josh had been to kill Kir. Brad’s words were potent. Nevertheless Josh had killed Brad and walked away from Kir.

Trey frowned. “Did I hit a nerve?”

“Why are you here?”

Trey walked over to the makeshift wooden table and picked up a cup.

“I was hoping for an explanation,” said Josh.

“I am going to destroy the agency from within.” Trey turned to Josh. “And you are going to help me.”

Josh had to laugh. He was hiding out, avoiding the world, terrified the compulsion to murder his ex-lover would lead him back to Kir. “How the hell am I going to help you?”

“Just survive the winter. You’ve become a cause célèbre. Missing ex-marine, fought for his country, disappeared while in government custody. Some powerful people are very unhappy.”

“No.” Josh couldn’t believe that. He had no connections.

Trey nodded. “It’s true. At some point, when the agency is weak enough, your story can be the final nail in its coffin.”

“I don’t want to tell my story,” Josh said through gritted teeth. Ex-marine, okay. Government custody he could deal with. Being Brad’s mindless Zombie and fuckboy was not something he intended to make public. “I want to be left alone.”

“Kir will be safer if the agency self-destructs,” Trey pointed out. “But you have to appear at the right time. Now is not the right time.”

*Kir*, thought Josh with an ache that never quite went away. He longed for Kir to be safe. From the agency. From himself.

The water boiled and Josh made the coffee. Trey left before Josh could get his head together to ask more questions.



Josh made it through the winter. Trey’s supplies helped but, truth was, Josh had Brad to thank for his survival. After Josh had knifed his Minder through the heart, he’d found Brad’s car keys which had opened Brad’s car and in that car had lain Brad’s laptop with enough information for Josh to access Brad’s money.

Josh had bought a canoe, winter camping gear, supplies. He’d dumped the car for fear they’d find Brad’s body and trace the license. Two stolen cars and several hundred miles later, he’d arrived at the state park with his gear and gone as far into the interior as possible.

For someone whose thinking had not been the clearest last summer—being Brad’s Zombie had messed badly with his head—Josh was surprised he’d done so well. The low point was breaking into the park’s resort in January to stock up. He didn’t enjoy his new role as thief and fugitive. This life was not a long-term solution, but he took a certain grim pride in staying free for nine months.

Josh wiped his brow. The snow had melted, the trees had buds and today he chopped wood in short sleeves. Spring had been a long time coming. He didn’t know how he was going to survive the camping season with its swarms of people, but he was grateful the freezing weather had ended. He’d grown weary of fighting the cold.



His ax hit wood and the sound echoed around the lake. The noise didn't yet matter. The park opened in another couple of weeks, the tenth of May. Then park rangers and casual campers might notice Josh. They didn't belong to the agency trying to track him down, but they could report his odd presence to authorities.

If Trey already hadn't. During these last few weeks, Josh often thought of the agent, mostly because Trey had promised to return in April. Trey's interest made Josh suspicious, but he was also starved of companionship. So a couple of days later, when he observed Trey paddling across the lake, Josh's spirits actually lifted.

Trey was an attractive man. Large in every way, eyes an unusual light shade of blue, and a harsh expression that suited his chiseled good looks. In another time and place, Josh might have flirted with him. But not now, after Brad and Kir and the agency. Josh had found a certain peace of mind while spending his winter alone, but he was still not comfortable with company. And he missed Kir.

Dark-eyed, haunted Kir, who was too young and too old for Josh, who had rescued Josh from Brad and whom Josh was primed to kill. God knows that Josh, no matter how he loathed Brad's orders, had done everything Brad had ever asked of him. Including taking it up the ass.

Josh pinned his gaze on Trey, who was not a Minder or a rapist or a lover. Just a turncoat agent Josh didn't trust.

"Hi, Josh." Trey stepped onto the island.

Not used to talking, Josh simply nodded as he watched Trey tie up the canoe and lift his pack.

"Glad to see you're still in one piece." Trey looked him up and down. "You didn't starve."

"No." Last summer, Josh had been too thin, what with being the agency's prisoner and Brad's Zombie, but over the winter he'd worked to

keep on weight. He tended towards skinny and couldn't afford it in the wilderness.

Josh swallowed. His voice was rusty. "So, how's the agency?"

Trey shrugged. "A little worse for wear. They haven't met with much success of late."

"They haven't found Kir?" Josh's pulse quickened as he waited for an answer.

Trey walked up the steep incline and his serious gaze met Josh's. "Not yet."

"Yet?"

Trey passed Josh and made his way to the wood table Josh had constructed so many months ago. Trey pointed at the Coleman stove. "I'd like some coffee. I brought some along in case you've run out."

Josh eyed Trey for a moment, then reached for the pot. He walked down to the lake, dipped the pot in the water and carried it back to the stove.

As Josh lit a match, Trey said, "The agency has sent Ed Harding in. He's made contact with Kir over the internet and I believe they've met once in person."

Josh didn't recognize the name, but inside he shook, fearing for Kir. He didn't think Kir could survive another intimate encounter with anyone in the agency.

Agent Trey would know agent Ed Harding. He was one of them. Josh, on the other hand, had been freelance, signing on almost three years ago for one apparently small job. He didn't know the personnel, apart from the few who had been his captors.

Trey waited until Josh set out the cups. Then he spoke in a flat tone that indicated he meant it. "Ed's a killer."

Josh pulled in a long breath and looked away.

“Ed looks like you.”

“Fuck,” said Josh in despair. Kir had a weak spot for Josh who, nine months ago, had left without a word. “Is he supposed to seduce Kir?”

“No, at least not sexually. After the story got out about Kir’s mistreatment, as they named it—”

“Abuse. Rape.”

“—the agency decided no agent should have sex with a Minder. For the agent’s sake, also. I actually don’t think it’s in Ed to seduce another man. Though he has his own kind of charm.”

Josh poured the boiling water into the two cups. His hands didn’t shake, but he splashed some water on the ground. He passed Trey his coffee. “I don’t have milk.”

“I remember.” Trey pulled out a packet of Coffee-mate, ripped it open and poured it into his plastic cup.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“So you can warn Kir off.”

Josh turned abruptly away. “I can’t.”

“Can’t? Or won’t.”

“I might kill Kir.” Josh forced out the words. “Which is no better than Ed killing him.”

He could feel Trey watching him. “Why would you kill him?”

Josh focused on the water, too blue under the bright spring sky. “Brad told me to.”

Trey took a long drink from his cup. “You haven’t done a very good job of killing Kir so far.”

“Because I haven’t seen him. I ran.”

“You *might* kill Kir. Ed will. I promise you. He likes to execute freaks. His specialty.”

For a moment, Josh couldn’t move.

"You really care for this Kiran Brunner." Trey's softly spoken observation felt like a threat. People would use his feelings against him. Or against Kir. "One Minder you loved and one you loathed."

"They're not all the same," Josh rasped, finding his voice and barely keeping it under control. "They didn't all come out of the same mold. They just have a fucking gene in common."

"I don't think they're all the same, either." Trey spoke as if he had observed not all redheads were the same. "But the agency does."

"You are the agency."

Trey smiled, a rarity. "No. They think I am."

"I don't trust you," Josh muttered.

"I figured that out when you tried to slice open my chest last fall." Trey paused. "Look, if you don't want to do anything about Kir, I wash my hands of him. I just thought I'd tip you off."

"You tell Kir to steer clear of this Ed Harding."

Trey sipped his coffee. "He'll believe you, not me."

"I'll kill him, Trey."

Trey's face softened slightly. Unusual, but Josh hadn't been able to keep the anguish out of his voice. Trey cradled his cup in his hands. "Listen to me, Josh. You won't kill Kir now. These spells don't last nine months."

"You don't know that."

"These orders or primes or whatever don't last forever," Trey insisted.

Josh's mouth twisted in disgust. "I've done everything Brad Carlisle ever asked me to do."

"And more." Trey met Josh's defiant gaze. "You killed Brad."

"Yes." Josh flung his lukewarm coffee into the bushes. He'd lost the taste for it. This conversation made him feel restless. Trapped. Thinking about Brad did that.

“Do you think Kir would take advice from me?” demanded Trey.

Again, Josh stared out at the lake. Kir wouldn’t let Trey get within speaking range. Trey had agent written all over him.

“Do you believe Ed Harding is a killer who has befriended Kir? Maybe you don’t.”

Josh jerked his head back to Trey. “I don’t know what to think of you and your betrayal of the agency.”

“The agency has betrayed itself and its purpose.” The bitterness in Trey’s voice arrested Josh’s attention. “It only goes after those freaks not strong enough to protect themselves. These are not the people most dangerous to society. We need some kind of police force for freaks, not a witch-hunt agency.”

“Kir isn’t a freak,” Josh protested. Trey lifted an eyebrow, as if he didn’t understand the risk to Kir of involving Josh. “If I try to get to Kir, the agency will nab us both.”

“I’ll help you.”

“Why?” Josh’s voice rang out across the lake. He could not understand Trey’s offer.

“Because *I* am a freak.”

Josh’s blood ran cold. It had never occurred to him that an agent could be a Minder. Brad had managed to infiltrate an agency compound, but the process through which one became an agent was much more rigorous.

“I’m not a Minder,” added Trey. “I’m not going to tell you what I am. Outside of this conversation, I’ll deny I ever said such a thing. But my work is to undermine the agency. To protect my kind. There are innocents just trying to live their lives and raise their children. I will not let the agency institutionalize my people.”

Josh looked around the camp that had been his home for nine long months. Well, he couldn't say no. If Trey had just laid a trap, Josh would pay the price. But he couldn't leave Kir to be killed by the agency.

"I'm just getting Kir away from Ed. Then I'm disappearing again," said Josh.

"Sure."

Josh rubbed his damp hands on his jeans. "I've forgotten what life is like outside this park."

"You'll remember. Your instincts were always good."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your file says your instincts were always good. That's one of the reasons you rose so quickly through the ranks in the marines. That's why you caught Horton's eye and he hired you to bring in Kir."

"This Minder business has messed with my instincts."

"I'm no Minder," said Trey.

"So you say. Yet you've convinced me to leave this park."

"Only because I speak the truth."

## Chapter Two

Kir glanced around Starbucks, feeling nervous. He shouldn't have met up with Ted again. If nothing else, the man was straight. But Kir found Ted's frank interest irresistible. They'd crossed paths on a couple of internet sites and, last month, Ted had been so enthusiastic about Kir's code that he'd given in. Kir had trusted Ted enough to meet in person. With precautions, because Kir recognized when he did something for the wrong reasons.

Ted's superficial resemblance to Josh lured Kir back for a second meeting. Like Josh, Ted loved his coffee. Between Ted's freckles, build and breezy confidence, Kir had been almost speechless the first time they met. Only when they sat down and Ted spoke—his voice deep and slightly mechanical, his face far less expressive—did Kir find he could think again.

They had stumbled through their first meeting, Ted oblivious to Kir's inner turmoil because Ted liked to control the conversation.

Josh had cared enough to let Kir talk. And Josh had been warmly attractive in a way Ted was not. But still, Ted lived nearby and Kir was lonely. So, a couple of weeks later, he agreed to discuss his latest debugging code in person, even though email exchanges were more effective and safer. Ted's one-track mind—and his focus on computers and codes—convinced Kir he was safe. And if Ted was agency, then Kir would find out soon enough to disappear. He could even "ask" Ted about Josh's fate first.

Kir missed Josh, ached for him, though he couldn't confide *that* in anybody. He didn't know what had gone down in Maddie's cabin last summer, but when he returned from town that awful day, Josh had

vanished and Brad lay in a pool of his own blood. In shock, Kir had hung around the lake—he couldn't stay inside the cabin with Brad's bloody body—praying for Josh's return. A week later Maddie showed up and dragged Kir off before the police came and charged him with murder.

But the police didn't arrive until a passing hiker noticed a funny smell coming from inside the cabin.

Kir often wished he'd waited longer, in case Josh had returned later, looking for him. But Josh wouldn't come back. Kir, like Brad, was a Minder who had forced Josh to his will. Though, unlike Brad, he'd never forced Josh to have sex.

"Kir? Are you home?" asked Ted.

Kir jolted back to the present—coffee with Ted—only to gaze into Ted's brown eyes and find them lacking. Josh's were the clearest gray Kir had ever seen.

Kir sighed. "Sorry."

"So, your solution is elegant and unorthodox, a fascinating combination."

It irritated Kir how Ted liked to lavish praise upon him. It didn't feel right.

"I haven't seen anything like it," Ted continued. "Did you bring your laptop along to show me?"

"I don't have a laptop," Kir lied. No one looked at his computer.

"You're kidding." For a moment Ted appeared distinctly disgruntled. Then his expression shifted back to amiable. "I don't suppose you could show me on your computer at home."

"I'll email you."

Ted was fishing for an invitation. Again. And Kir did not invite anyone back to his sister's. Too dangerous. He'd made a point to meet Ted far away from his actual home.



Today Ted was strangely on edge. Or at least Kir thought it strange. Perhaps Ted worked harder than Kir realized to exude relaxed charm. When Ted responded to Kir's frown with a big smile that didn't reach his eyes, all Kir's alarms went off. Ted might just be weird, or Kir may have missed the mark. He'd been sure Ted wasn't agency, but maybe Kir had become overconfident in his ability to peg the agent-type.

The idea made Kir sick, as all thoughts of the agency did. It wasn't safe to meet anyone, even casually. This paranoia was a burden, though a necessary one, and he had to acknowledge it. Kir felt a pang of regret. Not because he liked Ted. Only because Ted reminded him of Josh. Stupid.

He had to push Ted away, which Kir hated. It hurt his head and sapped him of energy. He loathed the glazed expression that came over people after he'd forced his words on them.

"You don't want to see my computer," Kir informed Ted, tone as bland as possible. It should have been easy to slip the idea in, but Ted reacted physically, stiffening.

As if he knew enough to resist. *Agent*. Kir kicked himself. A fucking agent and he should have fucking known. Who else would *want* to meet him? Kir's hands began to shake. He put them under the table where Ted wouldn't see them.

*Calm, calm*. He wanted to disengage without melting the man's brain, or getting his own blown out. Kir couldn't even manage a question about Josh because beneath Ted's disorientation lay terror. Kir could see it in the dilating pupils and blinking eyes. Ted had lost control. An agent's fear of Minders was a dangerous thing.

While Ted spaced out from the mild push he was fighting, Kir looked around the room to plan an escape route. Instead of escaping, Kir froze

and his mind emptied of thought as he spotted someone staring intently at him from across the room, a *someone* resembling Josh.

*Couldn't be.* The recognition—real or not—felt like a body blow. Kir's chest tightened and he darted a glance at Ted, to see if he still sat opposite him, then back to the Josh-clone who shook his head in warning and disappeared behind a bookshelf.

Kir couldn't breathe. His eyes stung. Josh? After nine months?

"Kir?" asked Ted, coming out of his daze. He leaned forward, his expression confused and aggressive. "What the hell is going on?"

Kir rubbed his eyes. Josh wouldn't do this to him, play hide-and-seek in a Barnes and Noble. Josh didn't play games.

"Why do you look sick?" Ted eyed Kir, suspicion in his words and in the way his body leaned away from Kir.

"Sick?" Kir managed, worried he might cry. He needed to make Ted lose interest in him, not descend into hysterics.

After a long pause, during which Ted looked increasingly pissed off, Kir got control of himself.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Kir?"

"I have to go," announced Kir. Josh-clone had warned him off Agent Ted.

"No," Ted almost shouted.

Kir had to push, hard. He braced himself for the effort, focusing his mind.

"Keep your fucking mouth shut," Ted ordered. Kir heard a metallic click. "Open it again, you'll have a bullet through your stomach. Nasty wound. I know what you are, you little shit, and what you just did. Swear to God I will pull this if you so much as move those lips of yours."

*Shit.* This was idiot day for Kir. Pressing his lips together, he nodded to acknowledge Ted's threat and let Ted think *he* had the upper hand because, no doubt about it, Ted had panicked.

Kir's brain was scrambled, but he knew enough to offer no resistance. Ted wanted full control. Agents always did. *Submit, submit, until you can escape.*

"Hands on the table, Minder. I know your fucking tricks."

What bad timing on Kir's part, to hallucinate a Josh-clone. Kir didn't perform well under pressure. He'd fucked up.

Beads of sweat appeared on Ted's forehead. Kir might not have to endure another sojourn with the agency. With trigger-finger across from him, he might die.

Then Ted's eyes widened, as if surprised. To Kir's amazement, Ted fell forward, planting his face onto his half-eaten croissant. Blood trickled down his neck. What the fuck?

The guy at the neighboring table looked over in alarm and Kir said quickly, but with some force, "My friend is just tired. No worries."

With an expression of relief, the man went back to reading his newspaper. That he'd been inclined to stay out of things made Kir's prompt work without a problem.

*Move.* Shaking, Kir pushed away from the table and rose, resisting the urge to race out of the building and thus bring attention to himself.

Halfway through the bookstore, Josh stepped out from behind a bookcase and grabbed his arm. Kir jumped, smothering a cry of alarm.

"Shh. Keep walking." Josh dragged a numb Kir along. "I've got a car."

Under other circumstances, Kir would have been delighted by Josh's presence, his touch, his attention. Right now, Kir could barely keep it together.

They made their way out of the store and down the road, before Josh pushed Kir into the backseat of a car and climbed in after him. The car started up while Josh slammed the door shut and Kir looked into the driver's mirror and recognized an agent-type at the wheel.

My God. He turned to Josh in anguish.

"It's okay." This new automaton-Josh had no expression on his face or in his voice. "Trey's helping you. I promise."

Agents didn't help. Josh, of all people, should know.

"Where's Ed?" Trey glanced over his shoulder at Josh.

*Ed? Did Trey mean Ted?*

"In Starbucks. Dead," said Josh. "He pulled a gun on Kir."

"Where's *your* gun?" demanded Trey.

"I left it there."

"Jesus, that wasn't necessary."

"Yes. It was."

"What a waste," Trey muttered. Through the mirror, he turned his eyes on Kir, then asked Josh, "What's the matter with him?"

"He's in fucking shock." For the first time, Josh sounded emotional, angry in fact. "He's not a fucking agent, you know. He's not used to this shit."

"Ooo-kay," said Trey.

Josh's body was all muscle now, full of tension, yet in control, a hardness to him Kir didn't remember. There must have been something in Kir's expression, because Josh's face gentled. "I'm so sorry, babe."

Kir flushed with emotion—pleasure that Josh had called him babe and uncertainty because Josh's voice was filled with regret. They stared, and Kir couldn't reach for Josh because Josh didn't like to be touched anymore, not since Brad had harmed him.

"I can't stay." Josh's face, grim again, spoke even more strongly than his words. He didn't want to be with Kir.

"You're leaving now?" Kir supposed he sounded plaintive, but he hadn't yet wrapped his mind around Josh's presence, let alone his departure.

"Before Brad died," Josh said in a clipped, flat voice, "he primed me to kill you. I don't trust myself."

"You wouldn't kill me."

"I kill, Kir. As you've just witnessed."

"To save me. You would never kill me. Never." Kir had to believe that. He loved Josh as he loved no one else.

Josh jerked his arm in negation. "How the fuck do you know? You don't know what I am. You think I'm *nice*."

"You are." Kir didn't care if he sounded stupid or unsophisticated.

"Just because you let me fuck your ass doesn't mean I'm nice."

"For Christ's sakes, Josh, do you mind?" protested Trey from the front seat.

Josh ignored him. "Don't confuse sex and love, Kir."

"I know the difference," muttered Kir.

"I'm a killer."

"Let's not overstate the case here," said Trey. "You're pumped after the kill, but I know killers and you're not one."

"Shut the fuck up, Trey. I'm talking to Kir, not you."

Through the mirror, Trey looked at Kir. "Do your spells last nine months?"

Kir hesitated. "They can last longer. If the person is inclined."

"Josh, you don't seem inclined to me," observed Trey. "In fact, you seem downright protective. You don't even like me to call Kir a freak."

Freak. Well, that was accurate. That Josh had defended him made Kir feel warm inside.

Josh turned his gray, intense gaze on Kir. "I cannot be around you."

"Let Kir take the prime or whatever it is away," suggested Trey with some impatience. "Then you can stop fussing."

"*Fussing?*" repeated Josh, enraged.

At the same time, Kir said, "No." He looked into the pale eyes of this strange agent. "I don't push Josh. I haven't, for years. I promised. I *owe* him that."

"Make an exception so he can stay with you." Trey's voice was soft and persuasive.

Kir looked away.

"Can you override Brad?" Josh demanded.

"I don't want to, I don't need to." The idea terrified Kir. It had been okay to work his magic on Josh when he didn't know what Kir could do. But not now. Not after Josh trusted him. Kir felt tainted enough.

"Can you?" Josh repeated.

Liquid seeped out of Kir's eye and Josh looked away, swearing.

Kir scrubbed his face, hating his weakness. "Do you want me to push you?"

"Will it work?"

"It's not necessary."

Josh turned back to him. "*Will it work?*"

Kir nodded.

"Then for God's sakes take away Brad's last words."

They stared and Kir reached over. Josh hesitated for a moment, then gripped Kir's hand, his palm warm and rough. Kir never wanted to let go.

"You don't want to kill me, Josh." Kir forced the words, not too hard, but enough for Josh to feel it, for Josh to stay.

Josh's gaze became unfocused and Kir felt nauseated. Three pushes in an hour and this third one hurt. Josh's grip lessened, as if he wanted to retrieve his hand. Kir let go, feeling desolate.

Josh stared straight ahead. They hit the highway and sometime soon Kir should ask where they were going, but Kir could only think of Josh.

"I felt it. I should know. It's happened to me often enough." Josh turned and read the expression on Kir's face. "I asked you to, okay?"

*And now you don't want to touch me, because I've messed with you.*

"The prime is gone, right Kir?" Josh needed reassurance.

"Yes. If it was even there. You killed Ed today, not me. And you didn't kill me back at the cabin."

"I thought about it. I really did. Instead I threw up and drove Brad's car the hell out of there."

Kir nodded. At last, Josh had answered the question Kir had asked himself all winter. *Why had Josh left him?* But now what would happen? Josh looked so unhappy.

"Where are we going?" Kir, exhausted, felt dulled by events.

"A safe house," said Trey. Kir's eyes widened and Trey added, "*My* safe house. The agency doesn't know about it."

"Um, why are you helping us?"

Trey didn't answer and Kir looked to Josh.

Josh settled back into the corner of his seat, far away from Kir. "Trey's a freak, too. Or so he claims."

## Chapter Three

They parted company. In the middle of nowhere, Trey got out and disappeared into the forest. Then Josh drove for ten hours while Kir dozed. Josh feared he still had to guard himself against hurting Kir. The urge was no longer there, but the image he'd found in his mind so many months ago, that of spearing Kir's heart with Brad's long knife, haunted him.

It was *only* an image. Planted by Brad. Josh had chosen not to act. As if repeating these facts made Kir safer. No, Kir was safe because he had forced Brad's words away from Josh, leaving him rattled and Kir exhausted.

They entered the city at midnight and deep within some unexceptional subdivision, Josh drove into the driveway of a rather upscale townhouse. He thumbed the garage-door opener and Kir woke.

Josh stared straight ahead, pulling into the too-bright garage. He closed the garage door behind them.

He turned to Kir. "I've never been here before. I don't know that Trey is trustworthy, but after Ed's little performance, I can tell you Trey didn't lie when he said you were in danger."

Kir blinked at him.

"Kir?" asked Josh.

"Let's go inside then." Kir, not quite awake, had gravel in his voice. Josh had not forgotten how sexy Kir's voice was, deep and rich, but now was not the time to remember.

Josh left the car and Kir followed. They didn't have much to carry, just Josh's bag. According to Trey, the townhouse had supplies. Josh hoped it was true.



He rifled through the kitchen and found lots to drink. Boxed juice, bottled water. As Josh poured himself some water, Kir opened the freezer.

He turned to Josh. "I'm hungry. Should I throw in one of these frozen pizzas?"

Noise roared through his head. Josh stiffened in fear, aware of the glass in his hand only after it broke, cutting his palm. Beyond that, he couldn't think.

When the noise subsided, Kir was beside him, trying to open Josh's wet fist while Josh clung to the pain.

"Josh. Please let go."

He breathed in once, then slowly unclenched his fist. The blood ran. Kir's hands shook, but he took out the large shard that had sliced Josh's palm. He led Josh to the sink to run water over the injured hand. The cold water soothed. The noise in Josh's head receded.

"It's not a deep cut." Josh kept his voice even. "I was lucky. Check the bathroom for a first-aid kit."

Kir eyed him and Josh nodded encouragement. "I'll be okay while you get a first-aid kit. I'll bet Trey has stocked this place well. Just look at the kitchen."

"Okay." Kir dashed away while Josh let the cold water numb his hand. He just focused on that numbness. He needed it.

Kir was back, touching him, soothing Josh's frayed nerves with his careful attention. Kir dried the hand with a clean cloth, applied antibiotic cream, then gauze and tape. Loosely clasping Josh's wrist, he drew Josh to a kitchen chair and pressed lightly on Josh's shoulder until he sat.

The rules had changed. Last summer, only Josh could touch Kir. Josh's body had been sensitized by his time as Brad's Zombie. Josh

shuddered at the memory and Kir, misreading Josh's body language, backed off.

"No," said Josh. "I'm just remembering too much. Always a mistake. Brad ate a lot of frozen pizza."

"I'm sorry. I should have known. My brain's slow today."

"I can't eat frozen pizza, that's all."

Kir reached for Josh again, then checked himself. But unlike last summer, Josh, while not exactly the most relaxed he'd ever been, wanted that contact.

"Come here." He opened his arms.

Kir looked at a loss at the change of rules, so Josh stood and pulled Kir into a hug, a little roughly as he remembered Ed and that fucking gun. He wanted Kir safe.

"Goddammit," Josh swore into Kir's hair because he felt too much and he couldn't explain anything. Kir grabbed him, clutching his back, trembling. Though no calmer than Kir, Josh made shushing noises. There was solace in their embrace. Josh ran a hand through Kir's thick, tangled hair to calm Kir, to calm himself. Kir's tears dampened Josh's neck. He didn't know how long they stood like that but, eventually, they came to rest their foreheads against each other.

"Despite my PTSD"—Josh had never wanted PTSD, well who did, but now he had it in spades—"we need to eat and drink."

"There's some kind of lasagna in there."

"Perfect." Josh stepped back before he started kissing Kir. If they made out now, they would never get their meal and Kir needed to eat.

Kir retrieved a frozen tray of food from the freezer and stuck it in the oven. He poured them both juice and ripped open a bag of popcorn. "Let's sit in a room with more comfortable chairs."

A couch and a coffee table made up the living room. They settled there, Kir stuffing his face while Josh could barely swallow. Though he forced himself to drink, his appetite was shot. Stress did that. Kir noticed and Josh just shook his head.

“Give me time. I’ll be able to eat later.”

“I’ll get you another drink.” Kir went back to the kitchen and Josh could hear him cleaning up the glass he’d dropped earlier. Kir, endlessly thoughtful, incredibly kind. Josh embarrassed himself by blinking back tears as he remembered how Kir had cared for him during his first days after Brad, when Josh had been a physical and emotional wreck, and Kir hadn’t flinched from Josh’s attempts to hurt him.

Kir returned to the living room and Josh held out a hand. Kir took it without hesitation. Josh drew him into his lap. Kir curled into him.

Josh’s cock went hard against Kir’s butt.

Kir met his gaze. “I thought you hated me.”

“No.” Josh palmed Kir’s cheek, then carefully touched Kir’s eyes, his brow, his temples, his wide mouth, remembering the beauty there, because Kir was, by any standard, gorgeous. He submitted to Josh’s touch, as he always did, eyes darkening with desire.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” said Josh.

Kir frowned. “I know that.”

“I didn’t. I was terrified I’d kill you.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Such belief.”

“Yes.”

Josh cradled Kir’s face in his hands. “I missed you all winter.”

Solemn, Kir gazed back, unable or unwilling to respond. With his thumb, Josh traced Kir’s lips.

“I didn’t forget how beautiful you are.”

Kir's lips parted.

"Do you mind being called beautiful? Some guys don't like it. I could say you're hot and it would be true, but you're beautifully hot."

Kir blushed and Josh leaned forward to press his lips against Kir's. Kir stilled, perhaps because of his own personal demons, perhaps fear for Josh. He tongued Kir's lips. Kir groaned, opened his mouth, and Josh plundered. Kir's mouth was sweet with juice, salty with popcorn, all Kir-taste and eagerness. The kiss took over and soon they were grappling with each other, making out for all they were worth, making up for their lost year.

They kneeled on the couch, chest to chest, hard cocks pressed against each other, unable to get close enough despite deep kisses tinged with desperation. Josh broke away and yanked off Kir's shirt while Kir unzipped Josh's jeans.

Then Josh's cock was deep in Kir's mouth. Kir massaged his balls. Josh couldn't pull in enough air as he rested his hands on Kir's warm back. Kir rose and fell. Josh's cock pushed deeper with each stroke, feeling the warmth and the tongue and the back of the throat, unable to think beyond sensation. After a time he began to shake with lust and emotion, caught on the edge of a precipice.

"Kir," he warned as he stiffened. But Kir kept the rhythm going and Josh stopped fighting the release. He let go, spurting.

Despite that, Kir didn't stop his attentions. He thoroughly licked Josh's head and slit, even after it was slack with gratitude. Josh caressed Kir's back, feather touches with his rough fingers because he remembered that his lover, above all else, wanted contact.

Kir looked up, dazed, and yet the uncertainty that always cut Josh lurked in his eyes. As if he thought Josh might criticize him.

“Hi, gorgeous.” Josh leaned forward and kissed Kir, tasting himself in Kir’s mouth.

Kir responded with eagerness, clutching Josh’s shoulders, shivering in his embrace.

During their short times together, there had been little opportunity to kiss and Josh couldn’t predict their future. While they kissed, Josh took his time undressing Kir, making away with his pants. Without disengaging, he arranged Kir to sit on his lap facing him, Josh’s cock still sated and Kir’s rock hard.

Liquid seeped out Kir’s slit and Josh circled the head with his fingers. Kir’s chest rumbled with heat and Josh pulled Kir closer, tipping up his ass, one hand with Kir’s cock, the other holding Kir’s balls.

Josh broke the kiss to look at Kir, whose lips were swollen with kissing, whose face was heated with pleasure.

“Hey, babe,” said Josh and his fingers slowly moved back from Kir’s balls.

“Josh.”

“Yes?” Josh reached the edge of Kir’s hole and Kir’s gaze became unfocused. Josh’s middle finger, slick with Kir’s precum, made contact and Kir opened for him. He slid in his finger and Kir almost fell backwards.

Josh left Kir’s cock to catch him. They shifted so Kir’s knees were on either side of Josh’s thighs and Kir could lean on Josh, breathing noisily, Josh’s finger up Kir’s ass, relaxing him and massaging him. He brought a second finger inside and Kir moaned.

The oven bell dinged and Kir stiffened, distracted.

“Don’t think about leaving me now,” Josh warned. Kir was so close. Josh used his free hand to pump Kir. Once, twice, and the third time,

Kir's white cum spilled across Josh's fist and onto his thigh while Kir shuddered above him.

He didn't remove his fingers right away. Instead he kissed Kir as deeply as he could and Kir took everything Josh could give.

Josh slid out, tamped down the kiss and let Kir go. With a bewildered air, Kir backed off the couch and walked naked to the kitchen. Josh washed his hands, changing the bandage. His cut had bled during their speed sex, but not a lot.

They ate hungrily now, not speaking, and when they finished, Josh's exhaustion threatened to overtake him.

Kir noticed. "Bed for you."

They went upstairs and found the master bedroom with a queen-sized bed. Kir lingered near the doorway, uncertain what to do, and Josh remembered that last summer he'd refused to sleep in the same bed as Kir.

"You," he told Kir, "are with me." He took Kir's hand and they tumbled into bed. "Tomorrow, we have a lot to talk about. Should have been tonight, but, well, you know."

Sleep about to claim him, Josh pulled Kir's back against his chest and Kir moved closer, kissing Josh's arm.

As he slipped away, he heard Kir whisper, "I love you."



Early morning, before the sun rose, Josh woke disoriented. No longer in his one-man tent, he'd somehow ended up naked in a luxurious bed. He felt safe, if confused. Then his heart stuttered awake to see why. He'd slept with Kir, his beloved. Josh had named him thus last winter, though he couldn't yet say it aloud.

When they'd fallen asleep, Kir had been relaxed, but now there was tension in his back and he was curled up on the other side of the bed. With a pang, Josh wondered when Kir had slept with someone he wanted to be with. Apart from Josh that one time.

Josh rolled out of bed and explored the washroom. Yes, Trey had supplies. Josh opened the box of condoms and while there wasn't lube, there was oil.

He turned off the bathroom light and padded back into the bedroom, letting his eyes adjust to the gray darkness, listening to Kir breathe. Kir jumped in his sleep. If Kir had been sleeping peacefully, Josh would have let him be.

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. They could only move forward.

He laid his hand on Kir's shoulder, very little pressure, and Kir jerked awake.

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

"Josh?" Kir tried to turn, but Josh kept pressure on his shoulder.

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

"Um, okay." Kir sounded confused, 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 frequently. Too often, when foreplay began, Kir had been overanxious to please and only relaxed when Josh gave orders. Josh didn't know if Kir had simply been worried about Josh and his sensitivity to touch, or if making love—at least its opening movements—stressed Kir.

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

“Dreaming?” Josh asked.

“I guess.”

“Bad dream?”

“I don’t remember.”

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 embarrassing bolts out of the blue.

“You know I like everything about you, right?”

Kir’s lips parted. “I’m glad,” he declared 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?”

“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?"

"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 in invitation. Josh palmed Kir's cheeks appreciatively, then stroked his legs before spreading 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 bewildered by all this talk. He always came quickly, at least with Josh, and Josh didn't know if that was a personal quirk or anxiety or youth. Though Kir, no longer the boy of twenty-two he'd first met, was twenty-five to Josh's thirty-one.

"If you don't know, Kir, who does?" Josh held Kir's cock, gently squeezing it, running his fingertips over Kir's slick head. Kir became even harder.

"You," Kir managed.

"Remember sometimes we'd come together?"

Kir rested on his elbows now. "I don't know if I can wait, Josh," he pleaded.

"What do you want?"

Kir didn't answer, though he was noisily inarticulate as Josh stroked Kir's length in a rhythm that would bring release.

"I'll tell you what I want," said Josh and Kir groaned. "Exactly that." Kir came, pumping into Josh's hand, shuddering while Josh palmed Kir's back with his clean hand.

"At least, that's what I wanted first. Now, don't move." Josh collected Kir's cum. Kir stayed still, shivering a little, ass raised, elbows braced, pleasure noises coming from his throat. Josh couldn't remember anyone enjoying his attentions as much as Kir did.

Josh slathered Kir's cum up and down Kir's crack, then reached for the condom and rolled it up his length.

"Are you relaxed?" Josh touched the tip of his cock to Kir's perfect hole.

"Please."

"Oh, I want it, babe, you don't have to ask." Josh pushed in and Kir welcomed him, muscles relaxing to take him, throat humming, yes.

"You amaze me, Kir. You just let me in. No resistance. As if we belong together."

Josh rested there, savoring the heat and the feel of Kir, filling Kir to the hilt.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Josh." Not an answer, but it sounded good.

Instead of moving, Josh stroked Kir's legs and lightly touched his balls and the seam down their middle.

"Josh." Not a plea, just a statement.

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

Kir repeated his name. Josh began to move. He started slow. He wanted to feel everything about it, the way Kir's muscles clenched and released, the way Kir's legs trembled. He wanted to listen to Kir moan. But at some point all these observations fell by the wayside and Josh's control lost the upper hand. He thrust harder and harder. His cock took over. There was sensation and Kir and motion and emotion till the wave hit him and he released, panting above Kir who still hadn't moved, yet his entire body vibrated with pleasure. Josh did not want to leave.

His penis didn't soften right away so instead of slipping out, he slung an arm under Kir's stomach and sat back, bringing Kir with him. As if to end things as they had begun, he bit Kir's neck again and Kir didn't even gasp, he just rested, boneless in Josh's arms.

Josh nuzzled Kir. "No more bad dreams tonight, okay?"

"Okay."

They tumbled over, Josh slid out and Kir turned. They lay side by side, facing each other, and kissed long and deep and slow before they fell asleep.

## Chapter Four

Kir woke enveloped in Josh's warmth, his shoulder absorbing the heat from Josh's chest. Their legs intertwined, Kir lay on his back, when he only ever slept curled on his side. Then again, he was sleeping with Josh. Kir opened his eyes tentatively, as if Josh might disappear in the bright light of day. Instead, clear gray eyes looked down at him. With affection, thought Kir, and like a school girl his heart leapt with delight.

"Good morning," greeted Josh, a slight question in his voice, needing reassurance. Because Josh worried about Kir and his past and his reaction to sex.

Kir turned and ducked his head into Josh's neck so he wouldn't look too love struck.

"Yes," he declared, feeling ardent.

Josh stroked Kir's back and Kir felt the bandage on Josh's palm.

With alarm, Kir sat up. He grabbed Josh's hand. "How is the cut?"

Josh smiled as Kir examined him. "It's fine. I changed the bandage a couple of times. I was perhaps a little too active."

"I'm sorry." Kir traced the skin around the bandage and Josh shivered.

"Not your fault." Josh could say that because he didn't yet know Brad had come after him because of Kir.

"It is," Kir said in a low voice.

Josh's bandaged hand rose, nudging Kir's chin up so he had to meet Josh's gaze. "What is your fault? That I cut myself?"

"Brad." Kir almost gagged on the name.

Josh's mouth twisted and his gray eyes clouded. "Why bring Brad into our bed?"

Kir could barely breathe now.

Josh sighed. "Why do you feel responsible for Brad's actions? Because he was a fellow Minder?"

"No." Kir closed his eyes, ashamed. Josh, at least, had been Brad's Zombie.

The silence stretched on and Kir knew he had to speak. He'd avoided it last summer when Josh was fragile and needed to heal. Last night had seemed too soon and they'd been...busy. This morning felt no better when it came to timing. Yet to hide his relationship with Brad was wrong. And impossible. He wouldn't lie to Josh, even through avoidance.

But to actually say it, was difficult. The tension built in his chest. He became terrified that Josh would walk out in disgust, and Kir wouldn't blame him. His throat thickened and he couldn't quite speak.

"Kir?"

*Get a grip. Get a grip.*

"Hey." Josh pulled him down into his embrace but Kir looked away. Then Josh positioned himself on top, his length along Kir's, elbows above his shoulders. Josh brushed back Kir's hair, quieting him with touch. Gently Josh placed a hand beneath Kir's cheek and pushed, forcing him to either look into Josh's eyes or close his own.

Kir met Josh's gaze and saw concern.

"Your heart is going a mile a minute beneath me," said Josh. "What are you scared of?"

"I didn't know he'd go after you." Kir's voice shook.

"Why did he go after me?" Josh spoke as if he hadn't been brutalized by Brad.

"I stopped." Kir wished he could see Josh more clearly, wished he could stop speaking. But he owed Josh the truth. "I just couldn't be with Brad anymore. I'm so sorry." He felt helpless waiting for Josh to fling

himself off the bed. But Josh kept stroking Kir's face, wiping away the tears.

"So you and Brad were together?"

Kir nodded.

"How long?"

Kir swallowed. "A year and a half. Off and on."

"Did he force you?"

Kir shook his head violently and closed his eyes, as if that would stop the tears. He waited for Josh to pull away in revulsion.

Instead, Josh lowered his mouth to Kir's eyelids and licked them, cleaning off the salt and the liquid around them, a soothing gesture that Kir had never experienced before Josh. After a while, Kir found he could stop crying.

He opened his eyes. Josh still waited above him, no disgust, his gaze honest and clear.

"Did he scare you, Kir?"

Kir smiled weakly. "I'm always a little scared."

"Are you scared now?"

"That you'll leave me. Now that you know."

Josh just watched. "But how did Brad know about me?"

"He met you, remember?"

Josh blinked, confused.

"You don't remember?"

"No."

It hadn't occurred to Kir that Brad would have prevented Josh from recognizing him. But it made sense. That way, Josh didn't tell the agency Brad was a Minder.

Josh's elbows began to shake.

“He must have messed with your memory,” explained Kir. “You met him just before we parted three years ago. He knew I cared about you, though I tried to hide it. That was the problem.”

They were both shaking now and Josh rolled onto his side, pulling Kir with him.

Kir spoke into Josh’s shoulder. “Brad wouldn’t have gone after you, except for me. He was angry that I wouldn’t put out any longer.”

“I think I’ll blame Brad, not you,” Josh ground out.

“I was frantic when you told me Brad was with you. I got to you as fast as I could.”

Josh toyed with Kir’s hair. “Somehow none of this surprises me. I think, at some level, I knew. Even if I can’t remember.”

There was a long silence.

“Did Brad hurt you, Kir?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted.

“Did you like that?”

“Sometimes. Because I felt, I dunno, less culpable. A lie, but there you go.”

Josh took a while to digest that, but he also pulled Kir closer. His caresses didn’t stop and Kir couldn’t stop clinging.

“Would you want me to hurt you?” Josh asked.

“I just want you.”

“Good.” Josh wrapped his hand carefully around Kir’s cock. “Because I can’t bring myself to hurt you.”

Kir’s tongue found Josh’s nipple and soon Josh took control. Gently.

They showered and breakfasted—cereal with boxed milk. Kir was overwhelmed by his confession and Josh’s forgiveness. It left him tongue-tied. So he made Josh coffee and himself tea.

"Thanks." Josh accepted the mug, a too-thoughtful expression on his face, and Kir braced himself. "I'm afraid we need to talk more. Though not, thankfully, about Brad."

Conversation had already exhausted Kir. Instead of talking, he wanted Josh to walk over and start touching him again, make everything feel right. Even if he already felt guilty that Josh gave more than he took when it came to sex. Kir could react but he couldn't take the initiative.

"Kir?" asked Josh and Kir nodded, ready to pay attention. "We can't stay here."

He stiffened. "You don't trust Trey?"

"No. I think our purposes, to date, have been similar, but that could change at any time. Trey could decide to lead Horton and his crew to our little hideaway."

"Let's get out." Kir stood, unable to enjoy his tea. Somehow he'd thought Josh trusted Trey more than this. "Now."

"Calm down. We should leave today, but I don't think Trey's about to bring us in yet. He's serious about helping us. Just the desire may not outlast other developments. There are people he's more interested in protecting."

"Still." Kir couldn't bear being back in the hands of the agency.

"We have a tiny problem of where to go, Kir. That's what we need to figure out."

"That's not a problem. I have a place."

Josh's jaw clenched. "As much as I like *you*, Kir, I cannot possibly hang out with a gang of Minders. All my hard-earned peace of mind will be shot to hell and I'll regress to the basket case I was last summer."

"No. No Minders and you weren't a basket case."

"A little unsteady, if I recall."

"No." Kir went to stand beside Josh.



To Kir's relief, Josh rose to embrace him. "What is this place of yours?" Josh said into his hair.

"An apartment a day's drive from here. It's my private place. My sister gave it to me when I needed to get away. No one else knows. And no one is stalking me, like Brad. I promise."

"You think it's safe."

"Safer than here."



Josh watched Kir tell the car-rental guy they didn't need to pay for the car. Although Josh still had money from Brad, cash would draw more attention than Kir blurring the kid's mind so he wouldn't remember what they looked like. They drove out of the parking lot, Kir at the wheel. Apparently Maddie had decided Kir needed to learn to drive.

"You're not too tired from messing with the kid?" Josh asked with some concern.

"No, he didn't care if we paid or not. He's just doing a job."

"But he'll get in trouble later."

"Maybe," admitted Kir with a guilty glance at Josh.

Once they hit the highway, Josh thought of Maddie. Not his favorite person. "Is your sister worried about where you are?"

"I take off from time to time. She's probably happy to think I hooked up with Ted."

"God, no," said Josh, remembering Ed Harding. That scene in the bookstore was going to give him nightmares.

"She thinks I need to have sex more often." Kir flashed Josh an uncertain grin.

Josh smiled back. "Only with me."

Kir turned back to the road, looking pleased. "I'll let Maddie know I'm fine once we're settled."

"Don't tell her about me."

"Okay. She won't hurt you, you know."

Josh didn't know. In fact, he didn't think of Maddie as a particularly great sister.

"She knows how much I care about you." Kir tightened his grip on the steering wheel and Josh decided he wouldn't slag off the one person in the world who Kir had, besides himself.

"Okay."

"Your brother is worried about you," Kir said out of the blue, startling Josh.

"Who?"

Kir raised his eyebrows. "Your brother. Sam Mackay."

"He noticed I was gone?" Josh shook his head in disbelief. Sam, his feckless, self-centered younger brother, would have finished his year articling with some hotshot firm by now and didn't have time to think about fugitive family members.

"Uh, yeah, he noticed in a big way. Raised a stink."

"Sammy?" Josh knew he sounded slow on the uptake. His brother had taken Josh's phone calls while the agency held Josh prisoner, but Sam hadn't seemed interested. Or uninterested. Just bored. Perfunctory. Which was, Josh had to acknowledge, a family trait. "We're not close."

Kir looked puzzled. "You're close enough for him to ask why his adored older brother, who served in the marines for four years—I didn't know that, Josh—disappeared while in government custody." Kir was echoing Trey's earlier statements, which Josh found odd. "He's livid, Josh, and he's actually made it kind of awkward for the agency. Because he's an up-and-coming Washington lawyer with important friends. Going

places. High-powered law firm. Apparently.” Kir shrugged. “I don’t really know about these things. This is what I gleaned from the internet.”

Josh got worried. He didn’t want his brother in trouble with the agency.

Kir noticed Josh’s alarm. “Your brother isn’t stupid. And he’s not without connections. They can’t really touch him for asking questions about you and demanding answers.”

Josh turned and looked out the window, overcome by Sam’s apparent concern. “He was such a brat, Kir, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“Yeah? Well, I guess older brothers often think that.”

“Especially when the mother spoils the kid rotten.”

“Your mother didn’t spoil you?”

Josh paused. “No. She couldn’t. She was dead. Sam’s my half-brother. His mother didn’t like me much.”

“How could she not like you?” Kir’s naive amazement warmed Josh.

“You are too sweet.”

Kir blushed. Josh liked making Kir blush. His dark skin got darker and redder. His eyes brightened with pleasure.

They talked on and off for the rest of the day. Mostly Kir reassuring Josh that a horde of Minders wouldn’t descend upon them, or Josh trying out different long-term survival scenarios. He seemed to think they should winter in an abandoned state park. Kir would do anything for Josh, but rather hoped it wouldn’t come to that. Josh had become too hard and skinny this past year and Kir wanted to look after him. Winter camping meant Josh looking after Kir when Josh already did too much for Kir.

They arrived at dusk, pulling into the underground parking lot. He could feel Josh’s tension wafting off him. Kir got them out of the parking lot, up the elevator and into the apartment.

Kir poured them drinks while Josh prowled the small space, checking out the bedroom, bathroom and kitchen, before stopping to stare out the window in the living room.

"Nice skyline," he said as Kir offered him water. Josh didn't drink alcohol or Kir would have opened a bottle of wine to help him relax. Maybe touch would help. Josh's touch always helped Kir.

A little shyly, Kir leaned his head against Josh and Josh's arm came around Kir's shoulders, pulling him close for a kiss on the forehead. Kir liked that he could touch Josh now instead of guarding against any inadvertent contact. But it also made him nervous. Kir should sometimes make the first move and he didn't quite know how.

He knew how to respond. He learned that too well, even if he loved reacting to Josh and his hands, his lips, his tongue.

"What is going on in that pretty head of yours?" asked Josh.

Kir felt his face suffuse with heat, with pleasure. He adored Josh's casual compliments and endearments. Over the past year, he had taken out memories of such instances and hugged them close when he'd felt so alone. Last summer, Josh hadn't been comfortable enough to say such things easily, yet he'd called Kir babe twice, and Kir had treasured both times.

Josh's fingers brushed the back of Kir's neck and he shivered. "Now what exactly did your sister say about you and sex?"

Kir smiled, looking down, wishing he could say something sexy and complimentary but phrases like, *you mean so much to me*, or, *I love you*, sounded stupid to his ears. So he said nothing, a dumb mute.

Josh downed his glass. "Let's work up an appetite." They'd picked up Chinese food.

"Okay," said Kir in a low, eager voice, in case his silence put Josh off. Then Josh was undressing Kir who trembled with anticipation.

“You are so beautiful.”

Kir just stared, drowning in Josh’s eyes.

“Kir, promise me you won’t let anyone hurt you again.”

“Just you,” Kir managed because his brain seemed to be lacking air.

Josh stiffened. “I won’t. I refuse to hurt you.”

“I just want to be with you,” Kir elaborated. “No one else.”

Josh relaxed then and his hands danced over Kir until Kir lay in his arms and they made love.

Later they sat on the living-room floor naked, eating noodles and chicken balls in the dark, the city lights their only guide.

“These taste like shit,” declared Josh, losing interest in most of his meal.

“You need to eat more. I’ll cook tomorrow.”

“You will, will you?”

“After I shop.”

Josh swallowed his mouthful. “How long do we plan on staying here anyway?”

Kir frowned. “A few weeks should be safe.”

“And our strategy to bring the agency down. What about that?”

Kir looked at Josh in surprise. “What strategy?”

“That’s the problem,” Josh said grimly, and Kir regretted losing Josh’s warmth. “We need a fucking plan. We can’t just be on the run, because then they’ll chase us.”

“Well, I have been doing a bit of work.”

Josh’s gaze sharpened. “Work?”

“Sending stuff to newspapers. Stuff that can be verified.”

“You be careful. They’ll trace you.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“I would never think you’re stupid, Kir.”

Kir looked away, embarrassed.

“Who called you stupid?” asked Josh.

“Snow,” Kir spat. His guardian, his handler, his pedophile lover. His leg began jiggling up and down.

“I’m glad I killed him.”

Kir shot Josh a questioning look. “Are you? I didn’t think you were.”

“After a long winter to think things over, I decided, yes, I was glad to have killed Snow. And Brad.” Josh expression hardened. “Despite their best efforts, I didn’t kill you or even bring you in.”

Kir crawled over and buried himself in Josh, pressing his face against Josh’s neck. Josh held him and they rested like that for a while. Kir could caress Josh now that they were both sated and he didn’t have to worry about how the sex was scripted. Normal sex, that was. He felt like he had so much to learn in this relationship.

He listened to Josh’s heartbeat, then nuzzled the pulse in Josh’s throat. Kir’s hands drifted down, counting ribs, finding Josh’s hipbones, enjoying the sensation of exploring Josh’s body with no hurry, no agenda. Josh had less body hair than Kir, but Kir liked the feel of the hair that did dust Josh’s skin. He should explain all this to Josh, but he found it difficult to articulate so he just kissed Josh’s breastbone.

Beneath him, Josh hardened and Kir went breathless, wishing the slow exploration wasn’t ending, yet anticipating what would come next.

Josh breathed hot air in his ear. “Just what are you trying to do here, Kir? Wear me out?”

Kir rose up. “You don’t have to do anything.”

Josh rubbed Kir’s arms. “Hey, come back here. I like you attached to me.”

Kir ducked his head back down. Josh's warm hand came round to massage Kir's neck, then raised his face so they were looking at each other.

"You prefer touching me more after sex, than before," Josh observed.

"No." Or at least, it was more complicated than that.

Josh traced Kir's lips. "Don't look stricken. This isn't a critique, Kir. Everyone has their likes and dislikes. Even me." Josh rolled Kir on his back and held him down, his expression intense. "Or were you just toying with me earlier?"

"Toying?" Kir queried.

Josh looked serious, but amusement lurked in his gray eyes. "You want to touch, you have to pay." Then Josh overwhelmed him with touch and mouth and cock and Kir submitted to sensation.

Kir woke in bed. They'd dragged themselves there, leaving Chinese leftovers on the floor. But Josh had already risen and Kir decided Josh needed to sleep more, as well as eat more.

After breakfast, they discussed which newspapers Kir had approached and how. Josh was impressed by the way Kir had covered his tracks, making Kir glow inside. That turned Josh on and Kir sucked him off because Josh had decided that Kir's backside needed a break. Kir didn't argue. Although he could never have enough of Josh's cock, he was sore and tender.

Josh surprised Kir by taking him in his mouth at the same time. Later they lay entwined, Kir drawing patterns on Josh's chest, Kir kissing Josh's neck, Kir rolling on top of Josh and licking his mouth until Josh laughed and opened for his kiss.

"After you leave me—" Kir stopped. Why did he have to say that? It was one of his many fears, but that didn't mean he had to blurt it out. He needed to *think* first.

Beneath him, Josh stilled and his face became blank, which unnerved Kir.

"I'm leaving you." Josh used his flat tone that hid everything. "Why? What do you know that I don't?"

Kir had scared Josh. He didn't want to do that. Ever. "No." He gave Josh urgent kisses. "I just mean, you know, we might not last."

At that, Josh looked baffled. "You're already planning our breakup?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"You'll get tired of me," Kir said lamely, unable to say the appropriate thing to end a conversation he should not have started.

"I will? Huh." Josh spoke as if Kir had revealed an interesting fact to him. "I've never had sex so often in my life. What cues are you picking up that I'm likely to tire of you?"

"I'm a freak," Kir burst out because Josh looked offended.

Josh watched him, but his expression relaxed and Kir let out a breath of relief.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say it aloud. I'm always scared of the future, but from now on I'll shut up."

"Better to speak." Josh touched Kir's face gently, as he always did when he wanted to soothe. "I like to know what's going on behind those gorgeous eyes of yours." Josh closed Kir's eyes with his thumbs, then traced the bone below Kir's lashes.

"No one has ever responded to me like you do. But maybe it means less to you?" Josh asked.

"You mean everything to me," Kir whispered.

"Okay," said Josh. "Okay." And he smiled.



## Chapter Five

They lasted a week on their own. Josh felt like all he did was eat and have sex, as if he'd been starved of both and couldn't get enough. He also slept a fair amount because sex relaxed him. Kir, of course, slept with him.

He watched Kir, to make sure he wanted every touch, caress and fuck Josh gave him. Kir's history of handing himself over, as his pervert guardian had taught him, scared Josh a little. It was a concern and the onus was on Josh to handle Kir with care.

Yet Kir was light with joy. As was he, Josh supposed, after that grim winter. He felt light-years different from last summer, though he'd lived with Kir then, and made love to him. Something inside had healed. The scar still felt tender, but it held.

Face-to-face, Josh shuddered, coming inside Kir. As he leaned forward to kiss Kir on the mouth, someone walked into the apartment and Josh went rigid, his hazy post-sex high shattered.

"Kir?" yelled a woman as Josh pulled out in shock.

"It's okay." Kir wrapped himself around Josh. "It's Maddie."

"Shit." Panic bloomed in Josh's chest. After his winter in the park, he'd thought to be past his fear. What bullshit.

"It's okay," repeated Kir. "Don't come in here," he yelled as his sister approached the open bedroom door and he yanked the cover over Josh.

She marched right in. "You idiot, Kir. How could you bring a total stranger..." Her mouth hung open for a moment. "Is that Josh?"

Kir climbed over Josh. "Get the fuck out. I'll be with you in a moment."

“Okay, okay.” She backed up, making an exaggerated show of shielding her eyes. “I thought you’d brought that Ted guy here.”

Kir turned to look apologetically at Josh who breathed easier now that he’d seen Maddie. At least she acted more like a sister than a Minder. The last time they’d met, she’d forced him into her car so she could drink tea with him.

“Stay here, Josh.” Kir pulled on jeans and stalked out of the bedroom.

Josh lay there, hearing them argue, but could not make out the words. He chose not be scared of Maddie. No point. Either Kir’s love would keep Maddie’s fucking words out of his head, or it wouldn’t. Time to find out.

Josh dressed, took a deep breath and walked out. As he entered the living room, they stopped talking. At once, Kir came to him, standing close and slightly in front. Maddie gave Josh the once-over. “You’re looking at me as if I’m the grim reaper, Josh.”

“Well, the last time Josh saw you, Maddie, you were—”

“Yes, yes.” Maddie waved her hand in irritation, then turned her gaze back to Josh who tried not to flinch. “Don’t worry, Kir will either eat me alive or, worse, get hysterical if I mess with you. So I won’t.”

“Don’t be a bitch,” said Kir. Josh placed a hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him. “The last time—”

“The last time you came within a hundred miles of me, you led Brad to us,” Josh finished, though he suspected Kir had planned to refer to the tea party Maddie had held for Josh.

Maddie blinked. “I’m sorry about that. Although it kinda worked out in the end. You killed Brad. I’ve decided that’s a good thing.”

“Really?” Josh wasn’t impressed. “It is a good thing. Brad liked to hurt Kir.”

She sighed.

“Josh,” protested Kir.

Maddie faced Josh’s glare. “I don’t interfere in my brother’s sex life. If I did, you wouldn’t be here.”

“Such a protective older sister. I especially like the way you abandoned him when he was twelve.”

She sneered which told Josh he’d made a direct hit.

Kir stepped between them. “Look, guys, that’s really enough.”

Because Kir was anxious, Josh held his tongue. He wanted to tell Maddie she was one shitty sister. Later, perhaps.

“It’s good to see you’re so attached to Kir,” said Maddie. “Though why you’d take off last summer—”

“Maddie, *shut up*,” demanded Kir.

“I’d never seen Kir so happy,” she continued blithely on, “as he had been with you and then, *poof*, you had vanished. No forwarding address.”

Josh pulled Kir back and wrapped him in his arms. Kir leaned into him, covering his arms with his own.

Over Kir’s shoulder, Josh stared at Maddie. “It’s just the kind of flighty guy I am. If I think I might slice open my lover’s heart with a knife, I take off. *Poof*.”

Maddie paled, giving Josh some satisfaction. She hadn’t known just how dangerous Brad was for Kir.

“Not that this urge strikes me often. In fact, it only happens when a fucking Minder tells me to kill Kir.” Josh’s voice had gone harsh, but he didn’t care. Kir was in his arms, Maddie looked shocked and he, Josh, only wanted Kir to be safe.

“You’re stronger than you look, Josh Mackay.” Maddie marched off to the kitchen and ran water, getting something to drink. Kir turned in Josh’s arms and kissed his neck.

"She's really angry with me," Kir murmured. "Because she didn't know where I was. I should have contacted her."

Josh shrugged. He'd rather Maddie, an unknown quantity, still didn't know anything. But he supposed Kir and Maddie wanted some brother-sister time and Josh didn't need to be around her.

"Don't stay up too late," Josh told Kir and went to bed.

Maddie stayed for a few days and Kir made it a point not to leave Josh alone with her. Just as well considering the conversations she and Josh tended to have.

"I gather you punched Kir last summer," said Maddie, out of the blue. "He had the remnants of a shiner when he came to town. Said he walked into a door. He's a terrible liar."

Josh looked at Kir, remembering when he feared Kir was controlling him. When Kir had only wanted Josh's company. "I wish I hadn't hit you."

Kir's dark eyes melted and Josh's stomach swooped low. If Maddie wasn't sitting in their living room...

"It didn't matter," claimed Kir.

"It *mattered*," said Josh with feeling. "I like to think my head was still foggy from my time with Brad, but I wish I'd trusted you."

Maddie jumped up, shaking her head. "I'm going for a walk. Be done within an hour."

"Huh?" Though Kir didn't try to stop her.

Josh prowled over to Kir's side of the couch and breathed in his scent before kissing him.

"Oh." Kir smiled now and Josh wondered how he couldn't have known why Maddie had left. But Kir's experiences were unique and, for the most part, uniquely bad.

"Don't say it didn't matter."

“Okay.”

“It really bothered me.”

“I know, I know. I just meant that I understood why.” Kir stroked Josh’s unshaved cheek. “You were frightened, Josh.”

“Yeah. I was.” He’d been terrified.

Josh gathered Kir in his arms and kissed him.

“Do you mind leading all the time?” Kir asked.

Josh pulled back and cocked his head. “Care to elaborate?”

“In sex, you’ll get tired of me just, you know, responding.”

Josh’s regarded Kir steadily. “Who told you that?”

Kir’s gaze darted away, then back. He hadn’t wanted to name Brad but Josh guessed.

“Brad was a complete asshole, you know that.” Josh kissed Kir again. “Let me tell you something. I *like* being in control. I’ve had boyfriends break off with me because I like it too much. But I’ll work on it with you, so that doesn’t happen with us.”

“I’m not going to leave you, Josh,” Kir said, amazed at the idea.

Josh just smiled as if he knew better and Kir felt indignant. Josh didn’t understand how much he meant to Kir. He pushed Josh’s shoulder in protest and Josh glanced down, eyebrows raised.

Kir became irritated. “You don’t *want* to know how unlikely it is that I would leave you. I watch what I say, so you don’t think you have a barnacle stuck to you.”

Josh grabbed Kir’s hand and dragged him to the bedroom where the condoms and lube lay. As he efficiently divested Kir of his clothing, he said, “You need to stay with me so I can fuck you whenever I want, Kir. Bend over.”

Without preamble, Josh entered Kir who grunted, trying to catch up to speed. Josh pulled out, Kir hardened and Josh plunged again, then

stilled. He brought Kir up and back to lean against him, pinched Kir's nipple and massaged Kir's balls till Kir thought his head would explode with the sensation of Josh inside him and all around him. Just before Kir was about to come, Josh went motionless.

"Josh," he pleaded.

"Were you trying to tell me, in your roundabout way, that you don't want to bottom?"

"*What?*" Was Josh teasing?

"No?" There was a smile in Josh's voice.

He pushed Kir forward again, so he was on hands and knees, then pulled out and slammed into Kir.

"Answer me, Kir." Josh retreated, thrust, developing rhythm and Kir could only gasp, so close to the edge and shivering with need.

"Kir," Josh warned.

"Christ, Josh, I want this."

"So. Do. I." Josh swore, coming inside Kir who just managed not to collapse. He loved the feel of Josh's orgasm within him. Even as the last of Josh pulsed, he nipped Kir's neck and his hand grasped Kir's cock, urging Kir on. Kir groaned, falling forward and letting go, though Josh didn't let go as Kir spurted through Josh's fingers.

When Kir stopped shuddering, Josh turned him over and mock-glared at him. "I will never get tired of you responding. I expect you to respond whenever I damned please."

Kir grinned up, then pulled Josh down for a kiss.

Later that day, while Kir showered, Maddie announced she was leaving. She pinned her gaze on Josh. "You'll be glad."

"Sure," Josh agreed. Kir didn't expect Josh and Maddie to get along. Kir seemed to believe Maddie could care about fellow Minders, but no one else.

She ripped off a hunk of fresh bread and chewed on it. "Do you mind explaining why you loathe me? I can feel your disapproval wafting off you and coming right at me."

Josh smiled tightly. "Where to begin?"

"You tell me."

*You're the crappiest sister I've ever met*, wasn't quite specific enough. Besides, he didn't make sweeping statements that hurt Kir. Crappy or not, Maddie had been the one person in Kir's life to show some kind of concern for him over the years. Even if that concern was ineffective, if not downright harmful.

"Well," offered Josh, "this visit hasn't been quite so bad, seeing as you didn't bring a psychopath along."

Maddie nodded. "Yes, Brad followed me last summer. I apologized for that."

"Oh, you apologized. Well then, everything's okay. No harm done. But wait. Harm *was* done. I was given this strange idea to kill Kir."

Maddie rolled her eyes. "It's over. I can't exactly fix it now. But you know, I don't think that's what you dislike about me."

She was right. The real source of his anger came from that much earlier event he'd already referred to. "You left Kir at the agency when he was twelve years old." Josh didn't bother to hide his contempt. "He couldn't defend himself."

Maddie's facade did not fail her. She looked as nonchalant as ever, but the stiffness in her shoulders hadn't been there before. She gave him a slight smile, no humor in it.

"I was naive. Funny what a warped place that fucking agency was. I didn't even know men fucked boys. I thought they only fucked girls. Like me."

*Crap.* If Josh had thought it through, he might have wondered what they'd done to Maddie.

"And yet they did," said Josh, though the fight was no longer in him. Maddie's abuse didn't exonerate her, but he found it hard to keep beating this horse. Besides, the water had stopped running. Kir had ended his shower.

Maddie's brown gaze turned icy, in a way Kir's never did. "You're right, I abandoned Kir, who continued on in my stead, till I could rescue him. And then, for a number of years, he refused to stay with me. He didn't forgive me until after he met you, in fact."

Josh didn't know what to make of that.

"Not such a fun conversation, is it? Though you're not without your own sordid past now." Her voice softened. "I'm glad you actually care about Kir. He's very emotional."

At that moment Kir stalked out of the bathroom, glaring at Maddie. "Do you mind? You don't have to lecture Josh about my flaws."

Josh reached out and pulled a wet Kir to him. "Babe, you have no flaws."

Kir looked down, smiling.

"Well, if nothing else, you're very cute together." This time Maddie's smile was real and to Josh's surprise he saw an echo of Kir in her expression. He had thought they shared their deeply brown eyes and nothing else.

Then her face went serious. "I just told Josh a little about Horton, Kir."

Kir nodded, then glanced at Josh who'd gone stiff beside him.



“*Horton?*” Josh looked at Maddie.

“He was my handler. Literally. What a fucker. Literally.” Maddie’s nonchalant pose didn’t convince anyone. A tremor passed through her.

Josh felt his mouth quiver with distaste. “Three years ago Horton hired me to bring in Kir. But I—Christ.” He shook his head. “Horton is obsessed with Minders.”

“We know,” said Maddie.

Josh, now appalled, withdrew from Kir and rubbed his temples. He and Kir had been living in a fantasyland this past week, but now all those godawful worries came flooding back. The agency wanted Kir and Josh. And perhaps Maddie.



That afternoon Maddie left and Josh prowled around the apartment, feeling caged. Only Kir went outside, because he could smudge his own existence more easily than Josh’s. People didn’t really see Kir.

When he returned, Josh jumped him and Kir fought back. He didn’t have Josh’s height, but their weight was not so different—Josh knew he was too thin. At one point Kir pinned Josh to the ground and forced a kiss upon him. Josh responded, letting Kir keep control of the kiss until Kir lost his guard. Josh took advantage and flipped Kir flat on his back while Kir hooted. As he struggled to rise, Josh turned Kir around and held him in an armlock while Josh prepped for entry.

“You want it,” he told Kir who just grunted as Josh toyed with his hole. Then he slammed inside.

“God,” said Kir who gave up the fight for fucking.

It brought relief and joy not to treat each other with kid gloves and they ended up laughing a lot afterwards while Kir explored Josh's sated body with a curiosity Josh found endearing.

Later still, they lay and talked.

"I don't know how long I can stay in a one-bedroom apartment. The first week was fine, a refreshing change after my winter outside. But I'm beginning to feel a little claustrophobic. And"—Josh cleared his throat—"that brings back bad memories."

Kir pressed kisses on his face, then pulled back. "The stationary bike isn't enough, I guess."

Josh observed Kir's wry expression and responded in kind. "Somehow, I know I'm not outside, or even moving."

"I'm sorry about Maddie."

Josh took a deep breath. "Well, I don't dislike her quite as much, so perhaps the visit wasn't a complete loss."

"She's all I've got, except you." Kir stared at Josh's shoulder. "I can't let her go."

Josh sank his fingers into Kir's unruly hair. "I don't want you to. You don't need to choose between us, Kir, even if we don't get along."

After dinner, they were cleaning up the kitchen when someone knocked on the door. They both froze.

"Maddie?" Josh said in an undertone. Kir shook his head, as if her return didn't make sense. They walked to the door and Kir peered through the peephole.

"Trey," Kir mouthed and Trey said, "That's right, it's me. Open the door before I draw attention to you."

Josh wondered if Trey's exceptionality was super-hearing or mind-reading while Kir unlocked the door.

But Trey didn't walk in. He stood in the doorway, looking at them with an expression Josh had never seen on Trey's face—regret. It unnerved Josh.

He glanced at Kir who swallowed, his face tightening. "Trey, you don't want to be here."

Trey smiled without humor. "Your magic doesn't work on me, buddy. Sorry. I'm a freak, too."

"Does Horton know that?" Josh tried to figure out what had prompted this visit while hoping to engage Trey, who seemed remote despite his regret.

The agent shook his head, but whether as an answer to Josh's question, he didn't know. "You would have been safer at my place. I guess it was too much to expect you'd trust me on that. This way I had to find you by following Maddie and, well, the agency became too interested in my search."

"We have to leave."

Again, Trey shook his head. "It's too late, Josh."

Kir's teeth began to chatter and Josh wrapped an arm around him, all the while looking at Trey. "You are going to help us," said Josh.

"I will," agreed Trey. "But first you'll be taken into custody."

Kir moaned.

"I'll go public." Josh offered Trey what he'd wanted back at the park. "I'll talk to whoever you think I should talk to. I'll tell them everything."

"You're surrounded," Trey explained. "And not by the media, I'm afraid. The agency."

"You're handing us over." Josh couldn't believe it. He hadn't expected this blatant a betrayal when they'd run from Trey's safe house.

"I have no choice. I couldn't hide your location from them. My powers are quite limited."

“What do they think you’re doing now?”

Trey’s smile was grim. “Convincing you to leave with me. It’s Kir they want to restrain.”

“No,” said Josh.

“I told them you’d be under Kir’s influence—”

“I’m *not*—”

Trey kept talking. “—but Horton thought I should check. Since you once worked for him.” Trey stepped back.

“Look, Trey—” began Josh.

“Get down. Cover your ears.”

Josh started towards him and Trey pulled a gun. He opened his hand, an apologetic shrug, then backed out of their apartment, shutting the door. Josh heard the warning whine and dragged Kir down, covering him. The window broke and the explosion knocked Josh out.

## Chapter Six

His head pounding, Kir faded in and out of consciousness. Despite the haze of pain, he recognized the room.

The punishment room, Snow used to call it. Where Kir was banished when he didn't cooperate, which wasn't all that often. The windowless room, dismal and gray, had filled Kir with dread and besides, he had been eager to please Snow.

Someone—not Snow who was dead three years now—had been kind enough to bring in a cot upon which he lay. Kir tried to rise but the old memories made him shake and he had to lie down.

He passed out again and woke next with a terrible thirst. He'd been drugged he now realized. Part of the reason he felt groggy and far from alert. The explosion hadn't helped either.

"Kiran Brunner."

Kir jumped at the voice coming through the speaker. Though it didn't belong to Snow, but Horton, a man who had visited frequently during Kir's last years with the agency.

"Good morning," added Horton.

Kir wondered which morning and how long he'd been out. Then he closed his eyes as he remembered Josh had been with him. Unlikely that Josh had escaped. He would have taken the noise bomb harder than Kir, because Josh had protected Kir with his body and covered Kir's ears with his hands.

Trey had betrayed them.

"Josh Mackay is in our custody," said Horton. Kir didn't doubt it, but found it painful to hear. "His good health will depend on your good behavior. Do you understand?"

Kir lay there, in despair.

"You had better get up and nod that head of yours, Kir. For Josh's sake, if not yours."

Kir pushed himself up.

"Listen to me carefully. I am going to come in and talk to you. I realize you're weak but I know you. I know you can manipulate me. Someone will be monitoring us and if they see you misuse your powers, they will intervene and Josh will suffer." Horton let that last word echo. "So, Kir, can I come in and you won't molest my mind?"

Kir hung his head in a semblance of a nod.

In less than a minute, Horton pushed the thick door open and shut it behind him. He stood an inch taller than Kir, with thinning hair and a grizzled beard. Intelligent eyes. Maddie had warned Kir Horton wasn't stupid.

Horton stood there, shaking his head. "You don't look much like your sister, you know that?"

Kir rubbed his bleary eyes. He hoped the drug wore off soon, because he needed his wits about him, such as they were.

Horton sat on the chair in the corner. "How are you feeling?"

"Not great." Kir didn't want to answer Horton's questions, didn't want to talk. But Kir had to be as compliant as possible. It was his way to get around people.

"Is there anything I can get you?"

"I need to piss and I'm thirsty."

Horton looked into the camera and nodded. "They'll bring you a drink." He gestured to the corner. "The hole is there."

Wearily, Kir relieved himself on camera, in front of Horton. He supposed he could be grateful Horton's interest wasn't sexual, but

gratitude was a difficult emotion to summon. Still they delivered the drink and Kir sat on the cot with a large bottle of water and guzzled it.

Horton watched him drink, which made his skin crawl. Horton's pale blue eyes seemed slightly dead.

Sitting back, Horton crossed his legs. "So, I want to tell you something."

Kir nodded.

"Josh doesn't interest me very much. Truth be told, I'm still irritated by his interference three years ago."

Kir blinked, trying to read the meaning behind his words.

"When he helped you escape," Horton explained.

"That was my fault," Kir said quickly. "I used him."

"How gallant of you to take responsibility for his actions. The point is, I've only ever tried to use Josh to get to you. I will continue to do so. If you use your powers against me, or the agency, Josh will be punished."

Kir found it hard to breathe, but he nodded again. *Puppet, puppet.*

"Do you understand? I'm thinking a bit of finger-breaking, to start. It can get much worse. Eyes are always vulnerable."

Kir began to shake and Horton smiled.

"Unlike Snow, I'm not fond of sexual torture. But I am just as ruthless. Even if, personally, I have nothing against Josh. In fact, I like him."

Kir tried not to let his lip curl in disgust.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes," whispered Kir.

"Good. Because I am happy to keep Josh in the best of health." Horton smiled as if he expected Kir to smile back. "Tell me, how is your hearing, Kir? Any damage?"

"I'm fine." His head hurt, but he didn't think his hearing had been affected.

"Excellent. I don't want you deaf. You wouldn't be as useful. And you're going to be very useful, aren't you?"

"I am," said Kir fervently. He was also going to rescue Josh, he just didn't know how. Rescuing Josh from Brad had been easy. Maddie had planned it. She had brains. Kir didn't. At least, not when frightened. And he was very frightened now. It no doubt showed.

Horton laughed. "My goodness, so eager. But then, Snow was your handler. He wanted you docile, pliant, lacking in spirit. Because otherwise you might do as your sister did, and get away from us. And you never did, at least not on your own."

"Where's Josh?"

"Ah, you're more interested in talking about Josh than yourself. I suppose that makes sense."

Kir swallowed.

"He's not too far away. I can't be more specific than that."

Kir pulled in a shaky breath. "What exactly do you want of me?"

Horton smiled again. "I want you to save the agency, Kir."

"How?"

"If I say jump, will you say how high? Did Snow really program you that well?"

"I think so," admitted Kir, remembering how Snow had delighted in praising Kir for being feisty and spirited, when they both knew Kir had neither quality.

"God knows what Josh sees in you. I mean, nice body, I'm sure—not that men attract me."

*Yes, yes.*



“But what normal man would want to be with you, freak and whore that you are? Trash, really. Yet Josh seems genuinely concerned about you. You were the first person he asked about when he regained consciousness.”

Kir’s face heated up.

“Ah, that information affects you. It is so convenient you care.”

“Will you tell me what you want?”

Horton regarded Kir. “Okay. Let me give it to you in a nutshell—you’re going to talk to a number of important people and make their doubts about the agency vanish.”

“How can they talk to me if I’m in this room?”

“You won’t be. Once I’m convinced you’re obedient, you’ll become my new assistant, at least in name. You’ll come to a rendezvous, convince our target you should remain at the table to chat and then make a couple of forceful statements.”

“It doesn’t always work.”

“Don’t play me for stupid, Kir. I know Snow used you often for this type of thing. Now, he wanted people to give him money for no reason they could comprehend, or he wanted to blackmail someone, but you managed quite well back then. Snow died with a tidy sum of money.”

Kir felt sick to his stomach.

“What? Not good memories?”

“No.”

“Well, it is different now. There is Josh to consider.”

“Yes,” agreed Kir. “But how do I know Josh is alive?”

“We’ll let you see him on video.”

“You could fake it.”

“Nah, we’ll set it up so you can ask him a question. How well he’s able to answer will depend on you, of course.”

Kir teared up. Josh would end up dead unless Kir was extremely careful. He didn't think he could survive Josh's death, not when it was caused by his very existence.

"Your sister never cried," said Horton.

*No, and Maddie still doesn't cry. She doesn't have sex now either. Doesn't care for anyone, except me and a few Minders.*

"Now." Horton stood and hiked up his pants. "Before we get started, you'll need a day or two to recover from the shock of being back here. You're too pale. You'll also need to be fitted for the job. Dirty shirt and jeans won't convince anyone you're my assistant. Someone will be in to measure you."

"Okay."

Horton left after a few more comments about Josh's health and Kir's goodwill. A bit later food arrived followed by a nervous man who measured Kir while Kir gritted his teeth.

Then Kir crawled back onto the cot and escaped to sleep.



Next visit, Horton brought a laptop. When Kir opened it, he saw Josh, live on camera, pacing his room like a caged animal. Kir's heart stopped at the bleak expression on Josh's face. He disliked being closed in. More than Kir who had, at least, grown up with it. He knew how to adapt.

Kir looked up at Horton. "You said I could talk to him."

"Josh refuses to talk to you." Horton shrugged. "We didn't think forcing the issue was in Josh's best interest, but if that's what you want you'll get it."

“No,” said Kir, unsure if Horton lied or not. Josh might refuse to cooperate in any way. Or he might be angry with Kir, but Kir rejected that possibility.

Horton had a small smile on his face. “You’d think Josh would be more grateful. We told him you wanted to talk to him. That you needed his reassurance. All he said, so eloquently, was, ‘Fuck you.’”

Kir looked away so Horton wouldn’t be able to read his face. He probably showed all his insecurities and longing and fear. Fear for Josh, fear that Josh hated him.

“In fact, Josh doesn’t seem to like you much anymore.” Horton seemed to see right through to Kir. “But that’s not important. What’s important is that *you* like *Josh*.”

*Josh likes me*, Kir wanted to shout, but he just kept his eyes glued on Josh prowling his room, shedding excess energy, losing weight again.

“I’ll take the computer,” said Horton and Kir relinquished his link to Josh. “Now we’ll get you prepped for a first meeting. This one’s not critical. We just want to see how you function in the field.”

Kir went through the motions without thinking. Like old times. They cut his hair. He showered and dressed. They groomed him. Horton watched with a knowing eye, apparently pleased. At least Horton had no desire to kiss him as Snow had.

The first man Kir met, a friend of Horton’s, was troubled by some of the agency’s antics, as he named them. As if the agency was a recalcitrant child that had to be brought to heel. Kir surprised the friend by joining them for drinks. When Kir “reminded” the man he wanted to meet Horton’s new assistant, they became a friendly party of three.

Kir remained quiet while the other two talked about old times, new times, agency goals. At the right moment, Kir ventured that the agency did a good job under difficult circumstances—these had been Horton’s

words—and the friend’s brow creased. There was less resistance than Kir expected. Though Kir didn’t think he had just saved the agency, he had shut down a questioning voice and it made him sick—he had acted against himself.

He found he couldn’t finish his drink, his head was swimming.

“Your assistant looks a little pale,” the friend observed. Shortly thereafter Horton decided they should leave.

Kir feared Horton would be angry Kir hadn’t hid his unease but, in the limo on the way home, Horton grinned, flushed with success. Giddy, and Kir remembered the old days when Snow would literally crow in the backseat, thinking there was nothing he couldn’t accomplish with Kir at his side or on his lap or in whatever position Snow chose.

Horton let Kir slump in his own seat and he proved a little more observant than Snow had been. “What’s wrong?” he asked, reigning in his exuberance.

“It always makes me a little sick,” Kir acknowledged, seeing no reason to hide it.

“With so few words? You hardly said a thing.”

Kir nodded.

Horton eyed him. “Your sister could accomplish much more.”

“She’s not here.” Thank God. In this situation, Maddie would kill herself.

“No. Not that I could count on her. One day she’d obey and the next she’d do her own thing.” Horton paused. “I found something admirable in that. It’s better, though, that Snow broke your spirit. If you ever had any.”

Kir looked out the window.

On the outside, Kir felt like a machine, a very obedient machine. But on the inside, he was watching. Nobody could know about the inside. He guarded himself and waited.

In the week that followed, Kir worked on four other men with similar levels of success. He took more care to hide his discomfort, to wait until he got back to his room to be sick.

Horton praised him. Kir was appalled that the praise at some level pleased him. What was the matter with him? He told himself he just wanted Josh to be safe. But his actions hurt people. At some point—soon, he hoped—he would have to undermine Horton’s efforts, all the while protecting Josh. Kir feared he didn’t have the strength and resources to play that double game.

He had nightmares he couldn’t remember and woke terrified of the unknown. He had to find his opening and until then, obey. The waiting was painful because he didn’t know what opportunity would present itself and he feared it wouldn’t arrive, or worse, he wouldn’t recognize it.

Then one morning, Trey paid him a visit. The large man walked through the door. His very presence startled Kir who’d been expecting Horton.

“Jumpy?” asked Trey, his voice flat, his face turned to stone.

Kir backed up to a wall. Trey. Betrayal.

Trey’s face became even more unreadable. Its blank grimness frightened Kir. Trey planned to physically threaten him. Kir recognized the type.

Instead, Trey began to pace. Kir wanted to fade into the wall to escape Trey’s silent presence. The pacing made Kir think of Josh, last seen by Kir over video, sleeping on the cot. Horton claimed Josh was not drugged, but one of Josh’s hands had been scraped and his face was bruised.

Trey came to a stop and turned. "You realize that Josh hates you."

Kir jerked his head up. The words hurt.

"After you shot Ed Harding, Josh had no choice but to do exactly what you wanted. You cannot be surprised at his hate. This is the third time you've taken control of him. At your apartment, he wouldn't even leave you to come with me."

Kir continued to stare straight ahead, his thoughts whirring. *Don't show it*, don't show that Trey made no sense whatsoever. Trey *knew* Josh had chosen to be with Kir. Josh had shot Ed. Trey had driven the getaway car.

"I wouldn't mind some kind of response here. Horton says you're very obedient."

"I'm obedient," Kir parroted.

"Good. It's important to know when to obey."

Kir looked up at Trey whose stone expression had vanished. His voice remained conversational and slightly sinister, but his eyes burned with meaning, as if something mattered very much indeed.

Trey resumed pacing. "Horton didn't want to explain that Josh hates you. But you need an explanation for why Josh won't talk to you. Otherwise you will balk when it is most important."

These statements that Josh hated Kir were false. They were Josh's way of telling Kir not to help the agency. He watched Trey, trying to read his message.

"You'll meet Josh's brother soon. That's why I'm here, to prepare you."

"Prepare me?" Kir's heart began to hammer. Josh's brother. He didn't want to manipulate Josh's brother. Josh had described Sam as a brat, but with some affection.

Kir swore he saw concern behind Trey's grim expression, but he had trouble making sense of the situation. He'd never had a cool head under pressure.

"I am in charge of Josh's well-being," Trey informed him. "I decide what happens if you don't behave. So when they take you to Sam Mackay, make sure you do the right thing." Then Trey did what Kir had been waiting for ever since Trey had entered the room. He walked up and grabbed Kir, hauling him off the ground to slam him against the wall. Kir began gulping in air.

Trey's face pushed up against Kir's, his pale blue eyes intense and unflinching.

*Tell*, Trey mouthed, then released him. Kir dropped to the floor as Trey strode out. Kir folded into himself, burying his head in his arms, and rocked a little, hiding his face from the camera.

*Tell.*

Kir wished he had good reason to trust Trey.



The next day Horton came in and looked over a well-groomed Kir with approval. "I would have been ticked off if Trey had bruised you."

"My back hurts."

"Your back doesn't show." Horton paused. "Yesterday, I watched Trey who is, I admit, unpredictable at best. He should have communicated the fact that Josh is vulnerable and you must continue to do as I say."

"I already understood that."

Horton lifted his arms in an exaggerated gesture of sympathy and Kir loathed him a little more. "*I thought so.*"

Kir felt a tic under his right eye. Horton noticed and reached out to touch the skin. Involuntarily, Kir flinched, while Horton looked disgusted.

"I don't know how Snow could have fucked you all the time. I don't even like to think about it." But he liked to mention it. Because it rattled Kir and the less clearly Kir could think, the better he obeyed.

"Do you understand what you have to tell Sam?"

Kir nodded.

"Say it again," demanded Horton as if Kir were stupid. It was only two sentences. Horrible sentences, but only two.

Kir swallowed. "Josh is dead. A Minder killed him."

"Don't mumble."

Kir cleared his thick throat. "Josh is dead. A Minder killed him."

"Exactly."

*Tell.* Kir clung to that word.

He barely paid attention on the way over though Horton appeared more tense than usual. This meeting carried more weight than those that had gone before, because Josh's brother was not easily cowed or bribed or influenced. At least not when the life of his brother was at stake.

As if Kir would proclaim to the world that Josh was dead. It would bury Josh alive. Did Horton think Kir didn't understand the risk to Josh? To force Sam to believe his brother had died was unthinkable. Kir cast Horton a sideways glance just before they left the limo.

Up the fourteen floors they went. Ushered into an office. With his lightheaded fear, Kir found it hard to breathe. He caught Horton eyeing him with worry. *Careful.* For Horton to abort the meeting at the last minute would be disastrous. Kir tried to ground himself by remembering Josh, his bravery and his strength. It didn't banish his fear but it got Kir



to the meeting room. Where Horton insisted Kir appreciate the fantastic view of the city.

Kir and Horton waited for Sam Mackay, not the other way around. So Sam thought a lot of himself. Maybe most brats did, Kir wouldn't know. He'd always been desperate to please and very little else.

With Josh, he'd forgotten how empty he really was. He felt empty again.

"Carl," snapped Horton. It took Kir a moment to realize Horton had used his cover name, and another moment to realize they had company. A stranger had entered the room and Kir's gaze fell upon a tall man of Josh's height and build. Their faces weren't at all similar. Sam was darker than Josh, and his eyes were blue, not gray.

Puzzled by Kir's presence or perhaps by his expression, Sam frowned and asked, "And you are?"

Horton rose. "This is my assistant, Carl Brown. I'm—"

"Mr. Horton," Sam interrupted. They shook hands before Sam turned to Kir to do the same. Sam frowned when Kir's hand trembled in his. "I had thought this a one-on-one meeting." Unlike the other men Kir had recently been instructed to work on, Sam did not appear impressed by Horton.

"Carl, sit down." Horton pointed to a chair, obviously irritated by Kir's demeanor. Kir refused to sit, while Horton muttered something about the importance of Kir's presence.

Sam looked well-dressed, Kir had to admit. What he wore was money. Kir hoped that meant power, because Josh needed someone on his side with power.

Horton turned to Kir expectantly, waiting for his all-important words to act on Sam.

But Kir didn't want to work on Sam so he spoke without force. "I have something interesting to tell you about Josh."

Sam's brows rose. "Oh?"

Horton glanced at Kir, then back at Sam, no doubt looking for the telltale confusion that should have marked this brief manipulation.

None showed on Sam's face. Kir's time was running out.

"About my brother?" prompted Sam.

Horton, though wary, adopted a sympathetic expression that put Sam on alert. He glanced between Kir and Horton and his polished exterior cracked a little. He cared about Josh, thank God.

"Mr. Horton," began Kir and Horton nodded encouragement. "Is holding Josh prisoner while blackmailing—"

Horton reached for his gun.

"Don't move!" shouted Kir. Horton froze, shaking in anger and confusion, quivering with his hand stuck on his holstered gun.

"What the fuck is going on?" Sam watched Horton's strange tremors in appalled amazement, then turned to Kir.

"I'm a Minder."

Sam didn't react to the news.

"Lock the door," Kir ordered, pushing a little.

Sam, despite himself, did just that.

"Listen to me. No matter what they say later, you must believe me. Or they will kill Josh. He is being held at the agency, in its core, I believe. You have to get him out, and fast."

Sam sneered at Kir. "What the fuck are you? One of those woo woo guys you hear stories about?"

"Yes. Get someone to search the agency's headquarters and you will find Josh at the center. Get there before they kill him." To Kir's relief, fear showed on Sam's face. "You don't have much time. I counted on you

having the resources. Does the name Trey Walters mean anything to you?”

Sam started, the name giving Kir credibility. “Trey’s FBI. He’s been helping me look for Josh.”

*FBI?* “Trey knows *exactly* where Josh is.”

Sam went for his cell. Watching Kir the entire time, he called Trey. Turned pale.

Outside, someone tried to open the door. “Mr. Mackay, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” yelled Sam, dialing someone else. “Go away.”

“Mr. Mackay, we have reason to believe—”

Then Sam gave instructions Kir didn’t understand. Something about FBI and agency headquarters. All the while, the man outside insisted ever louder that he be let in.

“Just fuck right off,” bellowed Sam.

“I’m sorry, sir.” The man in the hall broke the window.

“Jesus, that’s not necessary.” Sam turned. “No—”

It was over. Three men rushed the room. Kir stood, expecting a bullet. But perhaps he still had some value, because he was slammed down to the floor by force, face ground into the carpet as they trussed him up and drugged him into oblivion. During the struggle, they dragged Sam from the office, as if arresting him.

Kir had miscalculated. Josh was lost.

## Chapter Seven

Josh strode across the hospital room to reach the bed where Kir lay unconscious, wired up to more than one machine.

“What happened?” he asked Sam who trailed behind him.

“I told you,” said Sam patiently. “They almost killed him with the drugs. They were frightened. I couldn’t talk them down.”

Josh sank his face into the crook of Kir’s free arm and he stirred.

“I’m sorry, Josh. He was very brave, standing there to face them.” Sam paused, then added, “The doctors thinks he’ll come round.”

Josh didn’t intend to leave the room until Kir did.

Sam dragged a couple of chairs over. “Why don’t you sit down? You’re exhausted.” He placed the chair beside Kir’s bed and Josh sat where he could hold Kir’s limp hand. He passed a palm over Kir’s head. The agency had shorn his curls.

“He has curly hair,” Josh told Sam.

Sam nodded.

“They’ve treated him very badly.”

“He’s not the only one.” Furious to find Josh imprisoned, Sam had already filed Josh didn’t know how many suits. Something about physical abuse because of the fist fight, though that was the least of Josh’s concerns.

“Can you protect Kir legally?”

“Oh, I think so,” Sam drawled. “It’s no longer possible to keep the agency and their ‘clients’ secret from the general population. The publicity has been Trey’s goal all along and with our help he succeeded.” Sam sounded bitter because Trey had played Sam, pretending he didn’t know where Josh was, when Trey had known everything. “The public

knowledge will have consequences. But there is the fundamental issue of human rights.” His voice dropped. “It may be necessary to haul out Kir’s horrible childhood to discredit the agency and its work.”

Josh squeezed Kir’s hand tighter.

They sat in silence for a while and Josh tried to think of how to thank his brother.

“You should have contacted me,” said Sam, still angry about that. “I would have helped you when you were on the run.”

“I didn’t want to drag you into this mess and get you killed.” Josh had made himself believe his brother didn’t care because he couldn’t endanger Sam.

“I would have asked you for help.”

“But you’re my baby brother.”

Sam shook his head. “Believe it or not, I’m an adult. Kir’s age, in fact.”

Josh opened his mouth to thank Sam for saving his life and Sam abruptly rose, cutting him off. “You look skeletal these days. I’m getting us food. I’ll also have a cot brought in, since you’re not leaving him.”

“Thank you, Sam.”

“Don’t thank me.”

“Too late.”

Sam just punched his shoulder affectionately.

Later, after Sam had gone home for the night, Trey came in to visit. To Josh’s dismay.

“How is he?” Trey had betrayed everyone. Except perhaps himself.

Josh didn’t know what to make of Trey’s concern for Kir. “The doctors think he’ll be okay.”

Trey walked over to the bed and looked down at Kir.

“Why bring us in, Trey?”

Trey turned his pale eyes on Josh. "I think it was worth it. If you'd stayed at my safe house, I could have kept better control. But you didn't."

"So, you have what you wanted?"

"I'd say so. The agency will be dismantled."

"Good thing for you and your kind."

"Good thing for you," Trey said dryly.

"You can thank Kir for using him when he wakes up."

Trey didn't respond to that suggestion. "He doesn't look much like his sister."

"You've met Maddie?" Josh didn't hide his surprise.

"I helped her escape, long ago." Trey gave a hint of a smile, as if reminiscing.

Josh started. "You didn't join the agency until after Kir escaped."

"I was plain FBI at that point. Not undercover at the agency."

Something inside Josh began to boil. "Why would you allow a seventeen-year-old girl to go free and leave her twelve-year-old brother in that hell?"

Trey's gaze, quiet and assessing, held no guilt or regret. "I didn't know Kir even existed. They were separated by then. I just met a suicidal seventeen-year-old who thought she could manipulate me."

"She doesn't know you helped her?"

Trey shook his head. "I had a soft spot for her. It was all her anger. You'll have to forgive me. I waited till she left Kir's apartment before the agency arrived. I could delay that long."

"You had time to delay, yet you couldn't warn me."

"It wasn't about time. They had you and Kir in their crosshairs, not Maddie." Trey eyed Josh. "You don't look too impressed, given that you're

more attached to Kir than his sister. But Kir can adapt. As a teenager, Maddie was breaking.”

“Kir breaks, too.”

Trey briefly shut his eyes in recognition of the truth in Josh’s words. Then he said, “You needn’t fear you’ll see me again. I plan to disappear.”

“Well, I’d better say goodbye then.”

Trey nodded and left the room.

Later that night, Josh crawled into bed with Kir and found Trey’s words echoing in his head. “You don’t break, Kir, okay?” Josh kissed Kir’s cheek. He didn’t answer, just breathed. At least his sleep seemed peaceful. In time, Josh slept, too.



The nightmares had returned. Black hood over head. Mouth taped shut. He would suffocate. Again. This time his hands were free and yet useless, heavy like lead. He needed to lift them, bring them to his mouth and rip off the tape so he could speak.

“Kir.”

The voice tried to lull him. Kir struggled to understand where he was. Then strong arms and warm breath surrounded him. Someone said, “It’s me, Josh,” and Kir, fearing for Josh more than anything, rose fighting.

“Open your eyes, Kir,” urged the voice. He tried once, twice, before the heavy lids lifted and he was face-to-face with Josh, who held him tightly, as if Kir might try to get away.

Josh’s gray eyes swam with tears. Josh didn’t cry.

Kir blinked, confused, wondering if they were dead.

Josh started kissing him, forehead, cheek, mouth, cheek. Tears dropped on Kir’s face. Kir’s stampeding heart began to subside.

Josh pulled back to look at Kir again.

“Josh?”

“Yup.”

“We’re alive?” Kir asked.

Josh grinned down at him. “Yes.”

Kir looked around and realized he was attached to...something, with tubes and such. “Are we in prison?”

“Nope. We’re just waiting for you to get better. They overdosed you.” Josh’s face clouded at that statement.

“Where’s Horton?”

The grin returned, Josh made ridiculously happy by the question and Kir couldn’t help returning the smile. “*Horton* is in prison.”

Kir blinked, unable to believe it. “No.”

“Yup. FBI isn’t too happy with him.”

“FBI?” Kir felt slow on the uptake but then Josh kissed him and in the moment he didn’t care.

“They’re closing down the agency.”

“Who will hunt us now?” Kir glanced around, trying to assess their situation. His question had Josh wiping his eyes and Kir felt bad, but still confused and exhausted.

“No one *can* hunt us now.”

Kir winced. That was a nice dream, but he hadn’t the energy to argue. In fact, his eyes drifted shut, though Josh still held him tight. The rest of the night passed in a blur. Some strangers visited—nurses and doctors concerned about his health—and Josh remained by his side.

He woke enough the next day to urge Josh to flee and Josh responded by cradling Kir’s face in his hands, his expression fierce. “I don’t think you understand—we’re free and *I am not leaving you.*”



“Josh, I don’t know what’s going on, but you need to get out of here before people realize what I am.”

“No, I don’t. You have rights, Kir.”

“Rights,” he repeated.

“Yes, my brother is going to make sure your rights are recognized.”

The brat? “Why would he do that?”

Josh began to look a little exasperated. “Sam knows I love you.”

Kir realized he was gaping at Josh’s declaration before Josh swooped down to kiss his open mouth. When Josh pulled back, Kir cocked his head. “You love me. You never said that before.”

“It’s a special occasion. Don’t make me repeat it.” The glint in Josh’s eye gave away his deadpan delivery.

“You’re joking.”

“I *might* repeat it. You never know. Freedom works in strange ways.”

“We’re free.”

“Kir.” Josh appeared pained. “Don’t you believe me?”

“I know, I’m repeating myself.” He lowered his voice. “But I’ve never been free, Josh.”

Josh’s gaze intensified. “You’re not entirely free, babe. You’re stuck with me.”

“That’s a good thing, Josh.”

“Yeah, it is.”

## About the Author

Joely Skye is an introvert, a Spooks (MI5) fan, a wife and a mother. One of her favorite books ever is Ellen Kushner's *Swordspoint* and, while she doesn't watch much TV, she couldn't resist *Queer as Folk*.

She writes male/male romance. Don't ask her why. Men fascinate her, as does romance, so gay romance is the perfect fit.

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*On the streets of old San Francisco,  
darkness threatens to consume a vampire's soul,  
and one man's love is all that stands between good and evil.*

## Soul of the Night

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*Available now at Samhain Publishing*

The truth of his vampiric nature a carefully guarded secret, Kiyoshi Ishibe wanders alone in the shadows of the past. Banished from Edo in disgrace, the once famous kabuki actor Ryuhei Nakamura also journeys in loneliness. Both souls find one another in the night, each man filling the emptiness of the other.

But temptation and desire brings out the worst in Kiyoshi, triggering a fascination with the blood of a killer known as the Poisoned Dragon. As this interest quickly spirals into an obsession, everything Kiyoshi and Ryuhei have come to treasure is in danger of being lost...forever...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Soul of the Night*:

As it turned out, Kiyoshi's money went a long way in this small town. They were able to take some of the better seats on the knee-high platform along the inn's walls, with the nicely polished tables and clean chopsticks. Two bottles of warm *sake* were brought to them, along with the steamed pork buns as Kiyoshi had promised. The rice wine was just to Ryuhei's liking, so much so in fact, they drank a third bottle as well.

"You'll have to be careful with me now." Ryuhei giggled lightly behind his hand. "*Sake* tends to loosen more than just my tongue."

Kiyoshi felt his cheeks color as he glanced down at Nakamura-san's lap. If anything, it seemed to harden some parts of him.

"You're just so kind," Ryuhei cooed, then hiccupped. "You've made my stay here so much more bearable—enjoyable I'd even say." He

reached across the low table and patted Kiyoshi's hand. "I thought you might've been a traveling musician when I first saw you." He smiled, his fingertips tracing the smooth skin on Kiyoshi's knuckles. "You have such long, graceful fingers. There's not a callus on them and your nails are so fine. That's quite unusual for a farmer."

"I never said I was a very good farmer," Kiyoshi replied softly as he turned his hand to lightly clasp Ryuhei's. He stroked the pad of his thumb across the pulse point on Nakamura's wrist and felt his own blood stir with the same steady rhythm of the actor's. He licked his lips, his fangs tingling in his mouth as they tried to extend in anticipation.

Forcing himself to release Ryuhei's hand, he signaled for the innkeeper. "Perhaps we should see about arranging that room and finishing our drinks in private?"

Ryuhei tilted his head forward to peer seductively up at Kiyoshi through a fringe of dark lashes. "I would like that, Kiyoshi-kun. I would like that very much."

The innkeeper trotted over and pleased with Kiyoshi's generosity of payment, dashed off to prepare them a room. Ryuhei stood a bit shakily, dipping a little and murmuring about how "*That* was good wine."

He started humming old folk songs about *sakura* blossoms and the moon, and Kiyoshi thought Ryuhei had a sweet-sounding voice. "Those are pretty songs." He smiled at Nakamura, standing to help keep the actor steady as the innkeeper returned.

Apparently, Ryuhei's balance depended more on how close Kiyoshi was than any effect of the liquor. Dropping his arm around Kiyoshi's waist, Ryuhei didn't seem quite so tipsy after all. They followed the innkeeper up the wooden staircase that rose over the entrance to the kitchen, heading toward the room that had been readied for them.

"If I still had my *shamisen*, I could play those songs for you and you could sing them," Nakamura suggested playfully.

“I don’t know the lyrics; you’d have to teach them to me.”

Ryuhei gasped with mock horror. “But every child learns those songs.”

“Neh...sometimes I forget things like that.” Kiyoshi laughed nervously. He’d been born long before the first versions of those songs had been sung in any country village.

“Oh, Kiyoshi-kun.” Nakamura giggled. “You can remember my performances from ten years ago, but not this?” Ryuhei stopped in the middle of the hallway. “You *do* remember me, don’t you? You aren’t saying it to be kind?”

“I do remember.” Kiyoshi nodded adamantly until the sad expression lifted from the actor’s face. “I couldn’t forget such a stirring performance.”

“Nakamura!”

They both turned in unison to stare over the railing at the man who’d just burst through the front entryway. His bright red costume was rumpled and soaked with sweat, the feathers crowning the brass lion’s mask under his arm were limp and soggy.

Ryuhei tensed at first and then his shoulders slumped. “Oh no,” he groaned. “It’s Shosei from the Noh idiots...”

“Nakamura!” Shosei bellowed again, jabbing his finger up in the air rather rudely. “We had a show tonight.”

“Did we, Shosei-san?” Ryuhei blinked innocently.

The Noh actor sputtered and then shouted, “Yes.”

“Did anyone attend?”

“What the hell do you mean ‘did anyone attend’? Half this town must have shown up.”

“Did anyone *important* attend?”

“You—” Shosei’s round face turned the same shade of scarlet as his costume. “I had to play all three roles *myself*. I’m not paying you to chase ass in these *ryokan*.”

“You call that two-bit pittance *payment*?” Ryuhei leaned over the railing, just as worked up as the Noh actor. “It’s *robbery*. An actor of my skill stuck playing the role of *waki*—a meaningless secondary character? *Insult*.”

Kiyoshi looked around, nervous at the attention the scene was getting from the other guests. One thing was certain—this was a far better show than anything performed at the Noh.

“Robbery, is it?” Shosei shouted. “You washed up whore. You’re *fired*.” With that, he stormed back out of the inn.

Everything was silent in the inn for a long time afterward. Then Nakamura stood up straight and pronounced with all the dignity of an official in the emperor’s court, “It’s a good thing I quit first.”

Kiyoshi contained yet another laugh, rather surprised at how Nakamura brought so much lightness to his long, dreary existence. Oh, the man was most likely insufferable taken in large doses, but the sweetness of Ryuhei’s blood when he put himself into such a stir was undoubtedly worth the inconvenience.

He touched Ryuhei’s shoulder and leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Perhaps we should get to our room. There’s no sense giving people a show they aren’t paying for.”

Ryuhei’s arm slipped around his waist once more, his hand gliding down across Kiyoshi’s hip. “Yes, my friend. Private shows have always been my favorite.”

Ryuhei kissed him the instant the innkeeper slid the *shoji* closed behind them. Kiyoshi responded with a need he hadn’t felt in ages.

The actor’s lips were soft and moist, his eager tongue tasting of the *sake* they’d drunk together. Kiyoshi pulled back only long enough to set

down the bottle of wine he carried, then wrapped his fingers around Nakamura's *obi* sash and jerked the man forward into another deep kiss. His nimble fingers made quick work of the tight knot until the *obi* fell, giving him free access to the burning flesh within the robe.

Ryuhei moaned into his mouth and arched forward as Kiyoshi ran his palm across the growing bulge contained within the front of the actor's loincloth. Kiyoshi let out his own soft moan as Ryuhei's lips slid down, the actor's tongue snaking out to glide along the side of Kiyoshi's neck as though it were a slice of ripe fruit. He teased the lobe of Kiyoshi's ear with his teeth, murmuring words of delight when Kiyoshi leaned in for more.

"Oh you sweet, lovely thing." Ryuhei's hands stroked through the fabric of Kiyoshi's *kimono* the way a musician ran his hands over a beloved instrument. "I haven't wanted anyone as much as I want you, Kiyoshi-kun."

A lie, most probably. But it didn't matter, for the invigorating scent of the man's blood seeped from his pores, igniting the vampire's appetite in so many ways. Kiyoshi dropped to his knees before Ryuhei, nuzzling the hard cock through the fabric of the *fundoshi*. He slipped his fingers inside, fondled the dusky warm flesh incased within the loincloth. Ryuhei, knees quaking, squeezed Kiyoshi's shoulders to steady himself.

"Oh Gods. I can't believe the effect you have on me." Ryuhei moaned as Kiyoshi began to tug the fabric free. "*Please* don't make me wait..."

Kiyoshi dropped Ryuhei's loincloth to the floor, staring as the other's flesh grew longer and harder still. He gripped the base of the erection and leaned in to stroke the rigid length with his tongue, licking at the top slit and the thick drop of fluid beading there.

"Oh Gods." Ryuhei tangled his fingers in Kiyoshi's hair and tried to pull him closer. But Kiyoshi drew away, freed himself and stood as the actor whimpered, "Don't be a tease..."



Stepping back, Kiyoshi said nothing. He took the rolled futon mattress from the corner of the room and spread it across the wooden floor. Shedding his own clothing, he held out his hand in invitation.

*For the BCPI team, facing a horror from another reality could be deadly.  
For Sam and Bo, facing their own secrets and lies could be far worse.*

## What Hides Inside

Book Two in the Bay City Paranormal Investigation series

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*Coming April 10, 2007 to Samhain Publishing*

Sam Raintree's life changed forever when he started his dream job with Bay City Paranormal Investigations. In one fateful week, he learned he was psychic, discovered he possessed the power to open interdimensional portals, and accidentally let loose a horror like he'd never imagined. He also began a relationship with his boss, Dr. Bo Broussard, a man who'd been in the closet all his life.

Now, three months later, the burden of secrets has become too heavy for a fragile relationship to bear. Bo isn't ready to come out, and Sam is tired of hiding. When Bo hires a new investigator, Dean Delapore, Sam is intrigued in spite of himself. Dean is bisexual, attractive and very interested in Sam.

During the intense investigation of South Bay High School, from which three students have mysteriously disappeared, Sam and Dean draw closer together, while Bo pushes Sam away despite their feelings for one another. When the investigation erupts and Sam comes face-to-face with his worst nightmare, he has to decide whether to fight for Bo's love, or let him go.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *What Hides Inside*:

The group ate on the run, grabbing bites of subs and gulps of soda as they worked to get the equipment set up. Sam and Bo remained upstairs, sitting in two borrowed chairs in front of the folding table they'd placed

just outside the tunnel door. They watched the pictures from the seven cameras come up one by one on the powerful laptop Bo had finally bought the previous month. The display was crystal clear, every crack in the stone visible.

“Okay, that’s the last one,” David’s voice crackled over the radio. “How’s it looking?”

“Perfect.” Sam glanced at Bo. “What do you think, lights or night vision?”

Bo pursed his lips. “Hm. Night vision, I guess.”

“Use the night vision, David,” Sam repeated into the radio.

“Kay. Andre, Dean, you got that?”

“Got it,” Andre answered.

“Yep,” Dean echoed. “Done.”

Rising to his feet, Bo thumbed his radio on. “Okay, turn the lights off, let’s make sure we’re getting good pictures with the night vision.”

Sam heard muffled voices, then the camera displays went dark. In the blackness, the stairs and tunnel walls glowed an eerie green.

“That’s good,” Bo said. “Come on up.”

The gleam of flashlights showed on the computer screen, followed by the three men climbing the stairs.

“Damn, it’s like a fucking sauna down there,” David complained, mopping the sweat from his forehead as he emerged into the hall. “Feels good up here.”

“It sure does.” Lifting his sweater up to his armpits, Dean fanned his belly. “I think next time we come here, I’ll wear a T-shirt.”

Sam tried not to look, but he couldn’t help it. Dean’s pale skin shone with sweat, putting sleek muscles and hipbones in sharp relief. His cheeks were flushed red, his hair clinging in damp tendrils to his neck and forehead. For once, he didn’t seem to be purposefully flirting. He pulled his sweater back down without a hint of his sly, seductive smile.

Sam licked his lips, fiercely turned on by the unconscious sexiness Dean exuded when he wasn't even trying.

"There's water bottles in the bag there." Andre gestured toward the plastic bag sitting beside the wall. "Figured we might need them, with the heat down there."

Dean lunged for the bag, grabbed three water bottles and tossed Andre and David each one. Twisting the cap off the third bottle, he downed half of it in one breath. "Oh God," he gasped. "I needed that. Thanks, Andre."

"No problem." Andre took a long swallow of his own water. "All right, I'm off for a while. Who wants a ride home?"

"Me," Cecile said, coming out of Mr. Innes's office. She'd offered to talk with him about opening the side tunnels since Bo's help had been needed with the equipment set-up. "I have some errands to run before Andre and I have guard duty. Are we leaving the cameras up until one a.m. since we got started late?"

"Yes, I guess we should." Bo glanced at his watch. "Well, Sam? You ready to get started?"

The fevered look in Bo's eyes went straight to Sam's crotch. He didn't think Bo was talking about guarding the equipment, or monitoring the cameras.

"Um, yeah." To Sam's relief, his voice sounded normal.

"Okay, we're off then." Andre jerked his head toward the front entrance of the school. "Come on, I have things to do."

Sam watched as Andre stalked off without a backward glance. His heart ached for his friend. It couldn't have been easy for Andre to experience the sort of sensations he'd had in Oleander House, bringing back memories of that horrible night. If he closed his eyes, Sam could still see Amy's lifeless body. How much worse must it be for Andre, who'd been her lover and partner for years?

“Is he all right?” Dean asked, gray-green eyes full of concern as he watched Andre walk out the door, David and Cecile following arm in arm in his wake.

“He will be.” Bo sighed. “I’ll tell you about it sometime soon. Right now, it’s enough to know he’s going through a tough time. He closes up sometimes. Don’t take it personally.”

“Okay, sure. See y’all later.” With a quick smile, Dean trotted after the rest of the group.

Sam glanced around the suddenly quiet hallway. The knowledge that he and Bo were alone in the building hit Sam like a hammer.

Sam cleared his throat. “Okay. So. What did you want to talk about?”

For a moment, Bo said nothing. Then, just as his silence started to make Sam nervous, he took Sam’s hand and pulled him into the shadows under the stairs.

“Bo, what—”

Bo’s hand against his lips cut him off. “Shhh. Don’t say anything. Just touch me.”

“But—”

“But nothing.” Pressing close, Bo rolled his hips against Sam’s. The unmistakable hardness in Bo’s jeans set Sam’s head spinning. “I need you to touch me, right now.” Bo’s voice was a rough whisper, his lips warm and silky on the skin of Sam’s neck. “Please. There’s no one here to see. Please.”

Sam wanted to protest, if for no other reason than Bo’s resolute refusal to see him openly. Then Bo’s mouth found his, Bo’s hand slipped between his legs, and all thought melted in a scorching wave of desire.

Whimpering into the kiss, Sam cupped Bo’s head in one hand and fumbled Bo’s jeans open with the other. Bo shuddered against him when he wrapped his fingers around Bo’s erection and squeezed.

“Oh God,” Bo whispered, his breath hot on Sam’s lips. “Yes.”

“Yeah.” Sam licked Bo’s ear. “Bo...”

Even as Sam spoke, Bo’s fingers yanked open the button on his jeans and tugged down his zipper. Sam’s legs turned to rubber at the feel of Bo’s hand on his cock, the shy yet eager touch he’d become addicted to over the past few weeks. Letting the last of his reservations fall away, Sam closed his eyes and gave himself up to his need.

The uncomfortable angle soon had Sam’s wrist cramping, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Not when Bo pushed rough moans into his mouth every time his thumb pressed into Bo’s slit. Bo’s fingers twisted around Sam’s shaft, sending tingling tendrils of pleasure snaking down his thighs. The kiss turned hungry and harsh, both men groaning as they fucked each other’s hands.

“God, Sam,” Bo panted, and bit Sam’s lower lip. “Close.”

Sam nodded, stroking Bo’s prick faster. “Love how you touch me.”

Bo went still, his cock pulsing in Sam’s hand. When he spoke, his voice was barely audible. “Sam, oh my God...”

“Come on,” Sam growled, pulling back enough to see Bo’s face. “Let me feel it.”

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