

*A Year
and a Day*
Willa Okati

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A Year and a Day

By Willa Okati

Dedication

For Ally Blue, who led me to Samhain, and for Sasha Knight, editor extraordinaire—you're both the best!

Chapter One

“Ash, you cut it out, now.”

“Don’t want to.” A warm body cozied up nice and close and personal behind Slate as he stood by the kitchen stove. “You feel so good.”

“You say that every time you touch me.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true.” Long, slender fingers mounted on an artist’s hands slipped around the front of Slate’s jeans, trailing a line down his zipper. “Mmm, mmm. Hey, good lookin’. What ya got cookin’? Cookin’ up something special for me?”

“Ash,” Slate laughed. “I’m on the phone, here.” All the same, he didn’t move his lover’s hands away. The sensation of Ash’s fingers dancing up and down his cock felt all too good to say no to. “You know, talking to somebody else? A person who is not you, by the by, who probably wonders what on earth we’re up to while I have her on hold.”

“I can take a guess,” a voice crackled out from the other end of the line. Feminine, mature and amused as all hell. “Ash attacking you again?”

Slate shifted so he could hold the phone tucked beneath his ear and used his other hand to cover Ash’s, moving ever so slowly up and down. He tried to keep his breathing regular and easy as he answered. “Nah. He’s, um, making dinner.”

“Pigs in blankets?”

“Marianne, you have a filthy mind.”

"I've seen you two in action. Well, not all the way, except for that once in the hayloft when I came by to feed Shelby and the both of you were upstairs doing things that would scare the fillies." Marianne sounded amused. "Swear to you I'll never forget the look on both your faces when I popped my head up over the ladder. You looked like a high-school kid caught with his pants down at the prom."

"Marianne," Slate scolded. Then he moaned, because he just couldn't *not*, not with Ash starting to slide his zipper down click by click. "Your cousin is assaulting my manly virtue, and all you've got time for is jokes? A fine help you are."

"Better he assault you than somebody else," Marianne fired back. "Sounds like he's doing a pretty good job of it, too."

"That he is," Slate admitted as Ash slipped one questing finger inside the tiny hole of opened zipper. He let out a strangled noise when Ash slid his fingertip down one inch of his cock. "Say, you mind if I call you later?"

"I'm already on my way to hanging up." Oh, Marianne was definitely laughing at him, and that just wouldn't do. "Won't expect you to call for a couple hours. I expect you two are gonna be occupied for about that long, if not longer."

"Definitely longer," Ash whispered in Slate's ear, his breath tickling in a way that made Slate want to jump and laugh, then turn around and jump his lover's bones just to teach him a damn good and enjoyable lesson. "Much...much...longer."

He moaned again. "Ash, I swear to you, I'm gonna turn you over my knee."

"Promise?" that wicked whisper shot right back.

"Call you later, Marianne," Slate rattled off into the phone. "We've got all that to-do with setting up for the fair tomorrow. Lots of details."

“Yeah, but right now you only have one on your mind.” Marianne laughed, a low alto chuckle. “Have fun ravishing my only blood kin, now.”

“Believe me, I will.” Slate grabbed Ash’s hand to hold it steady, just where he wanted it most. “Bye, now.”

She’d already hung up. Slate hung the old rotary phone’s receiver back up in its cradle, and then whirled on Ash, ready to pounce. “Oh, I am so gonna get you for that,” he said with a savage grin, crouching down in preparation to leap. Ash chortled and danced away from him. He picked up a clean dishcloth off the kitchen table and snapped it at Slate, feinting backwards.

“Gotta catch me first,” he taunted. “Are you quick enough, old man?”

“Old? I’ve only got three years on you and you ain’t quite thirty yet. Don’t you be calling me old.” Slate crept closer. “You really do want that spanking, don’t you?”

Ash’s eyes danced. “Maybe. How about you catch me and we’ll find out?”

“Oh, believe me, I plan on it.” Slate’s fingers touched his heavy leather belt. “How about I take this off and use it? Jerk your jeans down and bend you over my lap. Your pretty tanned ass raised up high for me to do exactly what I want with it. I’ll stripe you until you’re the prettiest shade of red and beggin’ for me to fuck you.”

“That’s your plan, is it?” Ash feinted again with the towel. “You still have to catch me.”

“I don’t see you running.”

“Look a little closer, then.” Ash whipped his towel into Slate’s face and took off running, his laughter drifting behind him. Slate fought for a second to get his face free of the thing, and then ran after him. His cock rubbed against the inside of his jeans, already half-hard and eager to go

the full nine. Well, full seven, but thick around as Ash's slim wrist and more than able to deliver the goods.

"Run, run, fast as you can," Ash chanted at Slate as he belted after him, the sound of his sturdy boots a noisy clump-clump-clump in the wake of Ash's lighter sneakers. Slate followed the sounds of running steps and whoops of laughter through the dining room, out through the foyer, peeking in every room he passed, and kept on going. "Can't catch me, I'm the gingerhead man."

"What the hell?" Slate ran faster as Ash skidded out the front door. "That's *gingerbread*, you simple."

Ash paused long enough to give Slate a wicked look over his shoulder. "Not when I've been eating candied ginger, and have a few plans in mind for you, my friend." He darted on ahead, bursting into the yard.

They faced off, balancing point to counterpoint, in the front yard. Sunlight striped through the leaves of the big old oak tree that had grown there for hundreds of years, planted as a sapling by Slate's great-great whatever. It played off Ash's face and chest, highlighting his dazzling grin and sparkling eyes.

"Think you're up to this?" Ash said, his voice like pure and liquid sex. "Are you man enough to take me on? Make me beg for mercy by the time we're done here?"

"You just let me catch you, and you'll find out." Slate drank in the sight of his lover. God, he adored that man. Playful as a speckled pup and as full of life as the green leaves brushing his shoulders. "Come on, now, be sweet," he coaxed. "I'll love you up so good and hard you won't ever think about runnin' away again."

"Oh, no. No, no, no." Ash shook his head, lightly dance-stepping back. "The chase is on, my friend. Can't catch me!"

He sprinted away, dodging an old dogwood and spinning off its gnarled trunk before spiraling into the side yard and disappearing around the side of the house. “Come on, slowpoke,” floated back.

“Oh, I am gonna stripe that ass like a candy cane,” Slate muttered to himself before he bolted after his lover. He didn’t bother locking the door. No one locked their doors in the little rural bastion of farmhouses and stables, and thank God there was one place left in America where you didn’t have to fret with deadbolts and bars on the windows.

Slate ran around the side of his house, scanning for any sign of Ash. There was none. Damn it. He’d gone to ground. “Ash,” he hollered, putting his hands on his hips. “You show yourself, and right now, you hear me?”

No answer. “Shit,” Slate grumbled. Ash could have hidden in any number of places, from his work shed to Slate’s own, the two buildings side by side. He didn’t think so, though. There’d been rain the day before, and he didn’t see any skidding footprints in the good red Carolina mud.

He did, however, see tracks leading over to the— “Ah-ha, I gotcha now,” he crowed. “Most men would run away from the woodshed if there was a spanking in the works. Not you, though, you run right towards it.” He darted across a sparkling green field of grass, skirting Ash’s herb beds, and jerked open the door.

Nothing.

“Fooled you, fooled you,” Ash’s voice rang out, from somewhere off to the left. Slate whipped his head around to look, and saw his lover peeking out from their small stable. The wind blew his dark hair about his face in a devil’s halo. He looked like a fallen angel, tempting good and honest men to wicked deeds in broad daylight.

And Slate, well, he was more than happy to fall. He shifted into an easy lope as he stalked up on Ash, who hung in the doorway grinning

like a damn fool. “Ah, ah, ah,” he teased. “You still don’t have your hands on me.”

“I aim to fix that soon enough.” Slate closed the distance between them in a leap, but his arms folded around empty air as Ash whooped again and shimmied away, into the stable. Slate ducked inside in time to see sneakers disappearing up the ladder to the hayloft. He paused long enough to stroke the nose of his favorite filly, Brown Sugar, before he grabbed the rungs of the ladder and started clambering like a monkey. Sugar whickered after him. He’d just bet he knew what she was saying in Horse—*what fools these mortals be*.

Slate cackled as he launched himself into the loft, full of sweet-smelling fresh hay, delivered a few days back for the horses’ summer feed. He took a deep breath, loving the way that place smelled. Warm animal flesh, ripe grainy straw, and—his favorite part—heated-up male, sprawled out on his back in loose stalks like a bird come to rest.

Slate couldn’t keep a grin off his face as he prowled closer. “You’re just gonna give up?” he asked, dropping lightning-fast into a crouch. He seized one of Ash’s sneakers in his hand and ran his fingers up to the ankle. “I got you now. No more runnin’ away.”

Ash grinned lazily. “The way I see it, you’ve got me cornered fair and square. Nowhere else to run. Not unless I want to go out the window, and I plan on enjoying the rest of my day on my own two feet instead of traction casts.”

“That all you want to enjoy?” Slate slipped off the sneaker he’d grabbed hold of and tickled his way up Ash’s instep. “Or did you have something else in mind?”

Ash’s grin grew broader and whiter. “That could just happen to be the case.”

Slate stopped, his hand on Ash's ankle. "Why, you little shit. You set me up. Planned on ending up here the whole time, didn't you?"

"What can I say?" Ash arched and stretched, rolling in the sweet straw. He gazed at Slate as if Slate were his whole world, and God, how he did love that particular look on his man. "You, the great outdoors, this comfy bed I've been dying to christen..."

"You," Slate mock-grumbled, working Ash's sock free of his foot, "have a hell of a lot to learn about living on a farm, boy. Straw is itchy. It's dry and it's dusty, and you have no idea what it's like to get that where the sun don't shine."

"You'd know, would you?"

Slate could *feel* the naughtiness in his grin. "I might have a little practical knowledge to draw on," he said lazily, stroking Ash's narrow ankle bone. "Doesn't mean I want to see if my memories match up to the reality when we've got a nice soft bed upstairs in the house, fresh sheets and everything, just waiting to be used."

"Yeah." Ash toed off his other sneaker and brought his toes up against the hardness of Slate's crotch, which felt full to bursting his zipper the rest of the way open. "But then I wouldn't have had the fun of the chase, would I? And listen. You can hear this farm all around us. In the midst of love, we are in life."

"You're misquoting just a little bit there."

"Does it matter?" Ash raised up on his elbows. He nudged Slate's cock with his foot. "Come on, country boy. Ride me."

"Oh, no. If you think I'm gonna let you top after a chase like that, you do have another think coming, and fast." Slate caught Ash's mischievous foot in his other hand and stripped off the sock. "I promised you a whippin', remember? I make good on my word."

"I know." Ash's voice had dropped down, soft and low. "You swore you'd always be by my side. Thick and thin, good times and bad, sickness and health. I expect that extends to a chase through a gorgeous sunny day into a haystack." He turned naughty again. "Besides, I think I want to ride you, instead."

"I don't get a say in this?"

"Depends. Have I been bad enough that you want to have your way with me no matter what?"

Slate's eyelids drooped. "Darlin', you are bad enough any day of the week, and that's why I love you so good. Come here. Give me a kiss."

Ash scrambled up on his knees and wrapped his arms around Slate. Their mouths came together with a crash, no more games. Ash's tongue snaked into Slate's mouth, wet and hot and raunchy, thrusting in and out as if he were fucking him already. Slate came right back at him, fisting his hands in that flyaway dark hair and pulling him close. Chest to chest, knee to knee, lips to lips. Ash's hands clutched so hard at his back Slate thought they would leave finger-shaped bruises, showing just how much Ash needed to be taken. How bad he wanted to have a lesson taught to him.

When they pulled apart for air, Slate was hard as a rock and ready to go off at the slightest touch. He glanced down and saw from the way Ash's own button-flies were straining that he'd gotten his lover into a similar fix. Well, there was one way to remedy that, and he decided it was as good a plan as any. Take the edge off, so to speak. Get Ash good and limbered up for the ride of his life.

"Lay down," Slate said, rough as new whiskey. The syllables tasted good, rolling over his tongue, so good he said them again. "Lay down. On your back in that hay you're so fond of. And you do what I tell you, you hear?"

Ash's eyes glittered with lust as he obeyed. "Yes, sir."

Slate had to stop and take in a deep breath, his eyelids fluttering closed. When he opened them, it was to a picture of pure debauchery—Ash on his back, legs spread wide, his cock clearly outlined inside his jeans. So hard the tip damn near peeked out his waistband. Oh, hell, yes, his Ash had a tool on him and he knew how to use it. Fortunately, so did Slate.

"Unbutton your jeans," he ordered, still savoring his words like a tumbler of Kentucky's best. "Take yourself out. I want to see." When Ash hesitated, Slate shook his head, grinning fiercely. "Do you want that lashing after all?"

"Yes," Ash whispered, but all the same, his beautiful hands moved to obey. He plucked the metal buttons open just like guitar strings, the whisper-click of metal through fabric suddenly loud, with nothing else to hear but Sugar stepping light down in her stable, and their own breathing, thick and fast. His cock would have sprung out all on its own, but he reached in to guide it anyway. The organ lay in his hand, hard and dark, stiff and proud. Gorgeous as fuck.

"What are you going to do with me?" Ash asked, his voice low. "Don't tell me you're gonna suck me off. Anything but that," he said, words saying one thing and tone something entirely different.

"Don't I just live to torment you?" Slate teased. He elbowed Ash's knees, spreading them even wider so he could climb in between. Leaning forward on his forearms, he brought his mouth close enough that Ash had to have felt his breath, hot and moist on his heavy length. "I do have myself a fine specimen of manhood here, though. What do you think I should do with it? Maybe...this?"

He took a long, lavish lick, trailing his tongue from balls to tip, tracing the heavy vein on its underside. For a capper, he sealed his lips

ever so briefly around the swollen head and gave a quick suck. “Or maybe this.”

“Yes,” Ash breathed. “More. Please, God, Slate, do that again.”

“Since you asked so nicely and all...” Slate could have teased his lover all day long, driving him to the brink and back, but his blood was up and hot. He wanted it quick, fast, dirty and right away. Needed to feel the load of his lover’s spunk filling his mouth with hot, salty pulses. “Gonna drive you out of your mind, baby,” he said, lowering his lips.

Ash writhed beneath him as Slate sealed on tight and lowered his mouth. He could get no more than half the eight-inch length inside before he had to stop, but no worries. The rest of it, he covered with his hand, squeezing tight but not too tight, giving Ash the benefit of years of experience.

As he worked his lover, listening to his moans rise and fall like a summer gale, Slate all but hummed to himself. There was nothing he liked better than unexpected sex. One of the reasons he adored Ash—the man had a positive genius for coming up with new games to play. Today’s chase was one of his finer moves, and no mistake.

A good deed deserved a reward. So he *did* hum, the vibrations in his mouth surrounding Ash’s cock. Ash let out a sharp yelp, flinging his hand to the side and grabbing at the stalks of hay. He crumbled them in his grasp as he writhed and arched, bucked and then, with barely a “Slate, Slate, *coming*—” erupted in Slate’s mouth while he keened.

Slate hung on tight, kneading Ash’s thighs, still snugly encased in denim. He licked and swallowed, savoring every single drop Ash had to give up, loving the taste, the feel and the smell of the man’s juices. He’d never had finer. Never would again. He and Ash had promised themselves, each to the other.

They were in it for life, and it was shaping up to be one hell of a life. Just the two of them on a farm in the Appalachian foothills, close enough to an artsy town where they could sell their wares. Ash, his herbs and remedies; Slate, his leather-work. They had the farm to feed them and turn a bit of profit off. They had each other. What more could they possibly have wanted?

Slate's pulsing cock reminded him of one more thing. He pulled off of Ash, licking his lips. "Gonna fuck you," he rasped, running his hands up underneath the man's thin tee. "Ride you off into the noonday sun, lover."

Ash was breathing in great, heavy gulps. "Please. And hurry up. I'm empty as hell without you inside me." He pushed at his jeans, working them down his hips. "Undress," he begged. "Want to see you naked. You'll look like a god in the sunlight, I swear it."

Slate's jeans were kicked to kingdom come and his shirt halfway off when, suddenly, Ash put up a hand to stop him. "Lube," he blurted. "I swear, Slate, I forgot. The idea to play just came to me, and I didn't come prepared."

"Well, damn." Slate sat back on his heels, annoyed. "Boy scouts would be ashamed of you."

"Aw, don't be mad." Ash swarmed up for another kiss. "Look here. I'm still mostly dressed. I'll go back to the house and grab some."

"Or I could grab you." Slate caught Ash around the waist. "You want to just suck me? I swear, I'd love your mouth right now. Anything. Just don't leave me out to dry. No more games, baby." He lifted a hand to cup Ash's cheek. "Can't live a minute longer without you," he said, seriously. "You are my world, and everything good that's in it."

Ash blushed slightly. He turned his head and planted a kiss in Slate's palm. "It'll be all right," he soothed. "I know where there's lube, just

inside the kitchen. Left over from the last time.” His mouth turned up at the corners. “You know, when we let that country-fried chicken burn because you had me bent over the dinner table?”

Slate drew in a lusty breath, remembering. His grandma’s recipe, and he’d let it scorch black as coal while he rammed into Ash, his hands working so hard on the man’s back that he’d left bruises. Chicken had been a loss. That fuck he’d remember for a lifetime.

“Go,” he said, reluctantly loosening his grip. “But you hurry, hear me? I want myself so deep up your ass I can’t go any further, and I want to hear you scream for me. You do that so pretty, Ash. You sound like heaven to me.”

“And you to me.” Ash gave Slate another kiss, quick and hurried. He made fast work of buttoning his jeans and stood barefooted in the hay. He grinned down at Slate, splayed out with knees far apart. “I won’t be long. You won’t even have a chance to miss me.”

“Miss you already,” Slate murmured as he watched Ash’s ass while the man walked over to the ladder. He heard Ash chuckle, low in his throat, and begin to say something—

—but afterwards, he’d never know what it was. Ash stopped all of a sudden, as if something had delivered a solid punch to his gut. He dragged in a raspy breath, then a choking one, like he couldn’t get air to his lungs. He staggered, almost losing his balance.

“Ash.” Slate scrambled to his feet, already reaching out. “What’s wrong?” Oh, God. Hay, fresh hay, and sunshine. Ash in bare feet. What if there had been a snake? “Baby, you just hang on. I’m coming.” His foot slipped, and with a curse, he righted himself. Ash sounded terrible, not even able to drag in the slightest bit of air.

Slate had one second in which Ash turned around to stare at him, big brown eyes filled with terror and confusion.

Then, as if in slow motion, his body went slack as a rag doll, and he fell. Fifteen feet down, from the top of the hayloft to the hard-packed earth below. Slate heard the crunch of bones hitting dirt before he had one foot on the ladder. Cursing, he jumped, by some mercy landing on his feet.

He rushed to Ash's side, landing on his knees. "Ash? Ash, boy, listen to me. Look at me." No response. Ash's eyes were wide open, but they didn't see a thing. "Ash! Goddamn you, answer me!" Slate grabbed hold and shook him hard. Ash flopped, limp and...lifeless. His head swayed on his neck like a broken daisy stem.

Slate's cries for help echoed throughout the barn, but there was no one except Brown Sugar to answer him. It didn't matter. He knew, though he swore he'd never acknowledge it.

So full of light and life one minute, and now...

Ash was gone.

Chapter Two

One Year Later...

Six o'clock in the morning, and the sun was just beginning to glow over the horizon. Faint whispers of red and pink light crept through Slate's bedroom window, painting stained-glass pictures on his ceiling. He lay awake on top of the covers, staring at them. "You know, there's folk who say they see the face of the Virgin Mary in a squash," he said out loud, to himself. "Wonder if I look hard enough, I'll see my lover's face in the sunlight?"

He snorted. Fool's dreams. A year since Ash had died, and he still woke up every morning expecting to see that tousled dark head lying on the pillow next to his. Every night, he dreamed of the two of them in that same bed, arms and legs tangled around each other, limbs straining as they made love. Slate let his eyes flutter half-shut, imagining he could feel Ash's strong young hands skating over his skin, laughing about measuring him by spans. He licked his lips, fancying he might be able to taste the salt.

No. Nothing. Just his own flavor, that of a man who'd brushed and swished before falling on top of his bed sometime around three a.m. Sterile, minty, lonely as hell. He'd trade any number of fresh morning breaths for one kiss from Ash, breaking apart to laugh about who ate what the night before.

No more kisses from Ash, anymore. No more anything.

The sunlight grew stronger, stretching across Slate's ceiling. In times past, he'd have had a rooster out back, lord of the coops, standing on top of the henhouse and letting out a mighty crow. There were those who said that was an old wives' tale, but they hadn't met the ugly old beast he and Ash owned.

He'd sold that critter not long after...after... Well, mornings were hard enough to face. Almost as bad as the nights. Daylight meant another night without sleep, meant another day to get through without his lover.

Turning on his side, he stretched one arm across the smooth expanse of made-up covers beside him, not mussed in the least. Blankets tucked in smoothly, pillow plump and fat. Ash's side of the bed. A year to the day, and he wasn't able to bear sleeping in the middle, or even crossing sides of the bed. He had tried, once. Lain in Ash's place, hoping he'd have a good dream.

Hadn't worked. He'd seen that day in the barn over and over inside his mind, so crystal clear in his thoughts as if it were happening all over again. Ash, gasping for air. Ash, falling. Himself, down on the hard-packed dirt, Brown Sugar getting all agitated and kicking her stall. Finally remembering to call 911.

Firemen. Paramedics. His friend Marianne and her lover Zillah trying to draw him aside, and when he wouldn't go, being muscled back by two big, strong men in yellow suits. Sinking down on a bale of feed and feeling their soft, womanly hands on his back, his shoulders, trying their damndest to soothe. He hadn't paid them a bit of mind. Everything in him had been focused on Ash, lying so still...so still...

Someone in a uniform had come to talk to him after a spell. He could still remember the man's words, letter-perfect. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kincaid. Slate. He's young, but best as we can tell he had a heart attack before he

fell. It does happen to some men this young. Do you know if he had any congenital heart defects?”

Slate had shaken his head, baffled. “No...not Ash...he was fine. Never said a word about anything wrong with him.”

“He might not have,” the uniform allowed. “The fall did break his neck, though. There’ll have to be an autopsy—”

There Slate had lunged up from where he sat, raging at the man telling him this news in a voice schooled to be soft and sympathetic. Liar. He hadn’t felt a damn thing. “You’re not cuttin’ him up.”

Marianne and Zillah had managed to drag Slate back into a sitting position, and they’d held him there. Strong for women, they were. “I’m sorry for your loss,” was all the uniform had said, before he went back to the scene of the...where Ash lay, cooling off in the dirt.

Slate hadn’t cried then. He still hadn’t, one year later. His eyes burned with the need to, but no matter how many times his lady friends offered their shoulder, he hadn’t been able to coax out a single drop.

Grieve, they’d told him. *You have to mourn him, Slate. Otherwise you’ll never be able to let go.*

Damn them. He didn’t *want* to let go. And as long as he had reminders, he wouldn’t have to.

Rolling over again, he reached out to touch the leaves of a pretty plant on his bedside table. Glossy green leaves shaped like hearts, bell-like flowers. Foxglove. Digitalis. “You did have a heart problem,” he whispered. “And you didn’t tell me. I think I might just hate you a bit for that, Ash. Always had to be messin’ around with your herbal medicaments. So sure you had it under control.” His hand tightened into a fist. “Didn’t you know you can’t fix something like this without goin’ under the knife? Did you really think your herbs and your potions would fix it all? Damn you, lover. Why didn’t you tell me?”

But as when he'd asked those questions, every single morning as he rose out of his bed, there were no answers. There wouldn't be, either. Dead men didn't talk.

No matter how much one might want them to.

Ash's radio kicked on as the time ticked over to six-fifteen. Dimly, Slate knew he should have been getting up, too, but damned if he could find the energy to rise. Still fondling a leaf of the foxglove between his fingers, he listened to good old Patsy Cline singing about how she was crazy, crazy for feeling so blue. He thought—*not crazy at all. It's hell to be by yourself when you were promised forever.*

He closed his eyes and remembered a certain morning when Ash had been the first to wake. Slate had still been asleep, drowsing past the sunlight's first peek into the sky. Normally he was the one to rise earliest, but not this time. He remembered Ash's warm arms sliding across him, the man molding himself to Slate's side. They'd been playing Elvis that morning. "Love me tender," Ash had sung into Slate's ear, following it up with a nip to the lobe, then soothing the sting with the tip of his tongue. "Love me true..."

"And I do," Slate had said. "Come here and give me a kiss."

Ash had folded gladly into his arms. They were young and horny, it hadn't been long before they'd been writhing against one another, hard cocks bumping together. He'd come just from the feeling of his lover on top of him, so desperate for him that neither of them had been able to wait.

Now, he woke in the same clothes he'd laid down in, on top of the covers instead of beneath them. Woke, if he'd slept at all, which to be frank, he hadn't. *Is this grief?* he wondered. *Is this mourning?* The women push, push, pushed at him. But he had to deal with things in his own time, at his own pace.

Besides, he had some secret, certain plans they didn't know about.

Suddenly unable to bear the sound of Patsy's sweet warbling any longer, he reached over and slapped his hand down on the "off" button. Silence reigned in the bedroom, save for the sound of his harsh breathing. Good. That was the way it should be. He preferred the quiet these days. If he couldn't have Ash, why should anyone else go on about things in his personal space? All and only his now.

He sniffed at himself, and decided he stank. He'd have to have some fresh clothes before he attacked another day. The floorboards creaked under his feet as he made his way to the closet. It had been built in as a convenience, since the house had been constructed when folk used trunks and nails on the walls for storing their clothes. No matter what he did, it smelled musty. Made him think of old libraries. Of bookstores where secondhand novels went to mildew away to death. Tombs.

He shuddered, grabbing the closet door to steady himself. Dear God, everything made him think of death these days. He tried to remember Ash in life, to drive away the dark side of his memories. Ash, who once upon a time had made up sachets of something that had a strong and spicy fragrance, to keep their clothes fresh. Slate had been down in his herb gardens and his stillroom, trying to figure out what went in those little balls of scent, but he'd never been able to figure it out. Cloves were the only things he recognized, and those had been bought. A few of them dotted the floor, hard little things that hurt to step on in bare feet.

Yeah, Slate thought, his throat dry as dust. *Everything hurts*.

Reaching in, he dragged out a worn red flannel shirt. The weather would be getting too hot for such a garment these days, except Ash had loved it so much, worn it so often, that it had been washed thin as tissue paper. Not so long ago, it wouldn't have fit Slate, but he'd lost a few

pounds and he wasn't as muscled since he'd sold off all the stock. He wasn't a scarecrow by any means, but he was able to fit in Ash's clothes.

He hesitated, holding the shirt. If Marianne stopped by, he'd be in for a tongue-lashing, but... Oh, the hell with her. He stripped off his own blue T-shirt and dropped it into the "to be done someday" pile of laundry on the floor. Next, he kicked off his boxer shorts. He chose a pair of jeans, his own, from the closet, to be put on later, and he was ready for a shower.

Shower. Yeah. He'd built that onto the house. The whole bathroom, first attached onto the side of the house back in the fifties, had had to be completely redone. With Ash egging him on, he'd built the shower and tub big enough for two to share. Oh, and share they had. Every morning, they'd pile in like eager puppies. Hands and soapsuds everywhere, kisses underneath the spray...

Slate's jaw hardened. He couldn't let himself get lost in thought. Not today. He had things to do. And by God, he'd do them clean. He wanted to be fresh and sweet smelling when...

Well, he wouldn't think about it yet. Not just yet.

* * *

He smelled coffee when he headed down the narrow flight of steps that led from the upper rooms to the lower part of the house. For half a second he grew dizzy, flashing back to memories of Ash. He'd loved doing things the old-fashioned way, brewing their morning jolt the way cowboys had done on the trail. An old iron pot on the back of a wood stove, no matter how hot the day promised to be. Slate remembered peeking his head into the kitchen, a great big smile ready for his lover

and for the coffee, nectar of the gods, and being greeted by a bear hug, then led to a piping hot cup.

Slate shook his head and continued down the stairs. "Someone in here?" he bellowed, his voice echoing off the rafters and wooden beams. "You better have a damn good reason for breaking in. I do have a shotgun and I ain't afraid to use it."

"In the kitchen," came a faint female voice. Marianne. Slate closed his eyes and paused on the last step. Goddamnit. The last thing he wanted was to see Ash's cousin, the dead man's best friend besides Slate, on this day of all days. But then, she would have come by, wouldn't she? And she still had her key. He'd never asked for it back.

"Marianne," he called back. "You come by early for the ceremonies, or what?"

"Slate, don't be that way."

Don't know any other way to be, he grumbled to himself. Realizing Ash's red shirt hung open over his still-damp chest, he started buttoning as he walked to the kitchen. The flannel felt downy as a kitten's fur beneath his fingertips. It closed over his chest with the whisper of good, well-worn fabric. He remembered doing it up for Ash one day, teasing him about being so clever with plants but so fumble-fingered when it came to buttons...

He paused to pet the leaves of another foxglove plant on the telephone table in the hallway. The old house had been wired for connection back in the twenties, and this was the only place to get a connection to the outside world, unless he used his cell. Truth be told, he wasn't sure where that had lain for the past few months. Every time he went to punch in a number, he flashed back on his fingers pressing 9, 1 and 1.

"Slate? Are you coming?"

Nope, he scoffed to himself. He tore off a leaf of the foxglove and stuffed it into his jeans pocket. “Yeah, I’m on my way.”

“I made coffee.”

“Now, how did I know that?” Slate asked, walking through the dining room. He dragged one finger through the dust on the good old oak table, made a face, and poked his head into the kitchen. That had been an add-on, too, built when the separated building had been knocked down. He patted one wall with something approaching affection. His home. At least he still had that, odd as it might have looked.

Marianne and Zillah said his place had “character”, and he’d have to agree. The old house bristled with a bathroom here, a cooking space there, sticking out in odd squares on the sides, but he wouldn’t have changed it for the world. Once a square block, now it had its own personality. He had loved every square inch since he was a boy. Only things he’d seen to himself were the new bathroom and two work sheds out back, one bigger, for Ash, and his own leatherworking shop.

His home. His place to hide. He didn’t have to leave if he had enough supplies to last him a few weeks, and he had enough to last for weeks. This was a safe place. From the green-painted shutters to the front porch with its set of four rockers to the old back porch with its display of antique farming equipment to the old cellar no one had set foot in for half a century, it was his home. Had been in his family for well over a hundred years. Probably a fire hazard, but what did that matter?

Marianne was leaning against a counter, sipping from her own mug. She and Zillah did pottery work, and she’d given him and Ash a full set of kitchenware as a present when they’d gotten committed. Ash had loved his cousin, but oh, how he did like to mock her sense of colors. His own mug had been a sturdy thing he’d gotten at a Farmer’s Market, with a picture of some herb Slate couldn’t name painted on the side. It sat in

the middle of the smaller kitchen table, a small foxglove in need of repotting planted in it.

“Morning,” she offered. From the automatic coffeemaker on the counter, something Zillah had bought for him, she poured a fresh cup in a mug just like her own. “Coffee?”

Slate wanted to say no, but instead he managed a curt nod. His head was just beginning to hurt with needing the morning rush of caffeine in his veins. He accepted the cup and took a long swig, burning his tongue. Wasn’t as good as Ash’s. That would have damn near *melted* his tongue, and then Ash would have kissed it better. God, he missed that coffee. You could stand a spoon upright in the brew.

Marianne cocked a hip. “Not even a ‘good morning’ for me? No, ‘why are you here?’, even?”

Slate shrugged, leaning against the table. He blew on his coffee to cool it and took another, more careful sip. “Morning, Marianne,” he said flatly. “Why are you here?”

“Glad you asked.” She set her mug down and reached out for him. Last thing he wanted to feel was the touch of another’s skin, but she was *Marianne*, after all. Ash had loved her. Reluctantly, he met her halfway and clasped her hand, small and feminine, but just as rough from hard work as Ash’s had been. The sense memory made him wince.

“We want you to come to dinner tonight,” Marianne replied. “I don’t know what you had planned, but me and Zillah, we wanted to have a celebration of Ash’s life.”

Slate jerked back. “Celebration?” he yelped. He stared at her, unable to believe she’d actually said such a thing.

Her jaw firmed, so much like Ash’s when he got his stubborn on that it made Slate’s throat tighten. “Yes. Celebration. He had twenty-nine good years on this earth, and we all miss him. Not just you, Slate. We

thought we'd play his favorite music and talk over our memories of him. Zillah's gonna make all the foods he liked best. We'll do this whether or not you join us, but we thought since you were what he loved most of all, you should be a part of it."

Slate swallowed heavily, unable to form a single word.

Marianne reached out and captured Slate's hand again. She looked so bright, so pretty and fresh with her dark brown curls all a-tangle around her face. No one in his right mind, gay or straight, should have been able to say no to her. "Please, Slate," she begged, her voice small and coaxing. "Come say a last goodbye with us tonight."

Slate turned his head. He cleared his throat several times. Stared at the foxglove plant. Felt the one leaf burning in his pocket. "I'll think on it," he managed at last.

"You do that," Marianne snapped. She let go of Slate's hand and turned to put her coffee mug in the sink. "I brought you some breakfast. Zillah's been up since four a.m., loading the kilns, and I figured the least I could do was cook for all of us. It's good, Slate. Eggs and sausage and biscuits."

From somewhere, he found a grin. "Fake eggs and canned biscuits. No wonder you two are so skinny."

"Cholesterol, dummy." Marianne swatted at him. "You don't watch yourself, you'll—" Her face fell. "Oh, God, Slate, I can't believe I said that. I am so sorry. Slate, I didn't mean to—"

Slate's face had hardened dark as his namesake stone. "Get out," he managed to say through numb lips. "Go on. Don't make me tell you a second time."

Marianne caught up her purse from the countertop. If she knew Slate at all, he figured she'd know not to question him in his current mood.

"I'm sorry," she whispered one last time, before she fled out the back door.

Slate waited until she was gone, then caught up the foxglove plant in Ash's favorite mug. He threw it at the door with all his might, regretting it as soon as the cup shattered. Foxglove leaves went everywhere, fluttering to the ground in a pattern like the tea dregs Gypsies read in cups.

Slowly, Slate lowered himself into one of the table's wicker chairs. They were hell on the ass to sit on but he didn't mind. They were old, like the house, like the kitchen, like he himself felt. Like the iron coffeepot that hadn't been touched in a year.

Like the book he'd left lined up neatly in front of the foxglove plant. An ancient book, no telling how old, though with his bookbinding experience, he'd put it at several hundred years. A customer had given it to him for repairing purposes, when Marianne had coaxed him to start taking in business again.

Looked like a family Bible, but that wasn't what had caught his interest. An ancient family tree, ruled off in a dozen different directions, graced the front of it. Notes had been scribbled on the margins, and dozens of neatly folded scraps of paper, cross-hatched and double-written, had been stuck between the leaves. His job had been to repair the Bible and to bind the miscellaneous things in a fresh book.

He'd barely cared, only reading so much as he needed to put things in order, until he'd come across one batch of sheets in particular. Looked like an old mountain herbal, written in a spidery hand by an obviously old woman who wanted to pass on the knowledge she'd gathered over the years. It was mostly rubbish, of course, or things any fool knew, like willow bark being good for headaches.

It had hurt, knowing how much Ash would have loved these pages. He might have insisted on trying to figure out a way to get a copy. Trying

out the recipes to see how they differed from his personal concoctions. For that very reason, Slate had hurried through them, until at the very last he'd seen—

He lifted the thin, yellow scrap of paper to the light and read the words that had set his life off on a new path. He said them out loud, just to make it more real. To set himself on the road he would tread that day.

“An Olde and Dangerouse Spelle: For Visiting With Those That Have Pass'd On To The Other Side of Jordan Rivr. Must Be Done One Yeare After The Passing, And With Purs't Intente...”

Slate lay the page down carefully. His intent was pure enough, all right. His drive was clean as the snow. He wanted to see Ash again. Needed to see him one more time.

And today, if everything went the way he hoped, he would...

Chapter Three

High noon. Slate had heard the phrase all his life. It was when men met at opposite ends of dusty streets, ready to draw their six-guns and fire. When the hangman pulled his lever and the noose dropped. When the sun reached its peak for the day and started a slide back down into darkness.

The time of day when Ash had died.

High noon was an important time of the day. Slate hadn't seen the clock tick over to twelve once, since that day, without stopping to remember. Sometimes he'd felt a wave of dizziness wash over him, and he'd had to halt in what he was doing—cutting leather, tooling a book cover, or stitching in the pages. Had to wait for the spell to pass, for his heart to stop its stuttering, maybe drink a glass of water until he calmed back down. Once it was on the way to one, he was usually all right.

Well, as such things went, which meant not at all. But he got by.

Once upon a time, he'd tried spending the noon hour in Ash's stillroom, wiping away the dust gathering on his mortars, pestles and other things he didn't have names for, sweeping up fallen leaves from hanging bunches he didn't have the heart to throw away, or just sitting and breathing in the herbal scent that had surrounded his lover.

When that got to be too much to bear, he'd tried going into the herb garden. But although he lived on a farm, he didn't know too much about green and growing things. Ash had spent hours out there, being so very

careful with tying this and clipping that. Slate had known he'd just make a mess of it. He'd taken to sitting there as well, on his ass in the rich red dirt, crushing sprigs of mint between his fingers for the smell. Rosemary, too.

Rosemary, that's for remembrance, as he'd read in so many old copies of Shakespeare.

Then there had been a hurricane. Huddled inside his own sturdily built shed, Slate had clamped his fingers over his ears, terrified to look outside and see what destruction was wrought by the howling winds and pounding rain. The house had lost a few shingles, the greenhouse some panes, but the outside garden...it had been ruined.

Slate's heart had broken a little more, looking at the uprooted mess that had been Ash's second true love. He hadn't been back since. Even now, if he didn't have to, he wouldn't go near it. Had to, though. Noon was approaching, the hour specified as the time of power, one year to the day, and he needed his spell ingredients.

Part of him still scoffed at the idea of magic. His rational mind insisted on it all being medieval claptrap, superstitious nonsense. Things like washing your face with stump water to get rid of freckles, or toads causing warts. Bury a potato at midnight with your enemy's name carved in it. Mind, he'd seen some marvels worked by old mountain women who knew what they were doing with a poultice and a potion, but nothing he'd have called magic.

He'd have bet Ash thought he was working magic on himself. Foxglove to cure a congenital heart defect. Young, healthy and hardworking enough he'd have been sure all his favorite meals of fried chicken and fluffy homemade biscuits made no difference to his overall health.

Slate stopped in the door to the back porch, facing his yard full of sheds, stable and gardens, and shaded his eyes against the sunlight nearly at its zenith. Then he lowered his hand, staring into the sun.

“But you didn’t know any magic, did you, Ash?” he asked softly. “All you knew was protecting me from worrying about you. And you were right. I’d have fretted myself sick. But I’d have made damn sure you got the best care a man could have, and maybe you’d have outlived all this. Not chased you round and round until your ticker gave out.”

He looked down at his shadow. “Would’ve loved to live with you until we were both old men, Ash. You weren’t supposed to go off and leave me. For better or for worse, that’s what we promised. You broke that promise, now, and it’s up to me to fix it. God help me if I damn us both for what I do, but I have to...I have to.”

Holding the spell in both hands, careful of the fragile yellowed paper, he stepped out into the future he was about to change.

First stop, Ash’s garden. What was left of it, anyway. Overgrown with weeds after the spring rains, tumbled into clumps here and there. He prayed he’d be able to find what he was after—rosemary, for one thing, and Ash’s other favorites—sage, ginseng and violet bulbs. He’d already gotten salt from the house, the small plastic baggie heavy in his jeans pocket.

Once out in the mess, heedless of any snakes that might have been slithering around in the undergrowth, he set to digging with a will. He could remember, with perfect clarity, the time Ash had dragged him out there, so excited...

“Look, Slate, look. The violets are coming up. I thought I’d never get them to grow.” Ash, hunkered down on his haunches, caressed one glossy leaf tenderly as a baby. “They won’t be as hardy as the ones I could grow

inside, in the greenhouse, but that soil I bought and spread around here seems to be doing the trick. Aren't they gorgeous?"

Slate nudged Ash's ass with the toe of his boot. "Not the only gorgeous thing around here, babe," he said lazily. "Damn fine violets, though. Are those all—?"

"Yup, every one of them. Blue, white and yellow. They all have meanings." Ash dusted his hands off on his thighs. He glanced up with a devilish grin. "I'll tell you all about them sometime."

"Sometime?" Slate teased as Ash stood, twining dirty hands around his neck, not minding a single bit about the red clay smeared against his skin. This was what his lover loved; he'd take a bath in the damn stuff if it made Ash grin. Hmm. He filed that thought away for later. Nothing like a little bit of kinky variety.

"What are you grinnin' like a fool about?" Ash whispered, close enough Slate smelled the sweet mint he'd been chewing. "I know you. There's something whirring around in that mind of yours."

"Same old, same old."

"My favorite." Ash did away with the distance between them, bringing their lips together in a chaste, sweet kiss—gentle, that was, until his wicked tongue flickered out and tapped at Slate's lips.

"You want to go?" Slate growled, grabbing Ash by the hips with his own work-smudged hands. He'd leave handprints, and he kind of liked the thought of the man bearing his mark.

Ash's eyes sparkled. "You up for it, old man?"

"I'll 'old man' you." Slate spun Ash around, lifting him clear off the ground. "Right here, right now. Next to your violets, even."

"No, no," Ash all but shrieked, writhing and laughing in Slate's grip. "Not the violets. I worked too hard on those."

“Worked on getting something else hard, too,” Slate said, nudging his rising cock into Ash’s groin. “You have a solution in mind?”

Ash glanced at the sky. “It’ll rain soon,” he decided, even though the sky was clear. He had always had a sort of second sight about that sort of thing. “Inside. The greenhouse. Making love while the rain pours down all around us. How’s that sound to you?”

“Just about like heaven,” Slate agreed, diving in for another ravenous kiss...

“I never could get enough of you,” Slate murmured to himself. “Yellow, white and blue. All three of them, still growing. You watching out for your babies, wherever you are, Ash?” The thought made him somehow bitter. “You watching over me? Is that why I can’t let go of you? Why I don’t want to?”

He knelt, plucking up handfuls of the blossoms. Violets were for faithfulness, or so Ash had told him later, much later, while they lay on their backs in bed that night. Clean from their afternoon’s devouring one another, but still hungry. Violets, those were important. Yellow for worthiness, white for the willingness to take a chance on happiness, and blue for always being true. They mattered.

Chrysanthemums, for long life and deep need. Mandrake, for its shape. He half winced as he pulled the roots free, remembering tales of how they were meant to scream when they came loose of the earth, but it just sounded like digging carrots, to him. Sage, to go with the salt, for binding.

He had a bag of grave dirt hanging from his waist, a knife in his pocket and a healthy supply of the other thing he needed running through his veins. The sun was climbing high, almost at the peak point. It was time.

Standing, his hands full with spell parchment, herbs and flowers, he dragged in a deep breath. He turned a bit to the left and looked at the building he hadn't entered in a year. The stable. The last place Ash had been alive in.

There were no animals in it anymore. He'd sold Brown Sugar off with the rest of the livestock, and told Zillah she could stable her horse elsewhere. Not a thing had been shoveled out but the horse shit. It should still have the selfsame hay in there Ash had fallen and died on. Slate had hated the thought of touching one strand...until he'd found the spell. Now, he thanked a God he'd mostly stopped believing in that the site had been undisturbed.

He needed it, for the spell to work right. If it worked at all. Taking a deep breath, Slate stepped out of Ash's herb garden and took bold strides toward the empty stable. *Now or never*, he told himself. *No time to worry over it being right or wrong. This is the task you've set yourself. This is what you need to do.*

Even if it's...limited...then it's gonna be worth it. He stopped for a moment, resisting the urge to crumble his fists around the paper and greenery. *I have to see him again. That's all there is to it.*

He had to stop again, at the closed stable door, to catch his breath. "It'll be all right," he muttered to himself. "Probably won't work at all. Mountain hocus-pocus. Somebody's fantasy. Bet the woman who wrote this never brought anyone back at all. Nothing says she did. Maybe she was wrong." Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. But then again...maybe not.

Taking in a deep breath, he pushed the stable doors open. The smells hit him first of all—moldering hay, sickly sweet. The faint tang of horse sweat, even though Brown Sugar had been gone for all those months. Coppery blood, from where Ash had...from his mouth...

Slate drew back fast, leaning his head outside the stable. He couldn't do this. What had he been thinking, to face this place again? God, even the straw on the dirt floor was still rucked up where Ash had lain.

But no. That was good. He knew exactly where to lie and cast his spell. Slate swallowed and firmed his jaw. No use thinking about ifs and maybes. He'd try this, see what happened, and, well, then he'd either have his heart's desire, or he'd burn the place to the ground. He had gasoline for his truck and he had matches.

Candles. Fuck it, he'd forgotten the candles. He laid down his burdens and hotfooted it back to the house, pretending he wasn't glad to be out of the place where he'd last been truly happy. The irony of it hit him smack in the face, dragging a bitter laugh out of his gut.

He'd bought the candles special from another neighbor, Molly, who dipped her own. She pretended to a little magic herself, and she'd sold him the ones he needed for his own purposes. Hadn't been able to tell her outright, so he'd more or less had to guess. White, for a clear head. Black, for luck. He'd researched online. He'd have thought black would be a death candle, but no. It'd protect him.

More candles, still, enough to form a rough circle around where Ash had lain. Blue for health. Purple for success. Yellow to help him focus his energies and make this work. Orange for sex. All of them made from sweet beeswax, smelling ever so fragrant. The old lighter that had belonged to Ash's father, a man who had raised him not to be ashamed of anything, least of all who he was and who he loved. Ash had treasured that lighter, carrying it around in his pockets like a lucky piece even though he'd never smoked.

"You had that much sense, anyway," Slate muttered, snatching it up. He often carried the thing himself. It felt heated in his pockets, as if Ash were walking beside him, one warm hand tucked inside. He paused to

lean against the kitchen table, momentarily startled when he didn't see the mug and foxglove. He'd need...but there was one in the barn, if it hadn't died.

Better to be sure. Instead of stepping over the mess as he'd done before, Slate stopped to scoop up a handful of the bells and velvety leaves, along with a shard or two of Ash's favorite cup. "I am sorry about this," he murmured, careful not to cut himself. Not careful enough—his finger slipped and reddened the sharp edge of one shard. "I'll buy you another cup, babe," he promised, voice rough. "Anything you like. I'll even let you have mine and I'll drink out of Marianne's awful creations."

"I wouldn't force any man to do that," Ash said, holding a mauve cup up by its dainty handle. "I mean, this is fine work and all, I'm not denyin' that. But come on, now. Some things are just too precious even for a couple of fairies like us."

"Fairies, are we?" Slate sidled up to Ash, catching his belt loops with two fingers. "Would a fairy be able to have you begging for mercy, like you did in my arms last night?"

"Last night and this morning." Ash didn't mind having himself manhandled, in fact, he sparkled as Slate deepened their contact. "If you're gonna get started again—not that I mind, now—let me put this down."

"Then put it down, babe, 'cause I'm going to kiss you like you've never been kissed before..."

"Is that a promise?"

Slate looked up from his handful of foxglove and mug. "Yeah, hon," he managed to say. "It's a promise."

Back out to the stables, then. High noon minutes away, and he had to move fast. He held his breath as he walked in, head high, not letting himself weaken, not for a moment. He'd gone over this in his mind a hundred, hundred times. The movements were almost second nature.

Kneeling by the spot where Ash's head had rested, broken on its neck like a snapped dandelion stem—but not thinking about that, not thinking about it—Slate arranged his votive candles in a circle. Round about those went circles of salt and sage, for protection and binding. Then, the candles, time for them to be lit with Ash's favorite old trinket.

He sat back from the sudden bright light and wash of sweet wax smell. Dust. The dust in the air was making his eyes water up. Determined, he moved on, taking up the violets. One time around the circle with a bunch of each color, for faithfulness and love, and then he dropped them in the middle. Same for the ginseng. Foxglove and mug, too, even though the spell didn't call for those. It just said "Items That Tye The Lov'd One To His Last Resting Place". So that was what he meant to do, which meant, one last thing to go inside the circle...

Swallowing hard to force back his gorge, Slate opened the pouch at his waist and poured the contents into his hand. Red Carolina clay, crumbling dry. Grave dirt, taken from the base of Ash's tombstone the night before. He'd driven with his headlights off, slipped under the cemetery gate, and prayed no one would notice him. He thought he'd gotten away scot-free, although what he'd come to get all but burned his hands on the way out. Dust clung to his fingers, so he brushed them off over the pile of herbs and trinkets.

Time for the binding ingredient. Life called to life, and dust needed the rain to kick it back into something that could hold a shape. Slate slid the pocket knife out and opened a blade sharpened to razor edge. He held his palm over the circle, and, not closing his eyes, cut a shallow

slice right down the middle. Clenching his fist, he watched the blood squeeze out in fat drops, pattering down in the magic circle.

Here was where the spell cut off. There were no magic words. There had been scribbling, but even he, with his years of experience deciphering handwriting, hadn't been able to make sense of what was what. He guessed that left him on his own, but that would be right enough.

"Ashes to ashes and dust to dust," he said, his voice like a croak. "I call on Ash, who was taken before his time. Here's where he died, where I could have saved him if I had only known. Those of you who listen to prayers like this, bend your ear to me. I want my lover back. I know the price I have to pay and I'm giving it up gladly as I can. Just give him back to me for one day. One beautiful day, until the sun rises tomorrow, and then you take what you want from me when he's gone again. Listen to me, please. Give me what I seek. What I want. What I need." He squeezed harder, forcing out more blood. "Bring Ash back to me."

There was a moment of utter silence. Slate frowned. This wasn't any ordinary silence. Sounded more like the eye of a tornado. The utter quiet that came right before—

BOOM!

Slate went ass over teakettle, blown back against the hard wooden walls of the stable. The place shook, rattled and banged, just as if some vengeful deity had taken it up and given it a good shake. It went on for a long time, far too long for it to be natural at all, because God, they didn't have earthquakes in the Appalachians—

And then, it was over. Slate picked himself up carefully, checking automatically for broken bones. He ached from head to foot and felt weak, as if he were coming down with something. Bit like he wasn't all the way alive. His hand tingled and stung, but when he glanced at it he

saw the slice had closed over into a faint white scar. Shit. He'd really done something with his words and herbs.

He was afraid to look over toward his magic circle. Magic, dear Lord. He swallowed hard. What would he see, what would be there? Thoughts of Stephen King flashed through his mind before he mentally slapped himself upside the head for being twelve different kinds of fool.

Turning slowly, he looked.

And almost burst into the tears he'd held back for years. It was Ash, his Ash, buck naked on the stable floor, blinking his eyes as if he were waking from a long sleep. The candles, all of them blown out, ringed his head.

Dozily, he turned to Slate. "Hey, you," he said, in the selfsame voice Slate had been missing for so long. "What's going on, Slate? What happened here?"

Chapter Four

It had worked. For the first time in his life, Slate had the urge to rub his eyes and look again, just to be sure he saw truly. But no—it was him. Ash. Lying alive on the straw where he'd died, for all the world appearing to have just woken from a nap. All sleepy smiles and uncurling from his huddled position.

He bumped against the spell-casting ingredients. “Ash, no, don't,” Slate yelped, darting forward. “Don't, you don't need to—that's just some mess I—”

“Candles?” Ash held up the orange votive with a frown. “You know better than to bring open flames into a place like this. That's just asking for a fire or something worse to happen.”

Slate had to hold back a fit of laughter. Ash wouldn't get it, and it wasn't appropriate, besides. “I was just playin' around,” he managed to say soothingly, kneeling in the straw next to his lover. “You're here,” he murmured. “Really here.” His hands ached to run themselves all over Ash's body, and well, why not?

He started with the feet. Running a finger up the arch, making Ash's toes curl as he laughed softly. Both hands, one on each calf, feeling the hard young muscle underneath the skin. Blood-warm, flexing into hardness under his touch. Ash gave a happy sigh. “What happened, Slate?” he asked, stretching his arms wide into the straw. “What, you made me come so hard I fell asleep?”

Slate's throat felt thick and full. He paused with his palms on Ash's thighs. "Yeah," he said reassuringly. "That's it, darlin'. You've been out for a while. Didn't think you'd ever wake up and come back to me."

Ash smiled the sweetest of smiles. "Well, here I am," he replied, bringing his arms up. "Come here, would you? You're too far away."

"Never again," Slate swore. Kicking a few more spell ingredients underneath the straw, he scrabbled around until he lay at Ash's side, holding on to him with both arms. He hid his face in Ash's shoulder for a long moment. Not crying, still not crying, but shaking like a leaf in the wind. *I have him back*, he thought in wonder. *Damn me to the hell where I'm sure to go—I made it work. I have my true love back for one whole day.*

"Hey." Ash rubbed at Slate's shoulder. "Hey, there. What's wrong? You're actin' like the boogeyman just jumped out at you." He poked him, as if in fun. "Where's my big strong protector?" he teased. "You're the one who's supposed to keep me safe, not the other way around."

Oh, God, if you only knew. Slate composed himself with an effort, lifting his face to nuzzle below Ash's earlobe and make him grin. "I'm just fine," he lied. "You're here, and so am I. What else could I want?"

"Some coffee?" Ash suggested. He yawned even as his hand came up to stroke Slate's hair. "Feels like I've been asleep for a whole year. I'm hungry, too." He twirled locks around his fingers, then turned, a pleading look on his face. Like a little boy who wanted a snack between meals. "Think we could cook us up a good lunch?" he asked hopefully. "Maybe have a second breakfast for our meal?"

It would do no harm, not now. Slate pressed a kiss to Ash's neck. "Surely," he agreed. "We'll just go into the house, and—"

"Slate? Something's wrong."

Slate's chest froze. "Ash? What is it, babe?"

“My clothes.” Ash looked around himself, confused. “What happened to what I was wearing? And how’d I get down here? I thought we were up in the hayloft, not down here on the floor.”

Slate tasted bitter dread in the back of his mouth. He hadn’t thought. He should have had clothes for Ash. Should have had the kitchen and the house all ready for him, so he’d not notice a thing. Oh, God, he’d be sure to tell. “You just lay there,” he ordered, voice gentle, pushing Ash down into the straw. “I’ll collect all this rubbish and take it back inside, and I’ll bring you some things. Yours are probably still up in the loft.”

“I could climb up there—”

“No, don’t do that,” Slate backtracked fast. “You stay put. All right? You look like you’ve been through a hedge backwards.” Actually, he didn’t. He looked *wonderful*. Almost better than he had been in life. Glowing with health and vitality. Even if he did seem...dreamy. Half-asleep.

Ash yawned again. “Go on, then.” He gave Slate a light swat. “I want my blue T-shirt and a nice pair of jeans.”

“Underwear?”

Ash’s old grin, the one Slate had missed so—among countless other expressions—curved up his lips at the corners. “Don’t need any,” he said with another lazy arch. “I want food right now, but afterwards, I want you. Less to get in the way.”

Slate seized Ash’s hand and brought it to his mouth for a kiss. “You got it. Just you give me a minute, and I’ll be back. All right?”

“All right,” Ash agreed, settling down into his nest. “God, this is comfortable. If it weren’t for the breeze tickling me where man ought not to be tickled except by human hands, I could just lay here the rest of my life and die here happy.”

“Don’t you say that,” Slate barked. At Ash’s startled look, he amended, “I want you alive and by my side. That’s where you belong.”

“Not arguing that, Slate,” Ash said. His forehead creased. “You seem kinda jumpy. Is something wrong?”

Slate kissed Ash’s knuckles again, then let his hand drop. It fell by his side, fingers curled up as if he regretted the letting go. “I’ll be right back,” he promised. “You just stay here, yeah? Don’t be goin’ anyplace.”

Ash gave him a sweet smile. “Right here where you want me. Not gonna budge one inch.”

“Good.” Slate’s heart pounded in his throat. “Good. You be there when I come back, understand?”

“Oh, are we playing that game? Sir, yes, sir.”

Slate’s cock jumped. The sight of Ash, laying out on the straw, naked and stretching like a sex kitten, his cock half-hard and rising fast—as was his own, he realized—it was more than he could take. More than he’d expected this to be. He wasn’t sure what he’d been anticipating. Maybe something like a ghost, able to speak and talk. Not to touch him, to taste so alive under his lips, to want coffee and a big greasy breakfast-lunch. And clothes.

By God, he hated leaving Ash for one single second. To have the love of his life back in his arms and be forced to run away to save his cover story? In truth, it was the last thing he wanted to do. Ash couldn’t cotton on to the story, though. Slate had to go.

“Be right back,” Slate said, and beat a hasty retreat. His mind was whirling with thoughts of what-could-he-do, and what-should-he-do. Ash hadn’t seemed to notice the absence of Brown Sugar, and that was a plus. On the other hand, he could still be muddle-headed from being brought back to life. He had seemed a mite confused. What if he saw the

wreck of his garden? What if he wanted to go into the overgrown greenhouse? Slate swallowed hard, tasting bile.

One thing at a time, he told himself. *Get him what he's asked for, and then deal with the rest as it comes.*

Back inside, then, and the first thing he saw was the remains of the mug and foxgloves on the floor. *Shit*. Slate grabbed a broom and a dustpan and worked hastily to brush up the mess. He started to dump it in the kitchen trash can, thought better of it, and found a black plastic shopping bag. The rubbish went in there, and then in the can.

He stood, pulse racing. Clothes. Ash has said his blue T-shirt, hadn't he? That and his jeans would all still be upstairs in the closet they'd shared. He raced through the kitchen, around to the base of the stairwell, then thundered up it, heedless of the boards that needed replacing. They squeaked in indignant protest, but what did he care for them?

Thank any god who was listening, he was able to lay hands on Ash's requested outfit right away. He'd worn that shirt himself a few times, just as he did the flannel he—*shit*—still had on. Definitely not what he'd been wearing the day Ash died.

Hands full of clothing, he sat heavily on the edge of his bed. This was nothing like he'd been expecting. An Ash dragged out of heaven, maybe, with some words of wisdom for him. A ghost, maybe, one who knew he was dead. This Ash had been returned to him with no apparent memory of anything that had happened. As far as he was concerned, they'd just finished fucking in the hayloft. A whole year since orgasms... Slate's hands curled into fists in the blue cloth.

He gave himself a shake. Couldn't sit around all day dithering like a little girl, oh no. He had to get downstairs and get Ash what he wanted. He'd deal with the rest later. Every little bit as it came. No other way to

handle things, though if he'd known, *known* this was going to work, he'd have cleaned the house from top to bottom, laid in every last one of Ash's favorite foods and brought in a gardener to fix the herbs.

No help for it now, though. *Got to live for the moment*, he thought with a slightly crazed giggle. *And right now, I've gotta get back to Ash. He's naked, and he needs me. God, those words never sounded so good. Focus on the finer points on this and let the big picture go. My lover's waiting on me. That's all that matters.*

* * *

"Why the blindfold?" Ash stood and waved his arms around, trying to get his balance. "This another game?"

Slate smoothed the blue T-shirt over Ash's stomach, unable to resist touching him once more. Wouldn't be the last time that day, he was sure. While he was there, he went for broke, cupping Ash's erection through his jeans. "You sure you want food to eat?" he crooned. "I could give you something else to eat."

Ash chuckled. "I bet you could, and I bet you will. But first, I'm starving, Slate. Feels like I haven't eaten in—"

—Slate held his breath—

"Months," Ash finished. "Breakfast wasn't all that long ago, was it?"

"Just about four hours," Slate lied. It pained him to do so. He just hadn't thought. Moving fast, and he prayed, mostly soundlessly, he folded the fragile spell parchment with a wince and tucked it into the pocket of his jeans. "I'll undo you when we get back to the house."

"So you have to lead me?" Ash grinned, almost a leer. "I like this kind of game. You want me to call you 'Master', now? I could go for that."

"No, no, babe, don't do that." Slate cupped Ash's cheek. Ash pressed a kiss against his wrist. "Just be yourself, all right?" *The Ash I want.* "Play along with me until we're inside. That's all I ask." It had been a crazy idea, but the best he could come up with on short notice.

"Yes...Master," Ash said wickedly. He grinned like a devil caught mid-dance and wagged his tongue in Slate's direction. "You just get me in, feed me up, and I'll do anything you say do."

Slate shut his eyes tight for a brief moment. Talk like that shouldn't go straight to his cock, but damned if it didn't. "Follow me." He took Ash by the hand, the warm, dry hand, and led him toward the entrance of the barn.

"Hey," Ash asked, "where's Brown Sugar? Thought she was down here in her paddock."

"Zillah took her out for some exercise." It troubled Slate, how easily the lies were coming to him, but like everything else in the world, practice was making perfect. "Marianne's busy glazing this afternoon."

"Since when does Zillah know how to ride?"

"Where have you been?" Slate swatted the back of Ash's head, glad he couldn't see how he winced. Truth be told, Zillah had bought the filly, saying she'd learn how to ride the sweet old girl and warning him that the second Slate wanted her back, she'd sell back at a loss. At the time, he'd thought he'd never want to see the horse again. Idiot. He hadn't thought. He should have *thought*.

He led Ash carefully through the yard, avoiding any upturned clumps of earth he might bump into. Ash sniffed cheerfully. "I smell leather. Did you sneak in some work on your projects for the arts fair while I was asleep?"

"You know me. Work, work, work."

Ash managed to elbow him. “We’re gonna have to teach you how to relax.” He breathed in again. “My herbs. God, they smell sweet. I must be downwind of them. Remind me to go check the violets later? They’re delicate as hell. Gotta be careful of them.”

Slate flinched. “Delicate, you said? And do you have to check them today? You can’t do that tomorrow, maybe?” Tomorrow, when it would be too late.

“Oh, maybe.” Ash shook his head. “It’s all so clean. And I don’t hear any animals. Not the nanny goat, not the hens. Did something happen to them?”

“Nothing at all. They’re just napping. It’s high noon, when all God’s creatures should be asleep.” *Except us.* Slate nudged Ash to get him moving again. “Inside, you. I’ve got a good mess of stuff to feed you up with.”

Did he? His mind raced. Eggs, they had eggs. He’d bought a carton. There would be frozen sausage patties. Some bacon a neighboring farmer had dropped by, fresh and thick-cut in peppered slices. Did he have biscuit makings? Enough coffee to make the old-fashioned way Ash loved?

Oh, God, the coffee pot. It’d have a year’s worth of dust inside it, and none of the leavings. Ash had always sworn you had to start with the last bits of an old pot to make it the right strength and texture. Thick enough to chew, and it would—Slate almost laughed out loud—wake up a dead man.

They had reached the back door. Time to go inside and find out what was what. Either Ash would believe his storytelling and think nothing had changed at all. He’d stuff the man with food, then take him upstairs to bed and fuck away the day and the night, with breaks for holding one another and for conversation.

That, or Ash would suss out something had gone wrong and he'd demand answers. Oh, God, Slate didn't know what to say if Ash started to question him. He couldn't tell the truth. Ash wouldn't understand. Would he?

He ushered them both inside the door. A missed scrap of mug crunched under his boot. Good thing he'd remembered sneakers for Ash.

"What was that?" Ash asked. "Did we break a dish or a glass this morning?" His face creased. "I don't—I can't remember."

"Nothing of import," Slate soothed. "Come on, now, you. Come on inside and sit yourself down at the kitchen table. I'm the one cooking today."

Ash broke into a huge grin. "You, layin' your magic touch on the food? Hot damn, this is my lucky day. Will you make the biscuits the way I like them, with butter glazing the top?"

"All the butter you want, lover." Slate moved to stand behind Ash, starting to untie the knot on his blindfold. His hands shook, but he knew it was now or never. "I'll even do the coffee."

"Oh, no, no way. The coffee's all mine to do with as I see fit."

"Might have to clean up a bit," Slate warned. "I had me a look around, and it's dusty as hell in here."

"What's a little mess?" Still blindfolded, Ash turned his head to give Slate a brilliant smile. "A man has to eat a peck of dirt before he dies."

"I suppose he does at that." Slate picked the last of the knot free and let the blindfold fall. He stepped back, wary, waiting for Ash to take his look at the kitchen. Nothing had changed in the year he'd been gone, but lord, if his heart wasn't in his throat, waiting for Ash to notice something wrong. Anything. A difference Slate hadn't thought about making.

The electric coffee pot. Oh, shit.

Just as Slate was about to jump in front of it, Ash let out a long, satisfied breath and whirled in Slate's arms, hugging him around the neck. "Food and you," he whispered in Slate's ear, kissing the lobe. "What more could a man ask for in this life?"

What more, Slate thought, moving to where he could change their position and have Ash's lips on his own, left hungry for a whole year. *What more indeed.*

I just pray I can keep this up until...until the spell exacts its price. Be mine, Ash. Don't let anything spoil this day.

It'll be the last one either of us has, after all.

Chapter Five

Food. Who cared about the stuff? It could wait. Slate had Ash, the real live article, back in his arms again, and that was all he had on his mind for the time being. An Ash who was more than happy to see him, from the way he molded the long, lean length of his body against Slate's. Arms slid around his back, kneading at the muscles through the faded red shirt he wore.

"This is mine, isn't it?" Ash broke their kiss to ask.

Slate captured his lips again. He traced Ash's lower lip with the tip of his tongue, then, when his mouth opened, swooped in for a taste. Mint, just like always—but also, the faintest tang of copper. Magic.

Slate shivered once, then forced himself to move past it. He couldn't deny the reality which had brought Ash back into his arms. He'd thank it kindly, and get on with ravishing the love of his life. Throwing his full attention into the kiss, he lost himself in the joy of having Ash's lips under his again. Full, sweet, just begging to be nipped and sucked on. Everything Ash liked, he gave him, and then some over again.

His own hands began to wander, roving over Ash's shoulders, trailing a line down his backbone, laughing when Ash yelped and arched even closer. "Always were ticklish," he murmured, diving lower.

"Were ticklish?" Ash questioned, but Slate could tell he was talking just to make sounds in the air. His body said everything that needed be,

his cock a hard knot against Slate's in their jeans. "Oh, God...don't stop there."

"Had no intention of it, babe." Slate skated his hands down the small of Ash's back, then over the globes of his tight young ass, hard as the rest of him from hours of rough work. He squeezed, one finger at a time, then with the whole of both of his hands. "You feel so good. Better than I remembered."

"Than you remembered? Short memory, old man," Ash teased, rocking back and forth a little. His arms stole up around Slate's neck. "We were doing this just this morning, if I remember right. You couldn't decide what you wanted to wear, and I said—"

"—who needs clothes?" Slate turned his head to kiss Ash's bare wrist. "I do recall that."

"You say that as if it happened a hundred years ago." Ash looked up at Slate, serious and curious. "Then you picked out a green shirt. Slate, what's going on here?"

Slate's heart sped up, pounding in his throat. "I got changed," he said roughly. "Come on, now, no more talk. Just you come on and love me. I'll tell you all about things in a little bit here."

"Come on, come on," Ash mimicked, but with a grin. "You want me that bad? You that hungry for my tight bod?"

In answer, Slate picked Ash up and swung him around with a growl. "Like a grizzly bear coming on a honey pot," he said. "Gonna say no to me?"

"Hell, no," Ash purred, the dirty words taking on a certain spice as they fell out of his mouth. "No fucking way. You started this, Slate. Consider yourself invited on in."

"Oh, yeah?" Slate brought them close enough to touch foreheads. "Sound pretty desperate yourself, there."

Ash stole a quick, frantic kiss. He was growing damp with sweat, tendrils of his hair sticking to his forehead and cheeks. Looked about five years younger and in the prime of his life. Lush fruit on the vine, all ripe for plucking. "Needy," he rasped. "For you. All for you."

"Then I guess I have to take you," Slate managed to say around a knot in his throat. "Gentle or rough? Slow or fast?"

Ash made an impatient noise. "I don't care. Just do me, Slate. Feels like it's been ages since I had you deep inside me. I'm aching for you. I feel all empty. Fill me up."

That did it. "Sit yourself down," Slate ordered, pushing Ash back against the kitchen table. "No, wait, here." His hands shook on Ash's zipper, the one he'd just done up out in the barn, but he managed to pull it down and tug his sinfully tight-fitting jeans over his hips and down his legs. Gorgeous legs, like a man from one of their blue magazines. Tanned from long hours in the sun, sprinkled with fair hairs bleached by the light.

He kept on going, all the way to Ash's ankles. "Lift your foot."

Ash obeyed. One foot at a time, he was freed of his jeans. "I just put those on."

"And I just took them off. You complaining?"

"Not a bit." Propped up by the table, Ash arched a bit. His cock, full and heavy, angled up at Slate. "This look like I'm unhappy?"

"No, but you ain't half so pleased as you might be in just a minute." To prove his point, Slate licked a long strip up the heavy vein on the underside of Ash's cock. Salty, musky, pure male. He even smelled clean, as if he'd come fresh from a shower. Slate loved all flavors his man's cock came in, but this was most sweet and delicious of all.

Unable to resist, he slipped his lips around the tip and gave one hard suck. Ash let out a loud cry without words, gripping Slate's shoulders. A pearl of pre-come bubbled onto Slate's tongue.

"No, no, not yet," Slate purred, taking his mouth away. "I want more than this out of you. You don't know how—" he caught himself. He'd been about to say *how long I've dreamed of this*. "—how long I've been planning this," he finished.

"All since breakfast?"

"And before then." Slate kissed a row down the top side of Ash's cock. "I am tempted to stay right here, though. You think I should?"

Ash's hands came back to work at Slate's shoulders. "Please?" he said, sounding reedy with his lust. "Do me, Slate. Suck me off good and hard. I burn for you."

How could he have possibly said no to that? Slate parted his lips and slid them over Ash's cock as far as he could, and he could damn near deep throat. What if he tried—what could it hurt? He took a deep breath in through his nose, and kept going. Ash groaned, a deep, guttural sound as more of his length slipped inside the warm, wet cavern of Slate's mouth.

Slate kept going, lashing the underside of Ash's cock when he had to pause and adjust, but he didn't stop until he felt something bump and realized the thing was accomplished.

Both men gave huge sighs. Ash's hands tightened and loosened reflexively. "Slate," he whispered. "You got no idea how you look right now. I'm almost all the way inside. Another inch and you'd have your nose in my curls. Hot, baby, you're so damned hot."

And you're still verbal, Slate thought, breathing in deeply as he was able to. On an impulse, he blew the air out around Ash's cock. He all but laughed in satisfaction as Ash loosed another of those wonderful, deep

howls, hands gripping until they hurt. *Good, babe. So good. Gonna make this the best one of your—our—life together.*

Ever so slowly, he drew back, then slid forward. Once, twice, and then Ash caught the idea. As he began to move, Slate held his head still. *Fuck my mouth, babe. Come on and take me hard. Ride me rough. I can take it. I need this. You.*

Ash whimpered. “Don’t want to hurt you,” he managed. “You okay with this?”

Slate flickered his gaze up, channeling all the heat he felt into his eyes. He flicked Ash’s cock with his tongue, hoping his message was clear to not stop, to keep on going until one or the other of them burst. His own cock was pulsing painfully against his zipper, hurting so damn good, but he knew what he’d have to look forward to. He could wait. This was all about Ash.

Come on, Ash. Do me good and hard.

Slate began to move again, easing Ash into a rhythm of taking his mouth. Salty-sweet come coated his tongue as they moved, making the way easier. Slate swallowed as he was able, so hungry for the taste.

There could be more, though. Wicked, he moved his hands back around Ash’s ass. He ran one finger down the seam between his cheeks, then slipped it inside, stroking to the beat of his sucks on Ash’s cock. “Oh, God,” Ash cried, bucking into Slate’s mouth. “More. Please.”

Slate aimed to please, and it filled his heart with such a lightness and joy to see Ash like this, splayed out and taking his delight in the afternoon sunshine, that he’d have rolled the whole world up into a ball and given it to him if he could. Still teasing with one finger, gently prodding at Ash’s hole, he brought his other hand around front and began to play with his balls. Cupping the heavy sac first as it drew up

tight, he rolled the nuts back and forth, ever so gentle, the motion enough to drive Ash wild—as he recalled.

And oh, it seemed to be working. Ash was sweating in earnest now, fat drops rolling down his cheeks, his shirt sticking to his chest. He looked so hot, decent from the waist up, but below the hips shamelessly wanton. The sight filled Slate with such a surge of lust he had to stop, breathe, and concentrate on what he was doing if he didn't want to come in his jeans right there and then.

"Close," Ash panted. "So close, Slate. Just need something—something more—please..."

Slate understood that plea. Sucking down hard, he nudged with his finger and breached Ash's tight hole, feeling the *pop* as he slid through the ring of muscle. Rough and ready, he pushed in until he found that small, spongy bump, and pushed down firmly.

"Slate, God, God, Slate!" Ash threw back his head and howled, his hands fiercely tight on Slate's shoulders, his cock spasming. Gouts of come spurted out of him, a heavy load that was almost too much to take. Slate drew back, lapping frantically. He didn't want to lose a single drop, not one. He needed every bit of Ash he could possibly get. Savored every morsel of his man, his lover, his mate.

Ever so slowly, Ash fell down from the mountain peak he'd scaled. He let go of Slate's shoulders as if his fingers were creaky from holding on so hard. Still breathing fast, he shook his head and said, "Slate, I've never. You've never. That was...hell, incredible doesn't go far enough. You...what you did...your throat, your fingers, you made me insane."

"Good." Slate licked Ash's cock clean, bathing every last trace of spunk off the softening length. "You up to my turn, now?" he asked, still sitting, but staring up at his glowing lover. "If you're empty without me, think about how I feel. I've ached for this. So much, so hard."

Ash laughed. “Knock, knock,” he teased. “Who’s there at my door?”

“Big Bad Wolf,” Slate crooned in a low voice, rising to his feet. “Let me in, let me in, let me in. Can I come play?”

“Since you ask so nice...” Ash leaned forward, lazily pressing his lips to Slate’s. “Do we have anything slick in here?”

Slate cast a look around. There might have been a year-old tube stuffed in a cupboard somewhere, but he didn’t know how long those things stayed good. His eyes lit on a flask of virgin olive oil Zillah had pressed for him and pressed on him, trying to make him eat. He stepped away just long enough to grab the container and present it to Ash.

Ash’s eyes glittered with hungry anticipation. He licked his lips. “That looks just fine. We can pretend I’m Italian.”

“No need to pretend you’re good enough to eat. Now, turn around for me, babe. Turn all the way around.” Slate put his hands on Ash, helping his near-boneless body cooperate. “Brace your hands on the table. Lean your head on your hands.” He paused to stroke Ash’s back. “Do you know how hot you look?” he breathed. “Just thought I should tell you that.”

“Fuck me,” Ash said back, voice muffled. He shuffled, then spread his legs wide, a perfect Y with his gorgeous ass at the crux. His cheeks parted, the shadowy cavern inside just begging to be plundered. “Come on, Slate. Don’t make me wait for you.”

“You are a demanding little thing.”

“Damn right. Come on, big man. Fill me up.”

Slate took a deep, deep breath. He’d laid awake at nights, envisioning this moment. It’d played out a thousand different ways. Ash on his bed, face in their pillows, the herbal smell of their clean sheets and salty sweat filling his nose.

Ash on his back, arms reaching up for Slate. On the couch, crawling over each other. Rubbing off so fast and frantic they couldn't even wait to have one inside of the other. Lying outside under the shade of one of the ancient oak trees, the ground made soft by a fall of leaves. In the fall, in a carefully raked pile they were scattering to the four winds.

At night, spooned up one behind the other, thrusting in and out. Slow, sweet torture, or quick, rough and dirty—he'd seen it all in his mind's eye every time he passed a place where they'd made love before Ash left him.

But this? Nothing compared.

Slate didn't dare trust his voice to form words. He focused his concentration on what he was doing instead, as he listened to Ash's ragged breath and his own making a point and counterpoint song of lust. His fingers brushed soft denim, reaching for the zipper. As it slid down, the noise sounded all too loud in the kitchen. There had descended a hush. As if this were a sacred moment. Slate took his jeans off with that in mind, not flinging them across the room, but leaving them to puddle at his feet.

He stepped forward, in between the juncture of Ash's legs. Once again, he couldn't help touching. *Real. This is real, and he's as good as life gets. Magic, that's what this is. All of it. Everything we ever wanted. And I want...* "Take off your shirt," he whispered, rucking it up with his fingertips. "I want me some bare skin. Need to feel you instead of cloth when I'm fucking you."

"I'm down," Ash protested.

"I'll help." It had been a while, but Slate hadn't lost the knack of helping his partner get himself naked. Ash stretched his arms out flat on the table, knocking over a salt and pepper set, laughing as Slate scooted the shirt over his head. He pulled back, slipping his arms out of the

sleeves. Slate held the cloth to his nose, breathing in for a long moment. Then he folded it into a square and pushed it under Ash's cheek. "Rest on that," he said, tender. "And hold on tight."

Obedient, Ash's fingers clenched at the tablecloth. Hardly damask quality, so it didn't do much good except crinkle and bunch, but it'd do just fine. Slate reached for the flask of olive oil and unstopped it. The sharp, wine-like scent rose up to greet him. "Might be cold," he warned, anointing his fingers with a generous coating. Gentle as he could, he pushed two fingers into Ash. "That okay, babe? Too much?"

"No." Ash shook his head, setting the table to rocking. "More. Bring it on."

"Three?"

"Uh-uh. Want your cock, Slate. I don't need being prepared. I'm ready for you. Take me on." Ash clenched down around the fingers inside him. Just to play-punish, Slate rubbed his prostate in three quick strokes, then drew out fast. Ash moaned. "Bastard. Come on, now. Come on."

"I'm here for you," Slate whispered, lining his cock up to Ash's entrance. "You swear you're ready?"

"As I've ever been." Ash pushed backwards, bumping them together. "No more waiting, now."

"No," Slate agreed, bending to trace a line up Ash's spine with the tip of his tongue, then biting at a shoulder blade. "No more."

And with that, he drove in deep. Heat and tightness surrounded him, blowing his mind and any ability to think or form words. He'd waited, he'd wanted, and now he *had*. Mindless, like a piston, probably too much too fast, he drove in time and again, his balls slapping against Ash's ass. But instead of protesting, Ash mewled and wriggled like a cat in heat, writhing back as he was spitted on Slate's cock.

How long it went on, Slate couldn't have said. Seemed like forever, and like it was all over far too fast. He felt his balls drawing up tight and hard against his body. His hands gripped Ash's sides firmly enough to leave red marks. He loosed a low, deep groan, all he had time for, before he was emptying himself deep inside. His orgasm seemed to last for hours, throb after throb and pulse after pulse. Ash milked him with the roughest, silkiest grasp, making small cries as Slate thrust on. He couldn't have stopped himself had he or Ash wanted to. Thank God, neither of them did.

When at last he could see clearly, and think clearly again, he slumped forward, draping himself over Ash. Their hands fumbled blindly and grasped at one another, fingers twining together, both sets. Ash was gasping for air, but in the good way, just like a man who'd been fucked within an inch of his life, and Slate was struggling to breathe his own self.

This was it, then. What he'd waited a whole year for, ever since the hayloft. Had it been worth the wait? If he'd had his choice, he would have taken a year's worth of this man's loving any day, but this...

Well, he couldn't deny it. This was *magic*.

And thank whatever gods listened to gay men for it.

Chapter Six

Some years back, Slate and Ash had dragged an old couch into their dining room. It looked out of place as all hell, but they didn't care. It was a good place to lounge after a full meal, wrapped up in one another's arms, or a soft spot to hang out on while waiting for dinner to be done. Sometimes they sat and watched the sun set out the big bay windows. It'd been one of their favorite places.

Now, they lay together, both naked of any stitch except Slate's red flannel shirt. He'd even unbuttoned that, though, so Ash would have warm skin to rest his head against. Slate was propped up by the couch arm, Ash between his legs, and his arms around Ash.

"Mmm," Ash breathed after a long pause in which they had, comfortably, said nothing at all. "Times like these, I don't think heaven could be any better." He tilted his head back to look up at Slate. "You ever wonder about it? What happens when we die?"

Slate kept his expression steady. "That's an awful morbid question for someone who's just been fucked six ways from Sunday," he said mildly, playing with Ash's fingers. Long, elegant fingers. He realized with a start they were still stained from plant matter, just as they had been on the day he'd passed. Green stains up and down, smudges on his palm. He hesitated, but then asked, "What's got you thinking about death?"

Ash shrugged. “Just figuring I could have gone happy when you were driving into me.” He playfully elbowed back into Slate’s ribs. “It’s never been that good before. Wonder what made it different?”

A year of celibacy, Slate thought, but didn’t say. Instead, he cuddled Ash closer, closing his arms in a big circle with his hands locked over Ash’s stomach. “It’s just you, babe,” he said into Ash’s hair. Soft, silky, drying with the smells of sex and herbs. “You make me want to be a better man.”

Ash lay still save for playing with Slate’s hands. “What would you do?” he asked suddenly.

“What would I do about what, hon?” Slate kissed Ash’s scalp. He froze when the next question exited Ash’s mouth.

“If I died, what would you do?” Ash lay uncharacteristically quiet. His fingers stroked, then stilled on Slate’s hands. “I mean, it could happen. You never know what’s going to happen from day to day, right?”

Slate’s gaze strayed to a foxglove plant in the middle of the dinner table. “No, I don’t expect that you do. But don’t you worry about dying on me, hon.” He swallowed. “You’re gonna be with me just as long as I’m around. Ain’t nothing going to come between the two of us.”

“But if I—”

“No.” Slate jerked up. He gripped Ash’s hands hard. “Don’t you even go talking like that. This is our night, Ash. Just lay back and enjoy it.”

Ash felt a little tense in his arms. Slate didn’t want that. He stroked his lover’s lower arms, gentling him down, like a riled polecat. “Just enjoy the night. Please? And you trust me when I say I’m not going anywhere, and neither are you. We’ll be together until the end. Sickness and health, for better or for worse, and death shall not us part. I promise you that.”

“Slate, you’re squeezing too hard.” Ash said it quietly. He shifted, trying to free himself. “Ease up a little bit, will you?”

Slate realized he had been gripping hard, as if Ash were about to fly apart in his arms. He eased up. "Better?"

"Yeah, much better. Calm down. Promise me?" Ash curled back into the circle of Slate's arms. "This is forever. I know that."

"A love that will never grow old," Slate agreed. He blinked several times. Must have been some dust in the air. "You and me, till the end of time. Come what may. We got a deal on that?"

Ash's warm hand covered his own. "I promise, Slate. Team Us."

Slate's heart broke just a little bit more. He opened and shut his mouth, searching for something to say, but then Ash's stomach let out a loud rumble. Both men broke into laughter. "I suspect that means you're hungry?"

"As a horse." Ash wriggled. "As I recall, you were talking about a breakfast lunch? Closer to supper, now, but close enough?" He looked up hopefully. "We still on for a good, hot meal?"

"Anything you want. Still up for bacon, eggs, sausage, the works?"

"Damn, but the works sound just fine to me." Ash shifted lithely off the sofa, standing naked on the soft rug before them. With the dim afternoon light behind him, he looked like one of those old Roman statues of gods or men chased by the gods. Which, Slate expected, he was. His heart gave a painful twist.

Food. They needed a good tuck-in, and he could do this for Ash, at least. Even men on Death Row got themselves one last, good meal.

He stood up. "All right. You go get us our clothes, and we'll set into a meal that'd feed a horse." He poked Ash in the stomach, making him chortle and duck away. "Might even fill you up."

Ash gave Slate a look full of honest delight. "If anyone can, it's you," he said. He moved in for a quick kiss—Ash never had been able to get

enough of those—and then ambled toward the kitchen, his gait smooth and easy.

Slate sank back on the couch and ran his hands through his hair. That'd been way too close. Besides which, he didn't want to think about death again. Not yet. He'd just spent a year dwelling on the Grim Reaper, that bastard, and the precious hours he'd bought were slipping away all too fast.

One day and one night, he thought, despairing. *It's not enough. But then, a whole life wouldn't have been enough, would it?*

How can I bear to let go of him, come morning? For the first time, he damned the magic spell. Not that he'd be sorry to let go of his own life, without Ash in it, but if there had been any way to keep them together...on earth...

A pair of worn jeans hit him in the face. "Hey, now," Ash said teasingly as Slate fought clear of them. He was skinning into his own pants, looking at Slate with a quizzical expression. "What's wrong? You look just about sick."

Slate shook his head, forcing a grin to his lips. *Tomorrow be damned. I have him for tonight.* "Nothing wrong with me, babe," he replied, standing. "Let's get us some cooking done."

"Now you're talkin'." Ash beamed at him. He turned, then paused. "Foxglove. Is that new?"

"No," Slate answered honestly enough.

"Huh. Wonder why I never noticed it before?" Ash fondled one leaf, and bent to smell one of the white bells. "You know how these got their name? There's an old fairy story that the foxes used these to cover their paws. It's symbolic of heartbreak, too. Kind of morbid, when you think about it. Isn't it?"

Slate felt ill again, but he hid it. “Bacon,” he tempted suggestively. “Sausage. Scrambled eggs. I could be coaxed to make pancakes, if you ask sweet enough.

Ash laughed, the foxglove forgotten. “Biscuits,” he volleyed in return, feinting at Slate, then back. “Made to your momma’s recipe. Fluffy, with a good, golden, crispy top. Glazed with butter.”

“At your service.”

Ash grinned. “I know, I know, cholesterol. But we’ve just had ourselves a good workout, and,” he stretched, “I might just be up for another one before the night’s out.” He winked. “You make me insatiable, hon.”

Slate grabbed Ash in a bear hug. He didn’t say anything; just stood there, holding him. “Hey,” Ash said softly, after a moment. “Glad to see you, too.”

Slate pulled Ash tighter to him. He never wanted to let go. “Oh, yeah,” he replied. “Gladder than you can ever know.” Damn dust was getting to him again, making his eyes sting. “Come on. We’ve wasted enough time. Food’s waiting.”

* * *

Ash wiped up the last puddle of his egg yolk with a triangle of toast. Good, fresh bread, home-baked from a nice place in town. Slate watched him in amusement over his own plate, still half-full. “Where do you put it all?” he asked in wonder. That narrow, muscled body could hold a hell of a lot of food. Ash had already gotten his way down an omelette with ham, peppers and herbs, two of the golden-brown biscuits and a helping of stewed apples.

Ash gave him an arched look. "I can take on a lot," he said, turning his look into a leer. "I'm stronger than I look."

"I just bet you are." And maybe he was. Maybe the magic had repaired him. Given him a healthy heart. He'd surely come back with an empty stomach and hollow legs, given the way he was putting it away. Slate had gotten away lucky with the coffee pot. Ash had asked about the electric maker, and Slate's story about having dragged it out of storage to do a taste-test went over without question.

Currently, he was drinking a cup like he hadn't had in a year, thick as tar and black as midnight skies. It'd melt the spoon if you tried to stir in cream and sugar, so he'd dropped in three cubes and just let them dissolve.

He was getting to the sweet part, now. Closing his eyes, he savored the taste. No one beat his Ash in the kitchen, and that was a fact. This felt like the first time he'd been hungry, and eaten until he was full, in a whole year.

Opening his eyes, he saw Ash waving a piece of thick-cut bacon at him. "Bet you've got room for just one more bite," he teased. "Come on, now. Open up for me."

Slate's pulse quickened. God, this was hot. He parted his lips, allowing Ash to slide the treat in. He took a bite and let the flavors burst over his tongue—salt, pepper and the richness of well-cured meat.

"Good?" Ash murmured, holding the piece up for another bite. "I've got something else you could eat later on, if you had a mind to."

"Is that a fact, then?" Slate felt his cock twitch in anticipation. "Seems like you've already had your turn today." Not that he'd deny Ash anything he wanted, but oh, how he ached to bottom for the man. Ash wasn't the only one who felt empty when it came to sex. Mostly, Slate topped, but he did like his own turn on the flip side every now and again.

Ash pretended to pout. He waved the bacon in front of Slate's mouth. "Not even if I promise to be very, very good?"

Slate snapped another bite off. Chewing and swallowing, he answered, "Play your cards right."

"Gin, poker or Old Maid?"

Slate burst into laughter. It felt good and right, the air filling his chest and bursting out in something that sounded like a song. Close as he'd ever come, as he couldn't carry a tune in a galvanized bucket. "Poke-him, maybe."

Ash's eyes lowered to half-mast. "That sounds like a fun game to me, but I might be rusty. You'll have to teach me the rules. Be strict, now. Have to learn right if I want to do this, don't I?"

Slate flashed a thought back to the day Ash had died. Running, teasing about spankings and striping his pretty ass red. Somehow, he'd lost his stomach for that. He wanted to worship Ash, not mark him up, not even in consensual play. He reached out for Ash's hand, ready to seize up another biscuit, and brought it to his lips. "You'll do just fine," he murmured, before kissing it knuckle by knuckle.

He felt the weight of Ash's gaze on him. "Slate," he breathed. "You're gonna make me forget food all over again."

"Good," Slate said. "No, wait. You eat your fill. I want you to be happy as you can be."

He looked up to see Ash grinning. He took a big bite of biscuit and moaned. "Food and you," he repeated. "I couldn't want anything more, except another dose of you."

"After dinner," Slate promised, letting go of Ash's hand. He stood. "You want some more eggs? We have plenty."

Ash considered. "I could go for a couple, scrambled up nice and fluffy—"

—and the phone rang.

Slate froze for a second. The phone rang again. Damn it. It'd be Marianne or Zillah, wanting to know why he hadn't gotten back in touch. Asking him about Ash's memorial service that night. Asking him what he wanted to eat for dinner... The bacon and eggs flipped in his stomach.

"Hon?" Ash looked at him, concerned. "You have this expression like you've seen a ghost."

Slate choked back laughter. The phone rang a third time. Neither one of those women would give up until he answered—or worse, they'd drive down the road to try and dig him out of hiding. "I just have to get this," he said. "You wait right here."

"I could get it." Ash shrugged, starting to stand. "You work on those eggs."

"No, stay right there." Slate all but pushed Ash back down in his seat. "I'm—I'm expecting a call. You sit tight. Finish that biscuit. Try some jelly on it."

The phone rang again. *Damn stubborn women.* Slate gave Ash a final pat on the shoulder, then raced out to the hallway phone. He got there on the seventh ring and picked up.

"I am not in the mood to talk," he said without asking who had called.

"You're not?" Marianne snapped, sounding crisply pissed off. "Well, isn't that just too bad? Zillah and I have been getting the place ready all day long, and you're going to be a part of this whether you want to or not. We're not going to let you bury yourself in that house all night long."

"Marianne, truth to tell, I cannot speak right now. Damn it, I have something important going on." Slate cursed. "I'm—busy."

"Busy?" Marianne's tone took on a whole new level of irritated. "Slate, have you brought someone home?"

“Someone—God, no. How could you even think about that?”

“Well? What am I supposed to think?”

“That I’d be true to Ash’s memory,” he hissed. “If you think I could forget about him for one fucking second, every single day, this whole *year*—”

“Slate... Ash is dead. You have to accept that. He is gone, and he’s been in his grave for a year. You have to move on. You can’t do that until you say goodbye.”

“Well, you were sure in a hurry to assume I’d moved on to some muscled young farm boy,” Slate snapped. “You sure have a lot of faith in me, don’t you?”

“What am I supposed to think? You don’t tell us anything anymore. Time was, we were all inseparable. Me and Zillah, you and—”

“And who? And *Ash*, that’s who.” Slate resisted the urge to slam down the phone. He lowered his volume, just in case the sound was carrying to the kitchen. It was a few rooms away, so he didn’t really concern himself with it, but if Ash started asking questions... “You actually thought I’d cheat on his memory?”

“No, Slate. Actually, I’d hoped.” Marianne’s voice broke. “It’s been killing me to see you grieve so. The timing would have been what got on my nerves. But I want to see you find someone else. I don’t want to see those damned foxgloves decorating every room of your house, reminders of how you think you failed Ash.”

Slate’s hand tightened around the receiver until it almost creaked. “I will never forget Ash,” he said flatly. “Dead and gone, doesn’t make a difference. He is and will be a part of my life until the day I die. No matter how soon that might be.”

“Die? Slate!” Marianne’s inflection rose and sharpened. “You’re not thinking about—no, Slate, don’t. Don’t you do anything damn-fool like

that. I loved my cousin. I know how much you and he meant to each other.”

“You really don’t.”

“Fair enough. But don’t go offing yourself on account of this anniversary.” Marianne paused. Slate could tell she was crying. Fuck, he hated to hear a woman cry; worse was knowing he’d brought the tears on. “Slate, promise me you won’t do anything foolish tonight.”

Slate struggled to find words. He couldn’t tell her the truth. She’d want to rush down here and see Ash, and then when the sun rose the next day... How could she bear the loss a second time? “I’m all right,” he said tightly. “You just sit tight. I’m not coming by tonight—no, stop that, Marianne, please stop. I can’t, all right? It’s just too...painful.”

“Slate...”

“Marianne, no.” He took a deep breath. “Tomorrow, okay? I promise. You come by tomorrow, and you’ll understand.” The next morning, when he’d be lying dead in Ash’s arms. Or maybe lying by himself, with Ash dissolved back into dust beneath his grave mound. Whichever way it worked out, she’d be upset, but what could he do?

He couldn’t risk anything when it came to Ash, and their one perfect day he’d traded his life for. The terms of the spell were clear. He had to lay down however many years he had left to bring Ash back. He’d made the sacrifice gladly. If it weren’t for Marianne meddling—he could have been back in the kitchen, feeding Ash strawberries. Ash licking the juices off his fingers. Looking into each other’s eyes, heated glance to heated glance...

Slate took in a deep breath. “Marianne, just leave me be for tonight. Please?”

He could almost see her shaking her head. "Slate, no. Ash is dead. He has been dead for a whole year. We want you to live again. This is necessary. Please."

—Click—

Slate's heart jumped into his throat. Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck—the kitchen phone. He'd forgotten about the kitchen phone. "Marianne, I gotta go, talk to you later," he babbled into the receiver, then slammed it down. He ran hell-bent-for-leather back into the kitchen, praying to God he'd see Ash sitting at the table, tucking into his food, but—

No. His worst fears come true. Ash stood with his arms crossed over his chest. He looked Slate dead on in the eyes and said, "You lied to me."

"Ash, I'm so sorry."

"No. No." Ash dragged a hand through his hair. He dropped his hand helplessly. "You want to tell me what's going on here, Slate?" His gaze became steely. "Apparently, I've been dead for a year, and here you didn't bother to tell me about it. Foxgloves. Marianne. Hell, even you wearing a different shirt. That blindfold. My coffee pot. It's all coming together now, Slate, and I don't like it one bit."

He stared Slate straight in the eyes. "I want the truth, Slate. And I want it now. Hear me? Slate, what did you *do*?"

Chapter Seven

Ash wasn't talking to him. The last night on earth—for the both of them—and how were they spending it? On separate sides of the den, Ash huddled in a ball tucked into the corner of an old couch, and Slate standing by the door. He leaned on its frame, wishing he could curl up his own self. Vanish into nothing.

He hadn't counted on Ash finding out what he'd done. And he hadn't planned on how mad Ash had gotten. There'd been arguing, voices raised in yells until the rafters rang with shout after shout, then Ash storming out of the room and...

Slate rested his head against cool wood and wished he could take the previous hour back. "I ain't sorry," he said abruptly, startling even himself. Ash flinched, but said nothing in return. "I will never be sorry for having you back in my life, even if it was just for one day."

Ash stayed quiet. He drew one leg up underneath him and pulled the other up to prop his chin on his knee. He shook his head, dark brown locks swaying, but as for words, he had none. Not that he needed them. Slate could read his lover like a book, and right now it had the words "FUCK OFF" and "YOU IDIOT" written in big neon letters on the pages.

They'd come to a stalemate, it seemed. Ash stared at the wall, the one with a long, thin crack in the plaster. They'd rammed it when they were moving furniture one day. Ash was worse than a woman for liking things shifted around. He'd gotten some kind of Feng Shui trip on from a man

who'd sold him a futon, and for days afterward there had been nothing but rearranging for the best flow of chi, chakra, or whatever he'd called it. He'd been so apologetic about the damage to the wall, but oh, back then, Slate hadn't cared. He'd just tugged Ash to him, kissed him until he stopped apologizing, and promised they'd repair it.

That had been a little over a year ago. The crack had widened and lengthened with time. A small coffee table beneath it was covered with dust and magazines gone yellow. A stench of burning came from the lamp, which hadn't been switched on in months. Slate hadn't gone in that room. Too many memories. It'd had the one working fireplace in the whole of the house, instead of a gas heater, and the snowy winter nights they'd spent in front of it had been heaven itself.

Then summer had come, and Ash had gone. He hadn't wanted to change a thing about the place, even fix it up any, because to do that would have been like admitting there was no going back. Except there *was*, and he'd *found it*, so why was Ash madder than a hornet at him?

Love, Slate guessed. Damned if you had someone, and damned if you didn't. Maybe damned if you had both at once, and wasn't that a conundrum. "I don't—" he started, stopping when Ash flashed him a glare. "I don't have any care for my own self, Ash," he said. "All I wanted was to have you in my arms again. I'd have paid any price for that."

"Too high," Ash muttered, looking away.

Slate stood straighter. "What's that?" It was the first thing Ash had said in near half an hour. "No, now, come on. You have something to say? Speak up."

"I said, it was too high, you goddamned moron!" Ash yelled, unfolding arms and legs to sit bolt upright in his anger. His eyes blazed with a righteous rage as he pointed at Slate. "How dare you presume to mess around with life and death like this?"

“Me? I presume?” Slate fought to keep from staring. “Hell, Ash, all I did was gather a few trinkets and read off a piece of paper. Shit, if I’d known this was all there was to resurrection, I’d have gone into televangelism years back.”

“God almighty, you dumbass—” Ash picked up a magazine and threw it at Slate. “You really don’t get it, do you? But then, you wouldn’t. You don’t work with the earth. Ever hear the song, Slate? To everything there is a season, turn, turn, turn. A time to live and a time to die. I’d had my life, a good one, maybe kinda short, but I loved every minute of it.”

“Even the time you spent with me?”

“Especially that. You jackass. If you think I’d have chosen to go out that way, you’re dumber than you look.”

Slate moved away from the door, crossing to Ash. He knelt at his lover’s feet and put his hands on the man’s knees, looking up into his face. “Then I don’t understand. So help me, babe, I just don’t get it. Why are you so mad? I brought you back for us.”

“Slate...” Ash closed his eyes and shook his head. “It’s like a plant,” he said, swaying his head back and forth in a tick-tock rhythm of *no, no, no*. “They bloom in the spring, fruit in the summer, and you harvest come fall. Then they die. From them, you get the seeds to start all over again. That’s the way it works, Slate. Life and death. You don’t get the one without the other. What you may have done by bringing me back? It could end the damn world, Slate.”

“Bullshit,” Slate scoffed. “Bringing one man back doesn’t turn black into white or day into night.”

“The hell it doesn’t,” Ash fired back. “You’ve upset the balance, and you did it by perverting traditions and customs. You made a deal with the devil to sacrifice your own life for one day with me, and the price was

too high, Slate. How am I supposed to rest peacefully now, knowing what you did?”

Slate formed his hands into fists. There were words he needed to say, but be-damned if he could think of how to give voice to a single one. Silently, he laid his head on Ash’s knee. He rocked his forehead back and forth, quiet as a mouse, not knowing what else to do.

After what felt like forever, fingers ran over his scalp. A hand worked its way into his hair. “Slate,” Ash said. The name sounded like a caress, albeit a sad one. A goodbye one. “Let me see the spell. I need to know everything I can. How long we have, and if there’s some way—” He stopped himself. “Go get it for me, okay?”

Slate raised up, trying to fix Ash in his gaze. “You think there’s a way out of this?”

Ash wouldn’t look directly at him. “I need the spell,” he said, jutting out his jaw. Slate recognized that well enough as Ash’s “stubborn look”. “You said you found it in an old herbal? Maybe I know something that could undo it.”

“Undo it? Put you back in the ground, and leave me to go on without you?” Slate reared back. “Ash, I would *rather* be dead than try to exist alone any longer. You have no idea what it’s like. All those days working by myself, coming in to find I had no stomach for a supper I couldn’t bear to make, and every single night alone in a bed built for two. I got to where I couldn’t even bring myself off for aching over the memory of you. I needed you. Had to have you that bad. That’s why I did what I did. I didn’t even think it would work, but—”

“The spell, Slate.” Ash was still looking away. “Bring it to me. I have to see.” He faltered briefly. “I have to know.”

Slate stood. The floor felt unsteady under his feet, or maybe it was he who was doing the rocking. Sure enough had his foundations shaken from beneath him. "I left it in the barn."

"You sold Brown Sugar, didn't you?" Ash was staring at the cracked plaster again. "I should have known, when I didn't see her. When she wasn't there to pester me for a sugar cube or a carrot. Should have realized when I didn't hear any chickens, or the goat. Smelled the air. I can, now, you know? This whole place reeks of decay. I died and you let the place we loved perish just as surely." He looked down. "Bring me the spell, Slate. Go out to the barn and get it. Now."

Slate hesitated for just a second, and then he went, cursing himself for a fool every step of the way. He'd meant it all for the best, and for a while there, things *had* been good. If it weren't for Marianne's call, then...

He stopped himself as he stepped into the yard. Then, what? All Ash's talk of magic, of messing around with the forces of nature, hit him harder than a sledgehammer. It was true, everything he'd said. Life gave way to death, and that was how the world worked. He glanced up at the sun, beginning to daub red fingers across the sky as it set, and wondered, half-afraid—would it rise the next day?

Oh, God, what if the spell had gotten damaged when that explosion came? It was such fragile parchment...it could have been shredded. Slate hastened his steps, pausing just a second as he laid hands on the stable door, then plunged in with his face hard.

The mess greeted him like a slap to the face. He shook his head, disgusted with himself. Ash must have been tripping like one of the old Deadheads who lived around those parts, dizzy from being brought back and all, not to have noticed the clutter. And he, Slate, well, he was no better. Just the sight of Ash, whole and breathing, in his arms had driven everything else out of his mind.

Glancing at it by the cold light of sunset, though, there was no denying someone had been up to no good. Old straw churned up every which way—*God, what if I'd lit this place on fire?*—a broken ring of melted votive candles, a lighter and herbs strewn every which-a-way. That bit of coffee cup. His own blood, dried red on some stalks. Looked like someone had tried to work some arcane ritual, sure enough, and made an amateur's hash out of the job. Slate shook his head in disgust. *I am as big a damn fool as Ash says*, he thought.

But the spell? Slate didn't see the parchment anywhere. Alarmed, he began to scrabble through the hay, upturning the candles, flinging salt and sage about. "Dark," he mumbled to himself. "Nothing to see by in here. How'm I supposed to—no, wait." Triumphant, he held up the lighter and flicked it open. The flint and striker grated painfully, but it did kindle a flame. The barn lit up with ghostly shadows, his own silhouette throwing a startle into him.

"Idiot," he chastised himself. Careful, he moved his arm in an arc, scanning the straw. Appeared to be nothing but a churned mess. But what was that one small heap, disarranged almost too roughly, as if it had been deliberately done...? Slate dug in it with his free hand, and came up with parchment. "Got you," he exclaimed triumphantly.

As quick as his glee had come upon him, though, it dissipated. He'd have to take the thing back inside their house, and let Ash take a gander at it. He had experience with these old herbals. He might be able to read something in there that Slate hadn't. Something dark and dangerous. Could be it wasn't just his life he'd agreed to sacrifice. What if—

"No," he said to himself. "No, uh-uh, not gonna happen. You still out there? Whoever did this, you hear me? You can take me straight down to hell if you want, but my Ash goes to heaven. You don't pull him down with me. You best not, or I swear to God I will rise and spit you on my

shiny new pitchfork.” Slate paused for breath, shivering as he got the eerie feeling that something was listening. It thought he was funny. “Fuck you.”

Storming out of the barn, he would have sworn he heard laughter behind him. He clicked the lighter shut and shoved it in his pocket. The parchment he kept out, holding it in front of him as if it were poisonous, all the way in through the back porch, the kitchen, the hallway, and then the living room, where Ash still sat, as if he hadn’t moved an inch since Slate left.

No, he had moved. Back into his tucked position again, like a child who needed comfort. He was staring at the coffee table. The fingers of one hand drummed against his chin.

“I found it,” Slate said. His words dropped like stones. He fidgeted awkwardly. “Ash? Did you hear me?”

“I heard,” Ash said distantly. He reached out to the table, touching the small potted foxglove below the lamp, set amongst the old magazine. “Another one,” he murmured, fondling the leaves. He drew back as if they burned. “Did you have a plant in every room of this house? In the bathroom? If this body you re-made needs to take a piss, will I see purple flowers on the vanity?” He turned his head toward Slate. “Why?”

Slate shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Tell me.”

“Ash, please, no.”

“Tell me!” Ash bellowed. “Why? Why did you shut yourself up in this house like a tomb? I can see our car through the front window, covered with last year’s rotted leaves. There’s grass grown up through the tires. Your truck’s all rusted. Is the bed all full of mulch, too? Have you even left this place for longer than an hour, more than once a month, every two months? God, Slate. This whole place...it’s falling apart. I can feel it.”

Slate swallowed back angry words. He was not going to waste his time arguing with Ash. They had so little time left. Precious seconds, all of them slipping away. Silently, he held out the piece of paper. "The spell," he offered. "You wanted it? Here it is."

Ash stared up at him, eyes tear-bright. "I died, and you stopped living, too," he said by way of reply. "That's why you didn't mind throwing your own life away. You'd already given up the ghost the day I left this world myself." He extended his hand. "Give that here."

"Why?" Slate echoed Ash's question.

Ash met his gaze, unafraid. Even though the room was filled with so much tension you could cut it with a spoon, Slate's heart swelled. His lover didn't back down from anything. Not from life, not from death. Not from what could come or what had been. "Because," he answered. "I have to know."

Slate passed the paper over. Ash took it, frowning at the ancient handwriting crabbed all over the page, and leaned into the light. "Where did you find this?"

"An old family Bible." Slate saw no harm in telling him the truth. "It was full of old recipes and bills of sale. Some other things, too, stuff of no account. A newspaper clipping or twelve. Couple herbal things, like willow-bark tea. And this." He shifted from foot to foot. "Handwriting's the same as on the other pieces."

Ash was busy scanning the paper. "Mmm."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means shut up and let me read."

"You don't think I need to hear about what you see in there? Damn if I didn't look at it so many times I about went cross-eyed, and I know it all by heart."

"Shush."

Slate gaped. “You sit there and dare to tell me *shush*? This ain’t a fuckin’ library, Ash. And in case you hadn’t noticed, that isn’t the latest Larry McMurtry. If I ever had a right to interrupt, I think it’s now.”

“Fine.” Ash slammed the paper down on the table, and his hand on top of the paper. He glared. “You’re so smart. Tell it to me, Slate. What are the words of the spell?” When Slate hesitated, he kicked out his foot, narrowly missing Slate’s groin. “Tell me.”

Slate balled his hands into fists. “There were no magic words. I said what was in my heart and on my mind. I used everything it told me to—mandrake, sage, salt, my own blood, dirt from your grave—but there were no words I could read. No fancy invocations. Whatever I called on, whoever answered me, I don’t know their names. That what you want to hear? I messed with things I had no call to get tangled in. I’m a dumbass. There. You happy?”

“No.” Ash unfolded and stood, holding the parchment between them. “You didn’t read the scribbles underneath the ingredients, did you?”

“That gibberish? It’s chicken scratch.”

Ash smacked Slate in the chest, hard. “It’s not in English. It’s not in any language I know. Maybe something like Aramaic or Hebrew. But this is a sacred paper, Slate. The kind of thing you’d put in a golem’s head to bring it to life. You put words to the spell, and you brought me to life like a puppet man. Not too long from now, our strings are both gonna be cut. You thought you were paying the price with life. What comes after that?” He was shaking like a leaf in a summer gale. “What if we both go to hell, Slate? What if one of us goes somewhere and the other doesn’t? You brought me back because you missed me for a year. What if I have to miss you for all of eternity?”

“Is that what—babe, no. No, don’t.” Slate gathered Ash into his arms. His whole body vibrated with the shivers. He tucked the dark head under

his chin and rocked, at the same time thrilling to have Ash back in his arms again, and terrified of what the morning would bring. “We have all night. We can figure something out. It’s not even quite sunset yet.”

“No,” Ash said against Slate’s chest. “We don’t, Slate. You read that wrong. A day is a day. When the sun’s well and truly set, that’s when the magic ends. The morning and the evening, that was the first day, or don’t you remember your Bible?” He banged his head against Slate’s chest. “All this time wasted. Slate...we’ve got less than an hour left.”

Chapter Eight

Slate stole a glance out of the window. “Less than an hour,” he found himself saying. “Probably closer to thirty minutes, if that.” His lips felt numb. “You sure about this, Ash?”

“That’s the way it’s worded.” Ash’s arms tightened around him. “It’s the way these things work. You had a year, and you had one day. It ends when the sun’s gone.”

“Huh.” Slate examined himself. An odd calm had descended over him. All his plans for the night, from snuggling on the couch to throwing Ash over his shoulder and carrying him upstairs, from tooling matching leather armbands for them to wear together, to rolling in sweaty, tangled sheets...they didn’t seem to matter anymore.

“What would you have done?”

“Hm?”

Ash socked him. “Tomorrow morning, Slate. If it’d happened like you thought. If we both left at the same time.”

“Didn’t think, I guess.” He rubbed circles into the hard muscles of Ash’s back. His eyes sought out the crack in the wall and the mocking foxglove beneath it. So fragile, but with so much power in the leaves. Hurt or heal, give life or kill. “I was more or less thinking about us falling asleep in each other’s arms sometime near dawn, and that would be the end of it. Nice and peaceful. Not like the way you went out first time around.”

Ash's arms tightened. "Whatever you summoned, it won't be happy with us doing that. You do realize, don't you? They'll want us to hurt. Things like that don't want peaceful drifting away in sleep. They need pain."

"How do you know so much?"

"I don't," Ash admitted, with a cracking laugh. "But I did talk to the Wiccans down the road once. They had this massive long lecture about how everything is connected, and that yes, you could get huge power, but you paid a big price for it. I asked them to fix up a wilting violet plant, and they turned pale. We're not to tangle with whether something thrives or wilts, not by magic. It's real, and it's dangerous."

"And I got us sucked right into the eye of the hurricane." Slate shut his eyes. He ran his hand over the back of Ash's hair. "We got even less time, now. Wasting it by standing here, talking. You know that."

"What else are we supposed to do?"

Slate took a deep breath. "How about we give them a great big 'fuck you'? If they're mean as you say, they're gonna want to have us cringing while we wait for them to come and get us."

"You—I cannot believe you, Slate. You want to have sex while we're waiting to die?"

"I always want you." Slate kissed Ash's temple. He felt the slight beat of his pulse beneath and clung to the sensation. *Thump, thump, thump.* "If we have to go, then I want to go happy. With a smile on my face. I know I've got no right to ask this of you, especially when I'm the one who's screwed up so bad, and you probably hate me like hell right now, but—"

"Slate?"

He hesitated. "Yeah, babe?"

Ash pulled back to meet his gaze. "Shut up and kiss me."

Slate traced his thumb down the line of Ash's cheek, just where a tear would fall if either of them were given to crying. "You're sure about that?"

Ash gripped his arm. Not hard, not loose. Steady and sure. "I want you, Slate," he said. "I might be mad at you, but that don't change the fact that I *love* you. Every part of you from head to toe and the cock in between. We worked so hard to get to where we could live and love and be ourselves. If we have to go, then I say we do it our way. In each other's arms."

Slate bent forward for a kiss. "All right, then," he said against Ash's mouth. "Kiss me, too." Ash's arms tightened around his back. "We do this the right way."

"How?" Ash didn't seem inclined to let go, and truth to tell, neither was Slate, but they had to, just a little bit. "What do you want to do?"

Slate searched his mind, and found out that he didn't know. It was one thing to have sex with Ash. That came natural as breathing. But now, with knowing what he'd done, what hung over them? He wasn't even sure he could get it up, no matter what he'd said. "Let's go slow," he blurted. "More than anything, I just want to hold you. Let's be comfortable."

Ash nodded. "Can I ask for something?"

"I'd give you the world if I could."

"You did more than that." Ash was sniffing now. "You gave me an extra day. I was plenty mad—I still am—but how can I go out hating anything about you? You were and are the love of my life. I count myself lucky to have had you for the years we had before all this. I can't blame you for wanting just another taste. I only wish you didn't have to... I don't want to go, Slate." His eyes were shiny. "I don't want to leave you again. What if we're separated?"

“We might be. I can’t deny that. I acted foolishly. But we’ll be together for another few minutes.” Slate stroked Ash’s cheek again. This time, a tear did fall, one salty drop on his thumb. “Anything you want, babe. I promise.”

Ash sniffed. “Then pull that old throw off from across the couch. Let’s lie on the floor. I want to be in your arms when they come for us.”

“They,” Slate said. “Them. It. Whoever. Let it find us together. The floor is good as place as any.”

“Light a fire?” Ash glanced at the empty hearth. “I want to see the flames dancing.”

“There’s no time...”

“Please.” Ash gripped his forearm. “Just a small one. There’s tinder and such laid in there. And what does it matter if the chimney needs cleaning, or the ashes haven’t been swept out? I want to see the lights on your face as I hold you.”

“As I hold *you*,” Slate corrected. “You think I’m gonna let you go? Not too damn likely. You get the blanket, then. I’ll fix the fire.” He felt at his pocket and pulled out the lighter. “See? I’ve got this. I saved it. Saved all your things, but this I carried around. It was a lucky piece for me.”

Ash touched the metal with reverent fingertips. “It’s warm.” He nodded, his throat working. “Light the fire. I’ll make us a nest.”

Slate gave Ash one last kiss. The room was growing dark already, and who knew when “sunset” counted? Could be sooner than they thought. He wouldn’t leave his lover without a token of how much he cared. “I’ll hurry. Take off your clothes, babe. Lay down on the floor.”

“You too.” Ash pushed at him. “Skin to skin. That’s how I want to be.”

“All right.” Slate kissed Ash again—he couldn’t not. “Go on, now,” he said, with a light slap to the man’s ass. “Let’s do this proper-like.”

He moved to the hearth, squatting in front of it. True enough, there was a log and tinder, all laid out. Even a pinecone fire-starter sitting in the middle. Marianne had made those one year, as he recalled, and given them a supply. Ash loved the way the cinnamon and cloves in its wax smelled. Flicking open the lighter, he played the flame against the starter's wick, then across the tinder. A small flame caught.

Fascinated, he watched the line of blue fire trace a path up across dry wood, and the way it fell between the logs. Summer? Who cared about summer, or sweating? If he closed his eyes, he could imagine they were snowed in, with nothing to do but each other and all night to do it in.

Behind him, Slate heard the noises of Ash dragging their old throw blanket off the quilt. Someone had hand-crocheted the thing once upon a time in rainbow colors. "You remember when we got that thing?" he asked without turning around, but with a smile tinting his voice.

"That yard sale," Ash replied right off. "Up at the church next to the bank. They didn't have a clue what the colors meant. Just figured it was pretty."

"Remember how shocked they were when we came up holding hands? They might be a liberal bunch, but I don't think they were quite ready to see the way you kissed me when I said I'd buy it."

Ash laughed softly. "I remember. You said it was perfect for a couple of Friends of Dorothy like us, no matter how ugly it looked, and then you laid one right on me."

"Wasn't just me. You were just as into it as me."

"Then that crowd cheered. I think we got a standing ovation."

"Everyone there looking for bargains, eating bake-sale goods and hawking their wares..."

"Did you ever go to the craftsman's fair?"

"I did not." Slate looked down at his hands. He turned them over, glancing at the mottled places where working with leather had tanned his own hide. "I did spend most of last winter in the shop, making things that I thought you would have liked. Whole lot of vests, some armbands, key chains...silly little things. Book covers. I remembered how you'd once said you'd like a set of Shakespeare I bound for you. I made those."

"There's not time to go and get them, is there?" Ash's voice shook a little. Without turning around, Slate knew he'd be fussing with the blanket, getting it just so on the floor. "Not even an armband or two?"

Slate stood. "I'll run. Promise you, be back in half a minute. I spent months on those things, thinking about you and me. It'd be fitting to wear those." He turned around and was struck dumb. Ash stood in front of him, naked and glorious as any god. Slate gazed covetously at Ash's lean muscles, body, shadows and gleaming peaks. His cock hung between his legs, beautiful as the rest of him. "Though you make a good argument for not moving a step," he said hoarsely. "I could eat you up."

Ash half-laughed. He stepped forward and kissed the corner of Slate's mouth. "I want my armband," he said. "Go on, now. Get me my present. When you come back, I'll give you yours."

Slate went, and he hurried. He cast a look at the sky as he rushed outside. Turning purple, with the sun about to slide beyond the horizon. They didn't have but a few minutes left. *Ash, Ash*, he mourned as he ran into his workshop. Lucky for him, though, he didn't have to waste precious second hunting for what he wanted.

Two bands in particular sat upon a shelf, where he'd be able to look when he was working. Celtic designs, one that Ash had loved in particular, called "The Endless Knot". The volume of Shakespeare lay beneath it. On an impulse, he grabbed that up too. Then he ran, fast as his feet could carry him, back inside.

The fire had caught. That was the first thing on his mind. Blazing bright as if it were December, heating the room. Didn't hold his attention for long, though, as Ash was stretched out beside it. Lying on his hip, one arm resting on the rainbow blanket as he picked at the nubs.

"Ash," Slate whispered. "I'm back."

"I was so afraid you wouldn't make it. Hurry. Take your clothes off. Let me watch you do it. Then come and lay by me."

Slate nodded, but first he bent and lay down his leather work. "These are for us," he said. "The book and the bands. You hold on to those while I get myself down to skin." He tipped the corner of his mouth up in a smile. "Don't go to reading, now. This is the last time I get to do a striptease for you. Best you appreciate it."

"As if I would." All the same, Ash took a glance at the scene Slate had done on the front of the book—Ariel of *The Tempest* being freed from his cloven pine. "It's gorgeous work, hon," he approved softly. "You are an artist."

"If I ever did anything good, you were my inspiration," Slate answered honestly. "Now watch me. I'm going to give you a show."

Ash shook his head. "I don't need a show. I don't want one. I just need you here, in my arms." He held them out. "Hurry up. No telling how much time we have."

Slate had been planning a long, slow striptease, but now he realized that would be wrong. If they'd had until noon the next day, the way he'd planned, he might have gone inch by inch. Even put on some music. Flip open a button, close it right back up. Ash would have loved it. He had in the past, and that was a fact. By the time Slate had stripped down naked, Ash would have gotten hard as stone, reaching out for him with two open arms.

But now all that mattered was holding one another. Slate skinned out of his shirt and jeans. The pants he left where they lay, but on an impulse he clutched the flannel to his chest. "I want to hang on to this, too. It's part of you."

"Did you wear a lot of my clothes, while I was...gone?"

"I did. They made me think of you."

"Made you grieve even stronger."

"Yeah, but no, too. They made me miss you, sure, but then every now and again I would remember how they felt on you, or I'd get myself a mental flash of how they looked when you wore them. That made me happy." Slate grinned, realizing it was true. "Made me glad of you, just for a few seconds at a time. Kept me going. And coming, every once in a blue moon." He lifted the shirt to his nose. "Last time was with this particular thing. It's a good memory."

"May you be able to carry it with you," Ash said softly. He rolled onto his back. "Come on and lie with me, Slate. It's almost time."

"One more thing. Well, two." Slate folded the shirt into a pillow. Kneeling, he lifted Ash's head with a gentle hand and slid it beneath. "There. I remember seeing you in the barn, with your neck...and I was thinking, you ought to have something softer beneath your head than straw."

"Slate..."

"Hush now, hush." Slate picked up the armbands and held them out to Ash. "You put one on me, now. The darker brown one. It's sized to me. Right around the bicep, now."

Ash traced the design. "My favorite," he murmured. "The life knot. You remembered."

"As if I'd forget." Slate held still while Ash fastened the band. He followed the clasp with a kiss. "My turn now." Ash lifted his arm up

obediently, and Slate followed suit. He, too, kissed where the leather met flesh.

Then, naked, they sank down into each other's arms. For a long moment, neither said anything. The crackling of the fire filled the room in a soothing countermelody to the sound of their breathing. In, out. In, out. *You never realize how precious it is until it's gone*, Slate thought. He pulled Ash tight, and Ash pulled him tighter. Their legs twined together, one atop the other, thighs brushing and cocks touching. Not ready to have sex, but they'd had good years of that together, and what they'd shared in the kitchen could have no compare.

"This is nice," Ash said at last. "God, that sounds lame. But you know what I mean. Don't you?"

Slate nestled his chin against Ash's shoulder, his favorite place, where it felt right and natural. He kissed the side of Ash's neck. "It is nice. Nothing wrong with that. This is where we belong. You and me, together till the end."

"I still wish you hadn't..." Ash's voice broke. "You could have gone on, Slate."

"Not without you," Slate said firmly. "Come what may, babe, I'm ready. I've got you, and you've got me. Whatever happens, let it come on."

"Slate, you shouldn't have said that..." Ash began to shiver. "I can feel it, now. Can't you?"

Slate startled as he realized he was shaking. "I thought that was nerves. You mean it's—"

"Has to be." Ash began gasping. "Oh, fuck, it hurts. I didn't think it would be painful. Slate—you with me?"

A stabbing pain had begun in Slate's own chest. He clutched Ash. "Till the bitter end, and then beyond it." He raised his voice. "You hear that, you fuckers? You do your worst. We're tied together, me and Ash."

You can't tear us apart. I don't care what you try. I have my lover, and he was worth the price. You won't get a drop of pleading out of me."

"Me neither," Ash raised his voice to yell. He writhed so they were face to face. "Slate, kiss me. I want to go with your mouth on mine."

Slate didn't waste time. His chest aching, burning, he dived in and pressed his lips to Ash's. There was no energy for tongues, but he could still taste the mint sweetness of his lover and the soft/hardness of him. He breathed into Ash's mouth, and felt him swallow the air. Ash inhaled through his nose, and breathed back.

Time hung suspended as they breathed into one another. Slate moved his hand down Ash's arm, and encountered the band there. He clasped on and hung tight as a spasm racked his chest. "Ashes to ashes," he murmured into Ash's mouth. "I brought you back to life. I said I'd give anything to have you back. Guess I am."

A desperate noise burst from Ash's lips. "Come to me," he pleaded. "Breathe for me. Slate, come on." He gripped Slate's armband, too. "They're coming. They're almost here. Kiss me."

Slate did. He heard the noise again, like a hurricane gale beating against the window. The fire burst into a huge blaze, sending billows of smoke throughout the room. The windows rattled. Then, a vast something—nothing he could put a name to—burst into the room. A huge, malevolent presence. It hovered over them like a cloud, sending out tendrils of pure evil.

Slate and Ash hung on, breathing into each other's mouth. *I love you*, Ash's lips moved underneath Slate's to say. He repeated it back. *I love you, too*, he said. *More than life*.

With a horrifying screech, worse than nails on glass, the cloud of evil drew back. The room filled with the wail of a spoiled child denied a toy. The glass in the windows shattered, and then—and then—it was gone.

Slate and Ash remained, lying on their blanket. Both alive, breathing and kissing, feeling pulses beat as their hands roved over one another's bodies. "It's gone," Ash managed. "How did you—what did we—" He gripped Slate's arm. "The life knot. Endless circles. Breathing for each other. Completion, infinity, wholeness—it's like our own Ouroboros."

Slate felt dazed. "What now? I don't understand what you're saying."

"Does it matter?" Ash pulled away from him. "Feel. There's no more pain, is there?"

Slate patted at his own chest. His jaw dropped. "I'll be damned. Ash. Did we beat that thing? Whatever it was? You felt it leave, too, did you?"

Ash nodded. He rolled over onto his back, laughing loud and free. "You did more magic," he managed to say. "The armbands, our breathing. We formed a circle. A perfect ring. It couldn't break through to take its price. We're *alive*, Slate. Both of us. No more year and a day shit. You did this. You."

Slate shook his head, hard. "I'm not any magician, though," he managed.

"Then you're just damn dumb lucky." Ash rolled back and kissed Slate, good and rough. "You realize what you've done? You brought us both back to life. Lover, your love did it all." He traced the design on Slate's armband. "You were more powerful than life or death," he said, voice awed.

Slate felt the first stirrings of interest in his cock as Ash climbed over him, lying atop his body. Ash dipped down for an eager kiss, trailing over his face and throat. "I don't understand," Slate fumbled helplessly. "But you—me—we're good? That thing won't come back?"

"I don't think it can." Ash had moved down to Slate's chest, writhing over his body. "We're *alive*, Slate. I promise you, I'll go to a doctor and get my heart checked out. I'll take prescription medicines if need be. But I

swear to you, I'll not reject this gift." He raised eyes sparkling with the devil in them. "Neither will you. You're stuck with me, hon. From now until the end of time."

Slate felt the laugh rising like bubbling water in his chest. "Then the first thing," he said as Ash moved even lower, "is to get rid of all those damn foxgloves. And then we figure out what the hell to tell Marianne and Zillah, and everyone else... Oh, lord, this is gonna be a situation."

"Later," Ash murmured, "later. Right now, this is what comes next." He took Slate's cock into his mouth, and began to suck at it. Slate's hands fisted in the blanket.

Yeah, he thought. I still don't get it, but I know this much—we've come full circle, him and me. A year and a day. We have the rest of our lives to figure out the finer details. The rest of our lives...now that's a fine thought.

And then Ash did that special thing he did with his tongue, and Slate forgot how to think. Which was all for the best, after all.

They had their happy ending.

Willa Okati

To learn more about Willa Okati, please visit <http://www.willaokati.com>. Send an email to Willa Okati at willaokati@gmail.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Willa! http://groups.yahoo.com/group/willa_okati

Coming Soon from Willa

Unspoken, September 2006

The Letter, December 2006

Sex and Sexuality, March 2007

Josh Mackay is hired to bring in Kiran Brunner, a Minder with the psychic ability to manipulate and kill. But Kir has been abused by the agency that wants him back and he'll do anything to escape.

Enjoy this excerpt from

Monster

(c)2006 Joely Skye

A gay paranormal romance and the first book in the Minders series, coming July 11, 2006 to Samhain Publishing.

Josh stroked the shivering boy and made soothing noises while Kir clung to him, his heart racing. With his shakes, Kir's touches were tentative and clumsy at first. But after a while the movements became smooth and Kir was bold enough to slip a hand under Josh's T-shirt.

"I like your skin," said Kir.

"Thank you."

"I guess that sounds stupid."

"No." Still holding Kir, he asked, "Why are we going to Atlanta? You try to distract me every time I ask that question."

Kir slid down and kissed Josh's stomach.

"Kir," Josh warned.

Kir stared at Josh's chest so that Josh could see the sweep of his long, dark eyelashes.

"Well," said Josh when Kir didn't answer.

"I could just tell you not to ask me questions."

Josh felt a little cold. "You could, could you?"

Kir balled one fist. "But I don't want to. It's better if you don't know, so when they catch up with you, you can't tell them anything." He raised his face to look at Josh, his expression pleading for understanding.

"If you don't trust me, Kir, why are you in my bed?"

"Come on. You know what they're like. They'll drag that knowledge from you."

Kir's hand traveled up Josh's torso until his thumb touched Josh's nipple. Josh caught that hand.

"Believe it or not, I'm trying to protect you," said Kir.

"But how are you going to protect yourself?"

A shadow crossed Kir's face.

"Do you have somewhere to go?"

"Yes."

"Your sister," Josh guessed.

Kir didn't answer. He just stared, his eyes dark and unblinking.

"She'll be able to help you?"

"I think so."

"That's not as strong an answer as I'd hoped. They didn't have much information on her in your file."

"She's my best bet," said Kir.

"Okay." But the subject had brought back some of Kir's shakiness and Josh didn't understand that. "You don't trust her," he said, his heart sinking for Kir. "Isn't there anyone you can trust?"

Kir moved so he crouched over Josh, one hand on his shoulder, while he brought the other hand to Josh's cheek. Kir gazed down at him, without saying the word, *you*.

Josh couldn't help it, he slowly brought Kir's face to his and kissed him, closed mouth, lips soft and mobile. They breathed each other in. Then Kir's tongue touched Josh's lips, tracing one corner. Josh shifted

and opened his mouth to taste the wine on Kir. Kir struggled to get closer as he stroked Josh's tongue, mating.

They kissed for a while and despite his erection, Josh thought that was all they should do. But Kir was intense, holding Josh as if he feared he would rise and leave. When Josh tried to pull back, Kir followed. Finally Josh broke off by turning so that he was above Kir.

Kir looked up in fear and confusion.

"Hey," said Josh, cupping his cheek. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm here."

Chris Tucker is a cultured and sophisticated gentleman. Matt Gallagher is a pierced and tattooed wild child. Not exactly the pair you'd expect to become a couple. But the sparks fly between them from the moment they meet, and the fire never goes out.

Enjoy this excerpt from
Love's Evolution
(c) 2006 Ally Blue

A gay contemporary erotic romance collection, coming to Samhain Publishing August 15, 2006.

Matt's apartment was four blocks away, an airy studio above the coffee shop two doors down from Dragon's Den. High ceilings and tall, arched windows looked out over the city streets. There were two doors side by side in the wall opposite the entry. No doubt a bathroom and closet, Chris thought. The place was bare to the point of austerity. No pictures hung on the brick walls, no rugs covered the hardwood floor. A large drafting table stood in the corner beside the windows. On the other side of the room, a small television and an impressive stereo system huddled opposite a low, overstuffed sofa. The only other pieces of furniture were a queen-size bed and a small nightstand.

"Not exactly a packrat, are you?" Chris said, smiling.

"Naw. There's lots of CDs in the cabinet over there," Matt nodded toward the simple wooden hutch that housed his stereo system, "but that's about all I collect."

"It's a lovely apartment. It has a very peaceful energy, doesn't it?"

"Mm-hm." Matt turned the deadbolt, then walked up to Chris and pressed their bodies together. "Now shut up and fuck me."

Whatever Chris was going to say was promptly forgotten when Matt fisted both hands in his hair and kissed him hard. Chris moaned and opened his mouth wide, letting their tongues slide together. The breathless little noises Matt made drove him wild. He was more turned on than he could ever remember being in his life.

Matt took a step backward without breaking the kiss, tugging Chris with him. They stumbled toward the bed and fell gracelessly across the mattress, already working each other's clothes off with fumbling fingers. Shirts went flying in a matter of seconds. Pants were a bit more difficult, since neither was willing to untangle themselves long enough to take them off properly.

"Fucking fuck," Matt grumbled when he tried to squirm out of his jeans and they caught on the purple high-tops he'd forgotten to remove first. He twisted around with Chris still on top of him in an attempt to get at the laces.

Chris thought he would've found Matt's frantic frustration endearing if they hadn't both been so desperate. As it was, he didn't think he could wait another second to be naked and buried balls-deep inside Matt's body. He turned without a word to help Matt untie his sneakers and pull them off along with his jeans. He took the opportunity to slip his own shoes and socks off before moving up to kiss Matt again.

"Thanks," Matt said, fingers already working on Chris's pants.

"You're welcome."

Chris wormed his pants off and kicked them aside. Matt pulled him down, hooking one bare leg around his back, and Chris thought he might spontaneously combust from the solid heat of Matt's erection against his.

Matt let out a soft cry when Chris shoved a hand between their bodies and grasped his cock. "Oh God! Chris, can't wait, please!"

Chris probed the slit at the tip of Matt's cock with his thumb, making Matt writhe helplessly beneath him. "Lube?" he asked, nipping at Matt's upper lip.

"Drawer. Hurry."

Chris, being closer, reached to open the drawer of the bedside table. He fumbled around for a moment and found a small bottle of liquid lube and a box of condoms. Snatching the bottle and a condom, he sat up on his knees between Matt's open legs.

The world went still for a moment as Chris stared down into Matt's eyes. He felt as if he was standing on the edge of cliff. As if his whole life was about to change forever. He didn't understand it, but it excited him.

"Chris," Matt moaned, spreading his legs wider. "I need it, please!"

Chris blinked, shaking off the odd sensation. He opened the bottle of lube and coated his fingers with it, then leaned down to kiss Matt. As Matt's mouth opened under his, Chris reached between Matt's thighs and slipped a finger inside him.

Matt gasped into the kiss, hands digging into Chris's back. "God yes, more..."

Chris added another finger, pressing deep and twisting to search for the sweet spot. He knew he'd found it when Matt cried out, arching off the mattress.

"Oh fuck," Matt groaned. "Jesus, yes, so fucking good..."

The way Matt's insides clutched his fingers made Chris desperate to have that same velvet grip around his prick. He pulled his fingers out of Matt's ass, groped for the condom packet, ripped it open, and sheathed himself as quickly as he could. One hand around his own erection and his weight balanced on the other, Chris guided himself to Matt's slick opening and slid smoothly inside.

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