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The Letter

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

The Letter
Copyright © 2006 by Willa Okati
[Cover by Anne Cain](#)
ISBN: 1-59998-191-2
www.samhainpublishing.com

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: October 2006

The Letter

Willa Okati

Dedication

To the fine ladies at JBuL—you know who you are!

Chapter One

Phones are funny things, man. We use them now like people used to write letters back in the olden days. Sometimes it's just a "Hey, how are you" kind of thing, but every so often there's laughter and there's tears, or a question you just can't answer, no matter how hard you try.

Luke wound the cord of the old-fashioned phone around his finger as he stalled, trying to think of something to say. "Well?" his older sister Zillah demanded. "This had better be good, Lucas."

Uh-oh. When Zillah used his full name, he knew he was in trouble, and some little part of him had never gotten past "big sister" being able to beat the crap out of him. Even now they were grown and living their own lives, she still had the upper hand and she never let him forget it, either.

"Sometimes these things happen," he said after taking in a deep breath. "It isn't like Brandon and I hate each other or anything. It's just time for us to go our separate ways."

"No, it's not," Zillah said decisively. "I know my friends and my family like the back of my hand, and you and Brandon belong *together*. I don't care what anybody says or whatever fancy job a headhunter up North throws at you. You can keep working on software out in your garage office and let them buy it, but you stay put. You belong here in the foothills, with us. With Brandon. You know he can't leave. Those children in that special school depend on him. Worship him. But more than that, you two have the same kind of forever love as I see among the others who

live around here, and I don't understand why you can't see the same thing with your own two eyes."

"Zillah..." Luke let out a sigh and leaned against the wall.

"There's no use trying to explain things to me. We've been over it a hundred times. Marianne, what are you doing? I'm on the phone. Marianne, hold on a second—"

There was a fumbling, and then Luke heard the gentler sounds of his sister's partner come on the line. "I wrestled her down," Marianne said. "She means well, Luke, you know that."

"I do," Luke replied with a lump rising in his throat. He'd miss everyone, not least of all Brandon, but not having Zillah around for the first time in his life would be harsh. "She's my sis, you know? Takes care of me and all. That's her job."

"And she puts her whole heart and soul into it. You're mine by kinship if not by blood, so I look out for you too."

"Now don't you start."

"I just don't see why." Marianne's voice was calmer, but her tone just as unhappy. "You and Brandon belong together."

"We *did* belong together, sugar. The time's just come for us to go our separate ways, that's all. Look. It would have happened eventually. No one stays together forever."

"Slate and Ash are. Ian and Andy will. You know nothing's gonna come between me and Zillah. So why do you have to split up with Brandon? Turn the job down, Luke. You earn a good living here, and you have a partner who puts up with you—more than that, who loves you."

"And I love him. Always have, and always will." Luke leaned forward onto his elbows on his kitchen counter. He glanced around the small space where he'd grown accustomed to cooking with Brandon, their hips

bumping as they tried to work in the tiny area, laughing as they sliced up meat or cut carrots. Kissing over a sink full of dirty dishes.

He shook his head to clear it and went on. "I can't turn down this job offer, Marianne. They want someone to head up the base of operations for their whole business. I still don't know why they picked me out, but I can't turn them down. I can't just stay a freelance tech forever. This is my chance, baby. Don't make me say no."

Marianne was silent for a moment. "And what about Brandon?" she asked. "What does he think?"

Luke sighed. "We're in agreement, sugar," he said as kindly as he could. "He's all right with me moving on and him staying here with the job he loves, teaching special-needs kids, while I go and do the job I love, designing software somewhere other than a garage workroom."

"I don't see how he could be *all right*."

"We've talked things out."

"And he didn't say a word in protest?"

Luke shifted uncomfortably. They'd had a few words—hell, more than a few—but if he told Marianne the truth, she'd be on him like fleas on a hound dog. "We came to an agreement," he replied instead. "Him and me, we're of one mind about this. Has to be done."

"I'm sorry, then. And so is Zillah. Sorrier than we know."

Out of the corner of his eye, Luke saw Brandon edge into the room, having just gotten home from work. The man kept long hours, staying after to help his students, often not getting back before four or five. That wasn't what Luke was concentrating on, though. His lover, tall and straight as an arrow, was slowly unbuttoning the sleeves of his long white work shirt. "I've got to go now," he rushed, eager to get her off the line. "Got a lot of stuff to do before my flight leaves tonight."

"Do you have to leave so soon?"

“They want me there by Monday, and I still have to find a place to live.”

“But all your things?”

“I’ll finish packing up some stuff right quick. Essentials and all that. Just what I need for a couple of days and nights.” Brandon had moved on from his cuffs to the buttons of his shirt, undoing the fastenings one at a time. He looked up at Luke, his eyes sparkling dark and wicked. Luke swallowed hard. God, how hard it was to resist this man. He loved every inch of Brandon, from the tip of his head to his shining glasses down to his elegant feet and long toes. Damn if the man wasn’t pretty all over.

“The rest of what you own?”

Luke dragged his attention back to the conversation. “Brandon’s gonna pack up what he can. Then a truck will come by for the rest of my junk and stuff.”

“He’s actually going to help you out. God almighty... He loves you enough to let you go, and you’re just gonna fly away?”

“It’s that time for me, Marianne. Now, I gotta hang up. I’ll call you from New York once I’m settled in and let you and Zillah know I’m okay.”

Brandon pulled the tails of his shirt out of his jeans and let them hang open, free, baring his chest. Luke’s hands ached to run over all that smooth skin and ridged muscle, to see the dark chocolate of his fingers splayed against the creamy vanilla of Brandon’s flesh.

“And what about Brandon?” Marianne asked sadly. “Are you going to call him, too?”

“It’s best that I don’t. I really have to go now, sugar. Say goodbye to Zillah for me.”

Marianne sounded like she was on the verge of tears. "If I can't talk you out of this, then, go on. Do what you have to do. Just know how much you'll be missed, and by Brandon too, even if he won't say it."

Brandon ran his forefinger down his chest, circling both nipples and stopping at his navel, his hand hovering over the bulge in his jeans. Luke licked his lips. "Goodbye, Marianne."

"Goodbye." Luke heard a click and then the line went dead. He hung up the phone, letting his breath out in a rush.

He looked up at Brandon, shaking his head. "I didn't think she was ever gonna stop talking. I love her, but I've got something more important to do right now."

"Like me?" Brandon asked, shrugging his shirt off. It floated to the ground around his feet, a pool of white against their polished hardwood floors. The smell of his cologne and his skin drifted over to Luke, making his own cock sit up and take notice. Just the scent of his lover could turn him on faster than a snap of the fingers.

"One last goodbye," Luke agreed. "No more questions, 'cause we know all the answers. Just one more time to see us on our way, and then we'll be through."

"Then do hurry up." Brandon's voice still held a trace of the British accent Luke had fallen in love with before he'd even been properly introduced to the man. "I've been home all of ten minutes, and you haven't ravished me yet. You're running a little behind, don't you think?"

"I'll show you behind." Luke crossed the kitchen with three steps and wrapped his arms around Brandon, feeling the solidity and warmth of his lover in his arms. He closed his eyes and pretended, just for a second, that this thing coming between them, his leaving, wasn't real. Good as the job offer was, and as much as he protested otherwise, a

great big part of him didn't want to let go and move away from this home and this man.

He knew Brandon felt the same way, too, from the way Brandon took ahold of him and pulled him close. There was a desperation in how hard he held on, as if he was cherishing this one last time a little too much, storing every single memory up to take out and go over when Luke had left him behind.

"Don't," Luke said into Brandon's shoulder. "You know I can't stay."

"You won't stay."

"Please. Just don't. We agreed, one last time. Let's enjoy this while we have it."

"All right, then."

Luke drew back, but just far enough to put his hands behind Brandon's head and draw him in for a kiss. Their lips met with sweet familiarity, but also in a bittersweet sort of way that made Luke think of the way tears tasted. "Don't," he whispered against Brandon's lips. "Please, don't."

Brandon's hands came up to hold Luke's wrists. "No regrets."

"We've said almost all our goodbyes."

"Now it's time for the last one."

"It is."

Brandon stepped back, picking up his shirt. The movement of the white fabric made Luke think of a cloud of doves flying home to rest. "Come to the bedroom, then. I want to feel you inside of me one last time. We agreed."

"I'm right behind you." *Like I always said I was gonna be*, Luke thought. *But this, this leaving you, even though we agreed, I didn't know how hard it was gonna break my heart.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luke swore under his breath and put his hands forward, steadying himself on Brandon's shoulders. He moved his hands like a cat would knead, rolling in time with Brandon's sucking motions and making small cries whenever Brandon used his teeth or his tongue in an especially fine

way, turning him desperate for the feel of something tighter and hotter around his cock.

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

I’ll always want you—that went unspoken.

Luke nodded, pushing his jeans and shorts out of the way and kicking them lightly across the bedroom floor. As Brandon stretched out on the bed, Luke moved to Brandon’s side, helping his lover wriggle out of his own khakis until he, too, was bare of any stitch. Naked, Luke stretched out on top of the man, bracing his weight on his arms.

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

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

“Kiss me.”

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

Brandon’s cock stood up hard and full, pressing against Luke’s organ in a way that made both of them groan. Luke began to move, rubbing up and down, stroking his dick against Brandon’s belly and letting Brandon’s prick stroke along his stomach. He splayed his hands wide on Brandon’s upper arms, holding on with a good solid grip, just right, loving the way their skin contrasted together.

“Good,” Brandon whispered. “So good. But I want more. Please.”

Luke nodded. He reached for the lubricant, where they normally kept it, but was stopped by Brandon shaking his head. “Not the old stuff,” he said quietly. “I bought a new bottle. It’s on the headboard.”

Shutting his eyes for a brief moment, Luke reached above their heads and found a small sample-sized bottle. The gel inside was a dark indigo, and smelled of ripe summer blackberries. “One Use Only”, the label read.

One last time.

Luke uncapped the lubricant and squeezed a dollop over his fingers. “Open up for me, Brandon,” he whispered. “Spread your legs wide. That’s it, you know the way. Come on now.” As Brandon moved for him, Luke reached between the spread legs and smoothed the lube in the crease of his partner’s ass cheeks, reaching for his hole and circling it with dark fingers against the pale white skin. The smell of blackberries filled his nose, along with the scent that was Brandon’s alone—tea and herbs and paperback books.

They hadn’t discussed how they were going to fuck this one last time, but Luke knew what he wanted. He lifted Brandon’s right leg over his shoulder, smoothing down the fine hairs with his clean hand. “Lift up on your left,” he directed. “Go easy, now, don’t hurt yourself.”

“I can still bend in half if I want to.” Brandon’s eyes were hazy with passion now as he raised his left leg to hook over Luke’s shoulder, lifting his ass and presenting it for Luke’s cock.

Luke spread a little more of the lubrication around Brandon’s hole, but the man was already relaxed for him, fluttering open and shut, eager for his cock. He placed the blunt head of his dick against Brandon’s entrance and pushed inside, one inch at a time, taking it slow and easy even though Brandon made a dozen moans and grabbed at Luke, begging him to go faster.

When he was seated all the way inside, Luke bent over for another kiss. “Look me in the eyes while we’re doing this?” he asked. “I want to see you seeing me.”

Brandon nodded, then arched up, trying to work himself on Luke’s cock. “So eager for it, babe, just like always.” Luke nipped Brandon’s lower lip, noting that the man didn’t correct his use of the pet name this time. He was too far gone, probably. So was Luke, and heading deeper fast.

He began to thrust, keeping it slow and steady, going by inches at first, but then, as Brandon gripped his cock with his internal muscles and squeezed it hard, Luke found himself beginning to thrust like a piston, snapping back and forth with all the might in his hips. Brandon could take it rough, he knew. He wouldn’t hurt the man. Hell, from what he could tell Brandon was loving it. His hands roamed all over the place, clutching here and grabbing there, his mouth moving in a stream of nonsense words that all added up to *I love this, I love you*.

Luke willed himself not to close his eyes. He kept them trained on Brandon’s, although he was finding it hard to see through the haze of pure need. Brandon kept his word, too, his gaze growing darker and cloudier with lust as Luke thrust inside him.

Suddenly, Brandon spoke, three little words that stripped Luke of all his control. “Please. Don’t go.”

Luke lost it then, whether out of shock or simply being at the end of his tether, he couldn’t tell. His hips froze in their thrusting, and buried deep inside Brandon he spilled his load of hot seed, pulse after pulse being milked out of him. Beneath his stomach, he felt a matching heated wetness and he heard Brandon crying out to all the saints for mercy as he came hard.

Breathing in great puffs, the two held position for a moment. When Luke pulled out of Brandon, he kept their eye-lock ever so briefly, then rolled over onto his back and reached for Brandon's hand. He found it with ease, then laced their fingers together.

Silence reigned for a long space of time.

"Why did you have to say that?" Luke asked at last.

Brandon shook his head. "I don't know. Heat of the moment? I know—I mean, I'm well aware—you're going. It's all been decided."

"You don't sound too sure."

"Well, what do you want me to be?"

Luke sensed Brandon turning his head on the pillow and turned his own, gazing back into the man's eyes again. "What?"

"Well, should I cling to you like a doll and beg you not to go away? Neither of us wants that. We've made our bed, we've lain in it, and now it's time to move on."

"Not this way. Not speakin' angry and all that."

"No." Brandon made a clear effort to control himself. "You're right. I'm not going to be so much of a child as I might want to be. We're grown men going our separate ways with no hard feelings, just as we agreed." He smiled, the expression almost instantly going rueful. "If you don't mind, though, I'm going to go take a quick shower."

As Brandon got up from the bed, Luke reflected that not so long ago he would have followed his lover under that hot water, reaching for a bar of soap to slick across that beautiful pale skin. He might have even gone down on his knees once Brandon was clean and taken the man's cock into his mouth, sucking him off as a special present in thanks for the fuck they'd just shared.

Now, though, Luke made do with a handful of tissues to clean himself off. The smell of blackberries was suddenly cloying, choking his

nose and throat. Luke coughed as he sat up and lifted away from the bed. He stopped to straighten the quilt, and then walked over to his own clothes to get dressed again.

So. They'd had their last round of sex. He had to stay unemotional, had to stay detached. Call it one more thing checked off the list.

Even if that left a sour taste in his mouth.

Luke shook his head to clear it. The last thing he had to do was go up to the attic and get down the things of his he'd put up there for storage, including his luggage. He'd need all four of those pieces for his clothes to take with him, along with a few things he'd never tell Brandon about, like a photo album he'd put together of the good times they'd shared.

He might have been going up to New York alone, but he'd have his memories of this place and of Brandon, damn it.

As the water ran, Luke headed for the utility room and grabbed the pull cord that would open the trapdoor and send the steps coming down toward him. The thing creaked and groaned as he hauled it open, protesting the movement. Luke couldn't blame the poor old door. It'd had years of resting time. Hell, he was surprised he could open it by himself.

With the ladder down he climbed into the attic, fumbling around for the pull chain that would illuminate the dusty room. Generations of the same clan had lived in this house, forebears of some old family in all their various branches, and although there had to be a wealth of things stored away, he'd never fully explored the old place. There had always been better things to do.

Now, though, he had the oddest urge to look around. There were some curiosities stored up there, no doubt about the fact. Old dolls lined up in a row on a shelf, a kids' hobby horse, a box with faded paint declaring that it held "TOYS". A rack with a row of women's dresses on it, mostly moth-eaten, the styles running a gamut of generations. A low

wooden table that had probably once held a phone, like the one Slate and Ash still used.

And by the window, underneath a layer of dust, a small chest that had been so beautifully carved that Luke couldn't stop himself—he had to go and take a look. He could have just grabbed his luggage and gone, but something inside his heart made him move forward, going down on his knees in front of the box.

The thing had once been locked, but the cheap clasp had fallen away ages ago. Luke lifted the lid carefully, coughing at the dust, and then stared down inside. Letters. Almost a hundred of them, looked like, packed in tight as sardines. Each one had been opened neatly with a slit along the edge.

Luke ran his fingers across the top of them, and then, unable to help himself, pulled out the first one and opened it. The paper was yellowed and brittle but the ink still readable, and he began to scan it with his eyes.

He hadn't finished yet when he heard Brandon calling to him from down below. "Luke? Are you all right up there?"

Luke scanned the page again, not quite able to believe what he was seeing. "Brandon, come on up here, man. There's something you've gotta see."

He listened to Brandon's steps ascending the ladder. "Nothing but dust and old bric-a-brac, I'd wager," Brandon grumbled. "Luke, your cases are right here by the entrance. What is it that I've got to look at?"

Luke waved the paper carefully. "Just come here," was all he could say. As Brandon joined him, hunkering down on his heels, eyes widening slightly at the sight of the letters packed in tight, Luke handed his newly ex-partner the one he'd taken out. "Read this." He knew he sounded hoarse. "Go ahead. Tell me I'm not dreamin' this."

Brandon carefully took the sheet of paper and unfolded it. "Dear Luke," he began. His eyes, sharp now, cut up to Luke. "Is this a joke?"

"Uh-uh." Luke shook his head. "Look, that's your handwriting."

"Almost. Not quite."

"No, it's the exact same thing."

"It can't be. From the looks of this, and the date—" Brandon checked "—it was written almost sixty years back. My branch of the family was still in England at the time."

"Go on and read a little further, then."

Brandon shook his head but continued, aloud. "Dear Luke. When I saw you today standing by the rock garden in Asheville's town square, I thought that I had seen a vision straight from heaven. Then, when you turned and smiled at me, I knew it for sure."

He let the letter drop. "This is exactly how you and I met. But the letters...so old...how can this be?"

Luke shook his head. "You tell me, babe. You tell me. And there's a whole box of them."

"What do we do now?"

Luke gave in to the impulse that had been building inside him. "We read them," he said, making it a request. "Keep on going, Brandon. I want to find out what this is all about. Please?"

Brandon gave him a sharp look, but nodded. "You realize this'll keep you from packing."

"I need to know." Luke reached out and took Brandon's free hand in his own. "For me."

"All right, then." Brandon lifted the letter and adjusted his glasses. "Luke, I will always remember the day that we met..."

Chapter Two

Phones are funny things, man. They can bring you sad news, or they can bring you joy. Sometimes, they can just bring you unending frustration.

“Hello, New York Gateways, this is Tonja speaking, how may I help you?”

“Thank God, a real live person.”

“Sir, we are very busy and most of our customers’ questions can be answered using the automated menu.”

“Einstein couldn’t work his way through that thing.”

Luke heard a long, put-upon sigh. “Did you have a question for us, sir?”

“Yeah. I’m scheduled on a flight leaving tonight, number 4839 leaving from Raleigh/Durham, but I’m not gonna be able to make it. I was wondering if I could get that changed to a morning trip.”

“Let me see.” There came the sound of over-long, probably highly manicured fingernails tapping on keys. “We do have a seat on a morning flight, number 3482, but it’s first-class only which will cost you a two hundred dollar upgrade, plus there will be an additional surcharge of seventy-five dollars for changing at the last minute.”

“Wait a second. How much does that set me back?”

“Two hundred and seventy-five dollars. Sir.”

Luke held a hand to his forehead. He didn't have that kind of money in his account, or at least he wouldn't until he started getting paid at his new job. He could just about squeeze it out of his credit card, though... "Okay, put me down for the morning flight."

"Yes, sir. May I please have your card information?"

As Luke gave her the numbers, he could hear her fingernails. They were beginning to get on his nerves as if they were scraping down a blackboard. Finally, there came another sigh. "You're booked for the morning flight, sir. Is there anything *else* I can help you with?"

"No, Tonja, you have done enough. Thank you." Luke added the last out of pure good manners. He appreciated that the lady probably had a rough job, but she could at least try not to act like this was the biggest hassle since her last coffee break.

And she could cut those damn nails. Brrr.

Luke hung up the phone and glanced over to see Brandon sitting at their—no, his—two-seater kitchen table with the chest full of letters. He had a cloth and some wood polish and was trying to clean the thing up. Even had newspapers spread underneath so he wouldn't dirty up the table itself. A smile tugged at Luke's mouth. That was Brandon, always so careful, down to the last detail. He wasn't over-picky, though, and he could get down and dirty when he wanted to. Especially in bed.

"You don't have to do that, you know," he offered as a way of breaking the sudden silence that had blanketed the room.

"Better that we should breathe in all this dust?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"I know." Brandon sat a little back, gazing at the mostly cleaned box. "I suppose I just wanted something to do while you were on the phone. And it looks better now, don't you think?"

“What it looks to me is scary. A box full of letters with our names in them, written in what looks like your handwriting, dated sixty years ago? That’s the frightening stuff, man.” Luke joined Brandon at the table. He carefully lifted the box’s lid and gazed at the tightly packed letters. “I don’t know about all this.”

“Could you live with yourself if you didn’t know?” Brandon asked. “We have to go through these and see what they’re all about. Either someone’s playing an elaborate game with us as the butts of the joke, or this is something...” He let his voice trail off. “I don’t know. But I mean to get to the bottom of it.”

Glancing up, he said, “You didn’t have to change your flight, though. I could have done this on my own.”

“We’re a team,” Luke replied automatically, then winced. “Damn. I’m sorry, Brandon. I didn’t think.”

“It’s all right. We were a team.” The ghost of a grin touched Brandon’s face. “Perhaps, for one more night, we could pretend.”

Luke relaxed. Brandon wasn’t going to hold the mistake against him. He should have known better, of course. Brandon never did hang on to grudges or blame people for honest accidents. “Cool.”

“Very. Would you make us some sandwiches or something like that? I’ve got a feeling this will be a long night, and neither of us have eaten yet.”

Glad for something to do—besides look at those letters—Luke jumped up. “You got it. We still have cold cuts, or do you want veggie?”

“Veggie, I think. Tomato if we have it.”

“BLT?”

“No. Wait, yes. If it’s not too much trouble.”

“If we have bacon, no trouble at all. I could go for one of those myself.” Luke crossed to the refrigerator, opened it and busied himself

rummaging amongst the shelves and bins. “Bingo! We have all the ingredients.”

“You’ll want to use the cast-iron frying pan. It’s in the bottom of the stack.”

“Where I last put it. Take it easy, Brandon. I still know where things are.”

Brandon looked up over his glasses, his cheeks slightly pink. “I know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have... I apologize.”

Luke waved the recriminations away. “It’s okay. Cheese on yours?”

“Cheese on a BLT?”

“A BLT melt.”

There, that got him an honest smile. “Well, I’ll try anything once. Cheese it is, then.”

Luke paused with his hand on a block of mozzarella. “Yeah,” he said softly, memories of past adventures in and out of bed flashing through his mind, “you will. And you usually enjoy yourself.” He met Brandon’s eyes, and figured that Brandon was probably thinking much the same thing.

“I’ll keep reading while you cook,” Brandon said at last, breaking the moment that had stretched out between them. One of those long moments that only a real couple had, where they were communicating without saying a single thing out loud. “Do you want to hear what they say, or shall I read silently?”

Luke shook his head. “Frankly? Now that I’ve had a chance to think about it, this is creepy, man. I don’t know if I want to hear what’s in those letters. But I think I have to. So go ahead and read them to me.” He peeled off strips of bacon and laid them in the frying pan. “Don’t go through them one by one, though. Skip around a little bit.”

“Very well.”

Luke heard the rustling of papers, and then the slick sound of an envelope being drawn out. Something was thrust back in, probably a bookmark to show where it had been removed. His Brandon was always so careful about things like that.

Damn. Luke knew he had to stop this. Brandon wasn't *his* Brandon, not anymore, and he had to remember that. They'd said their goodbyes, right? This was just a delay in his traveling on. A pit stop on the road. Nothing more. He poked the frying bacon with a fork, breathed in the savory aroma of broiling pork, and said, "Okay, let's hear what you've got."

"Dear Luke," Brandon read. "Each day with you gets better and better. Our adventure today still makes me smile from ear to ear when I think of it, sitting alone here in this lonely old house. How I wish that you could come and live with me—but no, I know that's an impossibility. What fun it would be, though! You and I, together all the time with no separations. Perhaps I can convince you one day."

He stopped. "It's just like when you and I met," he said quietly. "I wanted you more than anything, but you were Zillah's brother, and I thought she would eat me alive if she thought I was dallying with her family. That woman is a force of nature."

"She doesn't say much except when she's upset, but yeah. And this is eerie, man." Poke, poke at the bacon. The fat meat sizzled and popped at him. "Go on."

Brandon cleared his throat. "The inks are a bit faded. But here we are: I'll never forget what we did. You and I walking down the stream that runs through the woods, following its path from one end to where it leads into the French Broad River. The way you walked in front of me, so careful to make sure I didn't step on any glass from broken bottles or sharp rocks. I knew I had nothing to fear with you by my side, though.

You wouldn't let a thing hurt me if you could avoid it." He put the letter down. "We've done that very thing."

"I know." Luke turned the bacon over as it began to smoke. Damn. He had to pay closer attention to what he was doing. "I remember."

Brandon went on. "And then, when you slipped and accidentally brought me down with you, how we laughed as we were soaked in the water. I can still see the droplets sparkling on your face as you shook your head to dry it, and I can yet taste the sweetness of your lips when you kissed me as an apology for getting me wet. Not that I minded, not one little bit. I was with you, and that was all that mattered. Perhaps we can do it again someday."

He closed the letter and coughed slightly. "We never did walk that stream again, you and I. We always meant to, but there was always something that came first."

Luke closed his eyes briefly. The memory was crystal-clear in his mind's eye. It'd been a few years, but he remembered the events as if they'd happened yesterday. "When was that one dated?"

He heard a rustle as Brandon checked. "June of 1948."

Luke shivered. "This can't be happening, man. I mean, this can't be real."

"We have the proof of it right here." Brandon slid the letter back into place. "I don't know what strange magic is in this box, but it seems to me that we've been repeating someone else's lives down to the very last detail." He paused. "Perhaps we're this couple reincarnated."

"You believe in that shit?" Luke scoffed. He took the bacon out of the frying pan and laid it on a couple of folded paper towels to soak up the grease. On impulse, he grabbed two slices of thick Texas toast and threw them in, grilling the bread.

“Luke, right now I don’t know what to believe. Do you have a better explanation?”

Knives made a satisfying sort of crunch when they sliced through lettuce. Luke hacked at the head of leafy green matter he had before him, and shook his head. “I don’t,” he said tightly. “Go on. Pick another one.”

“Just as you say.” Brandon went through the motions again.

“One closer to the end,” Luke hastened to add. He didn’t need to hear every single detail of his and Brandon—no, this older couple’s—lives. He’d lived it once, he suspected, and this was painful enough all on its own. “You find one that looks all right to read?”

“I believe so.” Although his back was turned now, poking at the bacon again, Luke could almost see Brandon adjusting his glasses. “Dearest Luke—I know that this will be one of the last letters that I write to you. I can still scarcely believe my good luck, but you’ll be moving in with me soon. I would never have believed it when I met you, but you and I are finally brave enough to admit our love. There will be some who’ll never speak to us again, it’s true, but there are plenty who’ll find our company even more appealing. Not that I suggest we start going to that sort of bar or party circuit. No, I refer to friends of ours who have the same inclinations, the sort through which we met.

“My family is not best pleased, having wanted grandchildren from me, but after some arguments—I must be honest with you in all things—they have agreed not to badger me about my decision. Father was the worst, but in the end even he subsided. I don’t think it’s the color of your skin, dearest, have no worries about that. And we’ll deal with the crossing of that bridge when we come to it.

“To think, though, that soon you and I will be sharing our rooms together! I’ve already begun getting things set in order. The bed is big enough for two, if we lie cozily, which I am certain you will not mind. I’ve

found an old crazy quilt in the attic, and had it laundered so that it's fresh and smells of clean soap. A pillow, soft and downy, for you to lie your head on. There's a shelf all cleared out for your paperbacks, and dresser drawers cleaned out for your personal belongings. I've even emptied out half of the closet for your clothes. You see how anxious I am that you should come and be with me? Live by my side?

"Luke, I am counting down the days. Soon, we'll be together for good."

Luke heard the rustle of the letter closing. Brandon was silent except for the sound of his sipping at a glass of ice water, soothing his throat. "Go on," Luke said harshly. "Tell me that's not exactly the way things went down."

"I can't. Those are my exact thoughts when I was preparing this place for you to move in. My parents' precise reaction. Everything's the same, down to the community of friends who would accept us and the reality that some townsfolk would not."

"And the color of my skin?" Luke sliced tomatoes with more force than he really had to, chopping thick red slabs of juicy vegetable. "What did you think about that?"

"You knew—know—I'd adore you if you were purple. Black and white make no difference whatsoever to me, except to admire the way we look—looked—together, when we were in bed. Creamy chocolate and smooth vanilla. We are—were—beautiful."

"I know." Luke knew his voice was hoarse. He rescued the bread, wincing as it burned his fingers, and laid it down on the plate. Adding the bacon, tomato, lettuce and cheese, he sliced the thing diagonally and took a deep breath. Suddenly, he had no appetite, no matter how delicious the food looked. "How many more are there?"

"About half. I skipped to somewhere in the middle."

“Go on further, then. Close to the end.”

“Very well.” Brandon’s fingers danced over the tops of the letters as he made his next selection. Carrying the plate to the table, Luke arrived just as Brandon was drawing one out. He put the sandwich between them. “This one should do. It’s very close to the end.”

“Not the last one.”

“Not yet.” Brandon gave Luke a cryptic look over his glasses. “I thought to save the last for the last.”

“All right.” Luke glanced up at the clock. Had it really taken him that long to throw a sandwich together? “Go on.”

Brandon nodded. “I won’t touch the food just yet,” he said apologetically. “The fragile paper...and grease...”

“You don’t mind if I do?” The thought wasn’t appealing, but Luke didn’t like letting things go to waste. He picked up his half of the sandwich and took a bite. It *was* good, savory and crispy. Licking his lips, he swallowed. “Hurry on up and read before yours gets cold.”

In answer, Brandon drew the letter out of its envelope. “Dear Luke,” he began. “Please, my love, tell me this isn’t so. You’ve decided to move on, and I cannot for the life of me understand why you’ve chosen to leave me behind. After all that we’ve shared, it seems unbelievable that you would part the ways of our pleasant company. I realize that you’ve been offered a position that is beyond your wildest dreams, but you make decent wages where you are now, and you’re well-respected. More than that, I am here, and I know you love me still.

“Please, Luke. Do not let this be our goodbye.”

Brandon closed the letter. He put it back in the box, picked up his half of the sandwich, and bit savagely into it. Luke tried to read Brandon’s expression, but couldn’t. “Babe...” he started.

Brandon swallowed and glared up at Luke. "Don't call me that. You've forfeited all right to any pet names."

"Not because I..." Luke stopped, putting his head in his hands. "That's how you feel, isn't it? The way it's written down in the letter. All this time you've been so reasonable and practical, but inside you've been dying because I was going away." He looked up. "Is that the truth, Brandon? That's what's going on inside your head?"

Brandon turned his head away. It was all the confirmation Luke needed. He reached out for Brandon's hand. "If I'd known, it would have made a big difference. I would have thought twice, maybe three times. Possibly even made another choice."

"You were so full of joy at the thought of moving up in the world," Brandon said distantly. "I couldn't keep you here. Wouldn't stop you from following your star, even if it led you away from my side. I'd never ask you to sacrifice your happiness for mine."

"Out loud. Brandon, these letters have been right on the money so far. You're telling me that now they've made a mistake?"

Brandon's hand tightened into a fist. "No. All right? Is that what you wanted to hear? Yes, I thought I would die when you decided to leave me. Every second of every day since you've made your choice, I've been aching to do anything it took to make you stay. Do you have any idea what that feels like, Luke? A little bit of me died every time you made a call or referenced that damned job. You were walking away from me piece by piece, the love of my life fading away, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Stop you." He shook his head. "Or I wouldn't. You seemed so happy. Glad to leave me."

"Babe, I was never happy over the thought of leaving you." Luke held on tight to Brandon's hand. "You don't think it drove me crazy, too? That

I didn't want to pack you in my suitcase and take you up North with me?"

"Then why in God's name didn't you ever say anything after we'd had our first discussions? If the thoughts lingered as a question in your mind, why didn't you bring them up?"

"Why didn't you?"

The two men fell silent. Luke took another bite of his sandwich, although it tasted like dust and ashes to him now. He didn't let go of Brandon's hand. He chewed and choked the bit of meat and bread down, then heaved a deep sigh. "I've been a damn fool," he said quietly. "Go on, Brandon. Read the last letter."

"Is there really any need?" Brandon fired back. "It'll likely just be a missive from me wishing you well in your new life."

Luke frowned slowly. "I don't think so. Consider this for a second, babe. All those letters are written to me—I mean, this other Luke—but they were found here, in this attic. They've all been mailed, postmarked and all. Don't you think that means..."

"I don't want to think about what that means. Not when you're leaving in the morning."

"Finish the job," Luke pushed. "Read the last letter in the box. I want to know how this ends."

Brandon took a deep breath. Finally, he nodded and reached for the very last missive in the box, pulling it out. "The envelope hasn't been opened," he said just as Luke noticed the fact. "What do you suppose that means?"

"I don't know," Luke answered honestly. "Maybe that there was no need for it."

"Should I...?"

“No more violation of privacy than what we’ve done already. And we have to know how this ends up, Brandon.” Luke didn’t know why this was so important to him—or he didn’t want to know—but it was. “Open it up.”

Brandon sighed. “Hand me the letter opener from that drawer in the middle? I think you can reach it from where you’re sitting.”

Luke could, and passed the long piece of faux silver over. Brandon took it without a word and inserted the end into the envelope. The slicing sound of the envelope opening was loud as a sword tearing through flesh, making both of them wince.

Brandon drew out the letter, unfolded it, and stared at the contents. He put one hand up to cover his mouth.

“Well?” Luke asked, leaning forward. “Don’t, now. Don’t stop. Tell me what this letter says.”

Blinking rapidly, Brandon began to read. “Dearest Luke—Before now, I had thought I could never be sorrier. You were about to leave, and there was nothing I could or would do to stop you, you were so happy. But then, a miracle. I’ll say nothing of the box of letters we found in the attic of this house, except to let you know how grateful I am that we came across them. Who this other Luke and Brandon are, they who lived in the 1800’s, I’ve no idea, but I’m glad as I can be that they left us a written record. You stayed the night through when you were supposed to have gone, and now as the daylight breaks I know that you will stay. Do you hear me, Luke? You’ll stay, by my side, where you belong, as we both well know. And now I think I could never be happier...each day with you is a gladder one than that which came before...”

Brandon cast the letter down on the table. Luke snatched the paper up and read the words for himself. “Babe,” he said in a low voice. “Babe.”

“Don’t,” Brandon managed to say. “Please, Luke.”

“I have to. This changes everything. Even if I still can’t believe it’s true.” Luke carefully folded the letter. “I have to make some phone calls, babe. I need to know about something. You’ll be here? You’ll wait for me and not rush off while I do this?”

“How could I?” Brandon spread his hands wide. “You’ve heard what the letters have to say, and by whatever magic, they’re all the truth. No, I don’t want you to go. If you stayed, I’d be the gladdest man alive. But I still won’t stop you, not if you truly want to go. I—”

Luke leaned over the table and kissed Brandon, sealing their lips together in an embrace that felt at once familiar and brand-new, sending thrills of sensation through his body and down into the pit of his stomach. “I’m not saying anything just yet. Wait right here for me though. Promise?”

Brandon drew in a deep and shaky breath. “For you, I promise. But beyond that, I can’t give you my word on anything. I don’t know where we stand right now, you and I.”

“That’s fair enough. I can’t ask for more.” Luke stood, the muscles in his legs shaky. He made his way to the phone and dug an address book out of his pocket. “Just a couple of phone calls. Then we’ll know what’s what.”

Although what he’d do depending on the answers he got, he didn’t know.

Chapter Three

Sometimes, like a letter, phones can bring good news or they can bring bad tidings. Or they can lead you toward choices you hoped you'd never have to make. Decisions you didn't want. A road that splits two ways. Do you go left, or do you go right?

Tick-tock, it's on the clock, and it's down to me now. I know what I have to do.

Luke hung up the phone and stood still for a moment, his breath coming short and shallow. He couldn't believe what he'd just done, but how could he have acted otherwise? He'd had no other alternatives. The letters...while he still wasn't sure this wasn't some elaborate hoax, they'd been so accurate, and they'd told him which direction to head.

He'd had to be sure, though, so he'd called the company headquarters in New York. They were a twenty-four-hour operation, and the nighttime head honcho had been there, with Luke's new personnel records at his disposal and the clout to make decisions.

Luke replayed the conversation in his mind:

"You can't be serious. This is a child's game, refusing to take your next step up the ladder because you're too attached to your friends and family. Surely they understand this is the best thing for you and your career as a software development engineer."

"It's not just my family and friends." Luke had twisted the phone cord around his fingers again—his own nervous habit. "It's my partner. Sir. I don't think we should split up. It's been a hard choice to make, but—"

"Partner? You mean your wife, or your girl?"

Luke had bitten his lip. "No. My partner. My boyfriend, my man."

"I see." Pause. "Well, what you do on your own time is none of the company's business. And if you're so attached to him, why not bring him up North with you?"

"His life is here. Sir."

"And so you're just going to throw it all away, after you've signed papers and been officially hired? After you've done all this traveling and bought your final plane ticket out? I'll bet you've even packed."

"I have. Sir. But the fact is, I want to stay."

"I see." Pause. Luke heard the man's breathing rasping down the line, and a rattle of papers. "Is it the money? We don't generally give out salary increases until after the first year in employ, but I can offer you one thousand more bi-annually. There's a note in the file that authorizes me to extend this to you if necessary."

Luke had shaken his head. "Sir. I can't. Sir."

"This isn't the army, you know." The night manager had grown irritable. "Look, you're throwing away the chance of a lifetime. Bring your 'man' up here and settle in. Wait and see, in no time at all you'll both have settled in. There's a healthy lifestyle for your type up here."

"My 'type', sir?"

An exasperated noise. "You know very well what I mean. I'm trying my best to sweet-talk you into honoring your commitment, but you seem determined to break faith with us."

"That's exactly what I'm doing, sir. I'm honoring a previous commitment by keeping faith with the promises I made a long time ago."

“You know, you’re not indispensable. We can find someone else to take your place.” The voice grew threatening. “If you say ‘no’ one more, time, I’m going to have to take this as a refusal of employment and you will no longer have a job with us.”

Oh, God. “Thank you for your generous offer, but I decline.” Briefly, Luke bid the corner office and all the technical equipment he’d been salivating over goodbye. “I appreciate how kind your company has been to me. Sir.”

“Well, if that’s the attitude you want to take, then fine. Your loss. We still hold the copyright to your language development software, though, you might want to know, and you’re forfeiting your right to any profit made from sales.”

“Some things are worth more than money. Sir. Sir?”

The line had gone dead, and after listening to the dial tone for a few moments, Luke had hung up. He stood there now, hearing his heart beat in his ears, realizing he was breathing way too fast. He took a few long, slow drags, holding the good air in until he settled down.

Then he turned around, walked out to the living room, and sat on the small hexagonal coffee table facing Brandon. His lover sat on their small couch, his legs drawn up underneath him in a heron-like position. His arms rested on his knees, and one hand was placed over his chin. “Well?”

Luke shrugged. “We talked. I know you heard me. And then they said I didn’t have a job anymore.”

“I heard them trying to coax you to bring me up there with you.”

“You know I couldn’t do that. This is your home, your community. This is where you belong.”

“And it’s not yours?” Brandon unfolded a little. “You say you’re not going there, but are you staying here?”

“Am I—babe, where else would I go?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.” Brandon rubbed his fingers across his forehead. “You’re staying with me, then. Willingly.”

“You know I am.” Luke raised up from his seat and reached for Brandon, but Brandon was too quick and moved out of range.

“I’m going to bed,” he said simply, looking down at Luke from his height of six feet and two inches. “Join me if you’d like, but I don’t think I’m up to anything more than sleep just now.”

Luke felt about three centimeters tall, and knew he had a lot of apologizing to do in his future. “I’ll be there in a few minutes. I just have to make a couple more phone calls.”

“You’re talented with those these days.” Brandon brushed by Luke, evading his attempt at taking Brandon’s hand. “Good night.”

And just like that, he was gone, out the door and into the hallway that led to their bedroom. Luke watched him go, then heaved a tremendous sigh and stood back up again. He headed in the opposite direction, toward the kitchen, where he picked up the phone and began to dial a series of numbers.

Twenty minutes later he had Tonja’s cohort, LaSaundra, on the line. “You realize you won’t get a refund on this,” the airline employee warned him. “All tickets canceled within a twenty-four hour period are—”

“I know,” Luke broke her off in the middle to say. “I know. But I can’t make my flight.”

“We’ll cancel that flight for you then.” Long nails went clickety-clack. “Do you want to make a reservation for a date in the future?”

“No. Not right now.” Luke’s mouth felt dry. The last of his savings was wasted and his credit card had been maxed out, every cent to his name

gone dwindling down the drain. All the same, now that he knew what he had to do, and understood the full truth about Brandon, he had no choice. None at all. He knew what he wanted, too. “Do you need anything else?”

“That’ll be it for now, sir. Thank you for choosing New York—”

“Thanks, but that’s just it. I haven’t.” Luke hung up the phone and breathed again. Then he picked it back up and dialed his sister’s number, hoping she would still be awake.

Marianne answered with a sleepy “Hmm?”

“Hey, Mary-girl. God, you two in bed already?”

“It’s all the sex,” Marianne replied dryly as a sleepy person could. “Tends to wear you out.”

“Those are details I don’t wanna hear, especially when my sister is involved. Speaking of which, is Zillah there?”

“Where are you calling from, New York?”

“No. I’m still down the road.”

“You should be on your way to catch a flight. What’s going on?”

“Can I talk to my sister? Then you can let her explain it to you.”

Marianne made confused noises. Luke heard the rustle of sheets and a comforter, and the sound of her talking in a low voice to someone else. She came back on the line long enough to say, “All right, Zillah’s awake. But I want to hear the whole story, understand?”

You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. But then again...given all we’ve seen and done around here...maybe you might.

“Little brother, this had better be good,” Zillah warned him, her crisp voice razor-sharp. She woke up quickly and was alert seconds after she opened her eyes. Sounded like tonight was no exception. “Two rounds of comfort sex wiped me out, plus I was havin’ a *good* dream.”

“Please, no details. Listen to me, okay? This is important, Zillah. Now sit tight. I have a story to tell you, and I’m beggin’ you to please believe me...”

When Luke had finished telling his sister the whole thing, from finding the letters through reading the last one, he fell silent and waited for her to respond. She’d had plenty of questions along the way, but now she was quiet as well. Too quiet, for too long.

“Zillah? You still there?”

“I’m still here.” She sounded absent, though. “Baby brother, I don’t know what to say except that I believe you got yourself a sign tonight, and I’m talkin’ about five-foot letters in glowing neon. I never did think you were meant to go to New York, and now I’m sure of it. Whatever brought those letters to you meant to get that message across, though damned if I know when, how or why.”

“So you think I did the right thing.”

“I know you did. Leavin’ Brandon would have been the biggest mistake of your young life. That man loves you with all his heart and soul, and anyone with eyes in their head could have told you it was killin’ him to see you all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, talkin’ about your bright future up North.”

Luke lowered his head into his hands. Looking back, he could see it all now. How quiet Brandon had gotten over these past few weeks. How he’d drawn back in little ways, until all that was left was their final goodbye. The small things had gone so gradually he hadn’t even missed them. Sleepy good-morning kisses, laughter in the kitchen as they cooked, Brandon coming out to his workshop after he got home from town himself and just sitting to talk. Holding hands. Lying out in the backyard hammock, whiling away lazy weekend afternoons.

How had he been such a damn fool?

“Luke? I know you’re still there, so you listen to me,” Zillah said. “I have some words of wisdom for you, things I’ve learned through hard experience. If something is meant to be, then it will be. And when you find something good, something true, you hold onto it with both hands and you don’t let go.”

A lump grew in Luke’s throat. “Thank you,” he managed to say. “I’ve got a long way to go to make up for this.”

“Yes, you do. And I suggest you start tonight. Then tomorrow, I want to see those letters. Me and Marianne are going to come over, and don’t you even think about telling us no. We’ll bring the whole group—Slate and Ash, Ian and Andy—if we have to, but I want you to know how welcome you are here. How much you belong. How glad I am and we all will be to know you’re staying.”

“Big sister.”

“Little brother. Go on, now. Get started.”

“I love you, Zillah. Don’t say it as often as I should, but I do. Swear to you that I do.”

“I know, Lucky Luke. Hang up the phone and go on. Go.”

Luke did as he was told, and then stood for a moment, bracing himself on the counter. How he was going to make a new start here, he didn’t know. But he had to try, didn’t he?

He managed to stall by taking a shower. The water felt even better than it ever had before, spraying down from the special diverter that he and Brandon had installed together, laughing at the over-complicated instructions on the tri-lingual foldout. Washing himself off with Brandon’s soap, he inhaled the scent of his lover, the smell going straight to his head. He prayed this wasn’t too much too fast, but he needed that

aroma surrounding him again. Nothing like the real thing, but it helped him feel a little better.

You're not the one who needs comforting, a small voice in the back of his mind reminded him. *Brandon does*.

Sluicing off, Luke stepped out of the shower and dried himself carefully with one of the oversized towels they'd splurged on, the fluffy mat springing between his toes. He shook his head. All these little comforts that he'd been prepared to just throw away. How had he ever been able to think about leaving? This was home. Where he was meant to be. Where he intended to stay.

The lights were off in the bedroom when Luke came walking in on soft cat's feet, knowing that he wouldn't disturb Brandon if the man were already asleep. He lay underneath the quilt, only his own side turned down, his back turned to the doorway. Luke listened, but heard nothing except soft, rhythmic breathing.

So, they'd have to start in the morning, then. Luke tiptoed toward the bed, determined not to disturb the man he loved from a no-doubt exhausted rest.

"I heard you in the kitchen, you know," Brandon said suddenly, startling Luke. "You called Zillah and told her. Why?"

Luke sighed, turning down his own corner of the bed and climbing in. He hesitated but then laid one hand on Brandon's back, creamy chocolate against smooth white vanilla. Brandon gave a small twitch, but didn't move away. Progress, or so Luke hoped. "I couldn't not tell her. I needed some advice, too. She's always been someone I looked to for good counsel."

"And how did she steer you tonight?" Brandon's tone was flat, completely unreadable. "Did she tell you that you should go to New York after all?"

“Tell me—no, babe, no.”

“Luke...”

“Now it’s my turn to tell you to stop it. That’s my name for you, babe, and even if you don’t love me anymore I’m always gonna think of you that way.” Luke began to rub his hand in small circles. “Brandon? Say something to me.”

“What do you want to hear?”

“Anything. You want to tell me I’ve been a dog, I’m ready to take my beating. Tell me off or chew me out, and I’ll accept it. I’ve been a damn fool, I know it, and if you’ll just take me back then I’ll work my hardest never to make the same mistakes again.”

“Take you back?” Brandon shifted and rolled, turning over. With his glasses off, Luke could see the tears welling up in his eyes. “You great simpleton, I never let you go. I wasn’t ever going to, even when you had taken your leave. You were and are the love of my life, Luke.”

“Babe.” Luke surrounded Brandon with his arms, holding the man tight against his chest. “But why didn’t you ever say? I might not have...”

“You had your eyes full of stars; you couldn’t see the forest for the trees.” Brandon’s voice steadied. He raised back up to look Luke in the eyes. “For me, goodbye meant nothing more than a farewell to the way of life I’d known. I had no plans to go out and find someone else to love. You don’t know how it murdered me to think that you might.”

“You know what? I never even thought about love when I was makin’ my plans. No, no, listen to me. When I was thinkin’ about all I’d do in New York, I always tacked it on there even though I knew I wouldn’t actually pick up the phone—gotta tell Brandon about this. If I’d felt I had a right to, I would have burned up the phone lines between here and there with every bit of news.” He pulled Brandon closer. “Please, trust me when I say there wouldn’t have been any bars or clubs for me, no

dinners with one of my co-workers that turned into something else. I had no plans to find someone else up there. I should have known that my heart was still right here. With you.”

They held on to each other for a long, long moment, Luke just listening to the sound of his lover breathing and the thump, thump of his heart beating. The silence didn’t feel uncomfortable, though, and he was glad of that.

Finally, Brandon broke through. “Where do we go from here, then?”

“I don’t know, babe.” Luke ran his hand down Brandon’s arm. “I know things are never gonna be the same as they were, not after what we’ve been through. But, I don’t know, maybe we can work at making them better? We’ve been through the fire. Let’s see what we look like, coming out the other side.”

“Forged and tested,” Brandon said, but with a ghost of a smile. “We can try again.”

“If you’re willing, then God knows I am.”

Brandon toyed with Luke’s hand, matching fingertip to fingertip. “I should be angry at you. I should turn my back and make you pay for what you’ve done. But I can’t seem to make myself. Just as the letter said, this is the happiest I’ve ever been.”

“You mean that? You’re actually happy?”

“Ecstatic, you idiot.” Brandon bumped his forehead into Luke’s. The warm hand slid down to Luke’s hip. “I’m not losing you. How could I be anything but glad?”

“It’s like Slate and Ash,” Luke said abruptly, the thought just occurring to him. “Except we didn’t have to part all the way before I came back to you again.”

“Those two.” Brandon’s smile became full-fledged. “When I think about them and the miracle we all witnessed, I have to stop and wonder

at what guards our lives. There's a force at work here in this little community of folks, and I think it means us good, not evil. I think we were meant to find those letters, and read them. It was something's last effort at keeping us together."

Luke kissed Brandon on the forehead. "You know, I think you're right." Moving down, he kissed Brandon again, this time on the lips, lingering there sweet and long. Brandon tasted as good as ever, flavored with the faint tang of tea he'd likely drunk hours ago. "You're sweet as you can be," Luke breathed. "Babe, can we... I mean to say..."

Brandon's eyes closed briefly. His smile grew wider. "I think we can. No more goodbyes. This is us saying hello."

"Better. We're saying welcome back." Luke took Brandon's hip in his hand and squeezed gently as he brought their mouths together for another sweet kiss, this one flavored with growing excitement and a sense of wonder. "I'm so sorry I almost left you."

Brandon smiled, reaching for another kiss. "Then welcome back," he said, taking Luke fully into his arms. "I'm so glad to have you here. You've no idea."

"Teach me, then." Luke rolled until he was on his belly. "I had you earlier. I want you to take me now. Bring me back home."

He felt Brandon's hands stroking up and down his back, and then heard a soft, "All right. If you're sure."

"I'm beyond sure, babe. I need to feel you inside of me." Luke arched his hips up. "Touch me deep."

He heard Brandon draw in a sharp breath. "The sight of you, laid out for me...far be it from me to say no. But I do have to punish you just a little." There was a slight whish noise, and then Luke felt the sting of a hard smack on his backside. "There. Consider your debt paid."

"I don't know," Luke said, wiggling his ass. "That was more of a pleasure than a pain, if you ask me."

"Hmm. We'll have to experiment sometime then, won't we?"

"Can we buy one of those floggers with the silk ribbons, like I showed you in that catalogue?"

"Anything's a possibility."

Luke felt Brandon turn and reach into his bedside table, then heard him rummaging around for a tube of lubricant. The kind they always used, no scent to it, just good slippery stuff that made a glide into someone's ass feel like pure heaven. "I think I'll always hate blackberries now," Brandon added.

"Me too," Luke confessed. "Why'd you choose that scent, anyway?"

"Because the bottle made me think about the last fruits of summer, and how I loved picking late blackberries off the vine. There was nothing so sweet, or bittersweet, as tasting those on my tongue when I was a boy."

Luke jumped a little as he felt the tip of Brandon's tongue trail a stripe down the line of his back. "Oh...damn. That's good, babe."

"Good to me, too. There are other things I'd far rather taste now than blackberries. Mmm, musky. And you smell like...my soap?"

"Had to have at least some part of you tonight." Luke raised his ass again. "Do I have to beg you? Because right now, I will. I always will, if you want me to."

"It's not necessary." The top of the lube container clicked open, and Luke felt the cool drizzle of it being poured on the small of his back. Brandon's fingers were there almost immediately, smoothing the liquid down into the divide between his cheeks, a finger probing at his hole. "Take one of the throw pillows and push it under your hips," Brandon directed. "I'm not in a mood to wait and adjust this and that."

“Me neither. Just want you, only you, back inside of me.” Luke sensed Brandon climbing over the top of him, and the slick sounds that said his lover was stroking his cock, getting his hardness ready for entry. He did as Brandon had ordered with the pillow, pushing it beneath him. Now that he had something to thrust against, his personal waking erection sprung into full life.

He felt gentle fingers pulling him open, and a hard, wet object poised at his entrance. “Are you ready for me?” Brandon asked, his accent stronger now, as it always had been when they were intimate...as it always would be.

“So ready,” Luke said, clutching the bed sheets.

And as Brandon slid inside him, he realized the truth of the matter. He was home, truly home, right where he belonged. Where he never should have thought of leaving.

Wherever Brandon was, that was home. And Luke knew for sure that he’d never forget it again.

Epilogue

“Well, look who’s awake,” Brandon said as Luke entered their kitchen. Brandon greeted Luke with a kiss, a quick peck on the lips that melted into something softer and sweeter, their tongues dancing together first in one mouth, and then the other. When they parted, Luke felt his heart leap for glee when he saw that Brandon was smiling.

“I was playin’ the sleepyhead again, wasn’t I?” Luke asked, rubbing his head ruefully. He’d just now stumbled out of bed.

“And then some. It’s past eleven o’clock. I gave up and ate breakfast by myself, but you’ve only got a little while to wait for lunch.”

“Oh, man, you’re telling me you cooked and I missed it?” Luke grabbed Brandon by the waist and gave him as much of a spin as he could in the cramped space. “Don’t tell me what I lost out on. No, wait, I want to know. Waffles? Was it waffles?”

“You’ll never find out, but they were scrumptious.” Brandon’s eyes sparkled behind his glasses. He’d put on a T-shirt fresh from the laundry basket, smelling of fabric softener, and old jeans that molded to his long legs and the curve of his ass. “I’ll make them again when you get up at a proper hour on Monday.”

“Monday?”

“You’re going back to work in your home office,” Brandon chided. “You lost one idea, but you’ll come up with another. I have faith in you.”

“Babe, you have no idea how good it is to hear you say those words.”

Brandon's gaze softened. "I think I do. And I'm glad to know you appreciate them."

"More than you'll ever know."

"I wonder." Brandon turned to brush his hand across the box of letters, still sitting on the table where they'd been left the night before. "If not for a happy chance..."

"Don't even go there." Luke held Brandon tighter. "We're back to you and me again, you hear? No more worries or doubts or sleepless nights. We're gonna make it, the both of us together."

"I know we will." Brandon kissed Luke this time, gentle, tasting of tea and sugar. He took his sweet time about the gesture of affection, drawing it out until the honk of a horn out in their front yard pulled them apart.

"Who is that?" Luke went to look out the front window, but Brandon beat him to it. "You move damn fast, you know that?"

"It's Zillah and Marianne," Brandon reported. "Lord help us, they brought the whole crowd. Slate and Ash are out there, as well as Ian and Andy. I'll go and say hello. Would you turn down the heat on the stove? We'll want to explain things to them before we eat."

"You got it." Luke flipped the switches one by one, inhaling the savory aromas of sautéing chicken, onions and peppers, plus some kind of garlic noodle dish that he never knew the name of, but loved as one of his all-time favorites. Homemade. Brandon really had been up a while. Luke knew his lover; he cooked when he was bored.

Out in the yard, he heard laughter and feminine squeals, then Zillah calling out for him. "I'll be right there!" he yelled back, turning toward the table to fetch the box of letters to take out and show them. He wanted Zillah to see the proof with her own two eyes.

Reached for them...but they were gone.

Luke blinked. They'd been there just a minute ago—hadn't they? And Brandon hadn't taken them outside with him. He stole a peek to be sure, but no, Brandon's arms were free and the box was nowhere to be seen.

"Huh." Luke stared at the space where the box had been. The letter opener, the wood cleaner and cloth all still lay there, and he wasn't waking up in New York. They had existed, he knew they had, even if only for a short while.

Somehow, he didn't think he should waste his time looking for the letters. He had a feeling that they'd turn up some fifty or sixty years in the future, maybe not here, but somewhere else, saving another couple that was on the brink of losing one another forever.

Unable to help himself, Luke broke into a broad smile. Zillah would just have to take his word as truth, then. They'd all be doing a lot of taking things on trust in the near future.

And until then, he had lost time to catch up on, and friends he'd almost lost to get reacquainted with. "Don't ya'll be having too much fun without me," he called, heading for the front door. "Luke is here to join the party!"

Out in the yard, his friends and lover welcomed him into a multi-armed hug, passing him from one person to another, to another.

Letters are funny things, you know? They turn up in the strangest places, and they can carry the oddest messages. In this day and age, what with e-mail and cell phones, we hardly ever think about the written word.

But sometimes, it's the most important item we can ever lay our hands on.

About the Author

Willa Okati has a hundred and one different stories to tell, and she's getting there one book at a time. Permanently glued to her computer chair in front of a laptop, she can be found pounding the keys from before dawn until after dusk. She's delighted to have found a home at Samhain, where she can write her Appalachian-with-a-twist paranormal stories. Coffee is her best friend and her lifesaver; cats are her muses; her bookshelves are groaning under the weight of a tremendous collection.

She loves to hear from readers, and can be contacted at willaoakati@gmail.com.

Drop her a line anytime!

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

Zombie

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Coming November 28, 2006 to Samhain Publishing

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

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

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

Enjoy the following excerpt from *Zombie*:

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

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

Kir frowned. "Why so serious?"

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

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

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

Kir danced slightly and Josh laughed.

“Go, go.” Josh waved.

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

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

Kir’s face heated.

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

Josh removed the tea bag from the cup. “Milk? Sugar?”

“No, thanks.”

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

“You must know I’m attracted to you.” Kir spoke in a rush, his face still hot.

Josh just smiled.

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

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

“Hi,” said Kir as Josh came up beside him.

“You need another piece of wood,” suggested Josh. “This one’s rotting.”

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

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

“I’ve been waiting,” Kir said in a low voice.

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

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

“Okay.” Kir sounded short of breath. “But I don’t know what to say.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All your compliments. I get embarrassed.”

Josh laughed.

Sometimes a kiss is worth more than a thousand words.

Unspoken

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Available now at Samhain

Once a famous vocalist, Ian has become mute through a mysterious set of circumstances that no doctor can explain. He has people he can call on, but what he really needs is a best friend, a companion, and a lover.

The very person he's been looking for is about to arrive on his doorstep. At a low point, Ian encounters a strange man in his garden—a wandering musician, like the bards of older times. Andy accepts Ian for who he is, lack of voice included, and reassures Ian that love itself is one of the greatest forms of expression.

Will Ian coax Andy to stay, save him, and share with him a love that will not be denied, even if it goes unspoken?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Unspoken*

As they entered the clean eating space, Andy laid a hand on Ian's shoulder to get his attention and smiled ruefully when he turned around. "It's just come to me that I'm a bit too dirty to be entering a spotless kitchen like this one." At Ian's puzzled look, Andy tapped the side of his nose. "Give me a moment. Does this door lead to the outside?"

Ian nodded. Andy brought his hands together in a clap of satisfaction. "Wonderful! I won't go any further than the yard, I promise."

Before Ian could think to stop him, Andy had plunged outside again, into the thick of the pelting, cold rain. Ian darted to the window and stared in disbelief. *The man's insane.*

Outside, Andy whooped and spun in circles, his feet dancing an almost Irish jig through piles of leaves as the pouring water soaked him instantly to the skin, his shirt going transparent. Ian's gaze was drawn to the play of muscles in the man's chest and the two dark brown nipples showing through. Thirstily, he drank in the sight until he realized what he was doing and stopped himself.

I'm lusting after this stranger now? Ian, get a grip.

"This'll take care of the worst of my road grime!" Andy shouted, running both hands through his sopping hair. He loosed a burst of wild, fey laughter. "Here now, come and join me!"

Ian withdrew slightly, startled. Go out in the middle of a storm? Not on his life.

"Ah, come on, man. This'll put color in your cheeks, so it will." Andy spun in circles and went jumping through small piles of leaves. He stopped with his hands outstretched toward the window where, no doubt, he saw Ian watching.

Their eyes met. A pulse of something—odd—passed between them, jolting Ian's bones with a low thrum of electricity. He flinched away from the sensation at first but then, sensing how a cord of the tingling power stretched between himself and Andy, relaxed into the feeling. His very bones began to warm as he turned away, feeling Andy follow, attached to him by the strange sort of chemistry they shared.

Ian had never felt anything like this with anyone. Gabriel had had his charms, as had the other men Ian had kept company with from time to time, but there was never a moment of pure connection where two souls had been lain bare to one another. Ian had the oddest feeling that when Andy had looked at him, he'd seen beyond flesh and bone to something deeper within. Something he recognized—yes, and approved of.

Was it all a little too strange to be real? Too sudden? Oh, yes. Ian had no illusions that he'd stepped foot-first into sheer madness. On the other hand, did he want to question that which made him feel safe and protected? Oh, no.

The sound of rain, lulling and soothing, pinged off the old tin roof above Ian's head. He paused for a second to enjoy the sound, one he'd favored since his childhood, at the same time wishing he were brave enough to go pelting outdoors with this wild king of the road.

Watching Ian, Andy came to a stop and favored him with another of those wide, warm grins. "It's all right," he called easily. "Try it someday, though, will you? You'll love the way this feels."

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