

Loose Id

*Enough to  
Let You Go*

W I L L A O K A T I

# ENOUGH TO LET YOU GO

Willa Okati

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## Dedication

*For A. D., always and forever my muse.*

## Chapter One

*Act I: Goodnight, Sweetheart. Well, It's Time to Go...*

*Life at Twenty-Three*

*BANG! BANG! BANG!*

“Good Lord,” Paul murmured, casting a narrow and more than half-displeased glance over his shoulder. “Don’t knock it down, would you?” Whoever was at the door, they were pounding loudly enough to rattle the hinges, which didn’t happen to be in architecturally sound shape to begin with. A few more bangs and it’d be done for. Even in rural Britannia, in a tiny hamlet where locking up at night *was* still optional for the brave of heart, leaving his home wholly vulnerable wasn’t a good idea.

*BANG! BANG! BANG!*

Pause.

*BANG!*

“For the love of... Oh, hang on!” Paul shouted in the general direction of the disturbance. “You picked your time, didn’t you? Just a minute!” They’d have to wait for him to wash off. He was coated with dusty, dry baking flour clear up to his neck, the stubborn

powder refusing to cooperate with his polite requests. The idea had been to blend said flour with sugar and cocoa, powder and eggs...did he need eggs? Possibly. To any rate, when all the ingredients were mixed, the whole sticky mess should miraculously transform into biscotti dough. He'd had a yen for them since Dominic, a neighbor who lived a few shacks down, had entertained his canny old Italian grandmother, who'd spent the most of her visiting time cooking. By God, she was a marvel in the kitchen. She'd turned Paul green with envy and had made him despair of his small skills mixing up scones and the like. He'd determined to try and copy her recipes, and now he'd finally gotten a chance to make the attempt.

He needed something to take his mind off...some troubles.

What was that lovely old signora's name again? She'd been gorgeous in the way of elderly gentry, all magnolias and charm and the kind of gracious manners that belonged to a born aristocrat. Dressed in jeans and sweatshirts when she ought to have worn pearls and gloves, she'd also had a soft, lyrical countryside accent that had made him think of misty sunrises wreathed in shades of red and purple over vast vineyards bursting with grapes. Listening to her, Paul had gotten wandering feet, wanting to see more of the world than he'd explored as yet.

Max had loved her, too. Thought she was fascinating. As good as sat at her feet, begging for more stories about the old days in Sicily.

"And that's quite enough thinking about Max." Paul thumped his wooden mixing spoon in a plastic bowl filled with melted chocolate. God, he'd made a mess of himself, hadn't he?

As Paul made an attempt at washing not-quite-dough off his fingers, the battering ram made a fresh assault on his door. He winced, finding it all too easy to imagine flakes of paint chipping off and leaving dents behind. Fine, probably not dents. The paint ruination, though -- that was a distinct possibility.

Who on earth wanted to see him so much they'd practically knock the house down?

Paul shook his head at the mess of sticky, stubborn ingredients laid out and heaped up on his range top. "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." Or was it, "Hail, Caesar, we who are about to die salute you?" Either way, there was no hope for his attempts at Italian pastry making. He'd craved a crunchy, bittersweet biscotti, too; it was exactly the thing to soothe his munchies, and he had hoped to savor a handful with some afternoon coffee.

He was turning into his father, Max would say. Max. Screw him, anyway. What did he know?

Paul scowled and poked at the melted sugar that was crusting over the top of his chocolate. Homebodies were not necessarily old. He liked to imagine taking trips as much as the next man, but in the end, he was a born country mouse, wasn't he? No need for traveling the world. St. Augustine was all he needed. The sleepy northern blink on a map was and forever would be *home*.

His noisy visitor, impatient in all respects, had apparently gotten tired of the boring bang-bang-bang. He or she had started to improvise melodies. *Shave and a haircut, two bits* repeated itself with varying emphasis on different words, then *Taps*, and then something he didn't recognize at all until it threw in the *That's all, folks*.

Paul rolled his eyes. Well, you had to laugh, didn't you? Life wouldn't be much without a dash of humor. "All right, all right, I'm coming." He tossed the checkered-yellow dishcloth he'd been using, still dry, over one shoulder -- before realizing it would leave a huge, floury splotch on his dark shirt. "For the love of... All right, all right!" He dried his hands on his jeans and made for the door. "What do you -- oh." He cleared his throat. "Have to say I didn't expect to see you come around again. What do you want?"

The person responsible for the racket grinned at Paul. A cheeky bastard who sassed without shame. A man most would call tall, though he stood perhaps eight centimeters below Paul's lanky height -- *a real Longshanks, me* -- and as dark as Paul was light. Sooty



black hair, cut to stand up high, grown out a little too long at the moment, and giving away the secret of the waves that would appear when it was even longer. Sparkling brown eyes, the next closest shade to coffee-colored. Those marvelous orbs were filled with the kind of energy that put the *snap* into *snap, crackle, and pop!*

The man pushed his strong, broad hands into the pockets of his almost obscenely tight jeans -- he did have the body to get away with it -- and leaned against Paul's poor, abused doorframe to twinkle at him. "Can Paul come out to play?"

Paul didn't say a word. Couldn't. He worked his tongue along his teeth instead, probing the spot where one had gotten chipped ages ago. He wanted to look away from the man, Max, but didn't think that would be a good idea. Avoiding Max never worked. If he was told he couldn't have something, he went after it with all the more passion.

Paul shifted his weight from foot to foot. Not knowing what to do with his hands, he crossed his arms over his chest, reconsidered, reconsidered again, and then copied Max by thrusting them into his pockets. Max waited patiently for Paul to finish his gyrations, but those deep brown eyes were laughing all the while.

God, but Max could be clueless, couldn't he? A dangerous man, him with his wicked eyes and his roguish devil's grin, made for tempting the unwary into merry hell. Paul didn't envy the horde of fan girls and boys Max would most definitely accrue when he hit the big time and made his presence known on the London stages. Which, Paul had no doubt, Max was capable of doing in record time. He had a certain something about him that no one could resist.

Lord knew Paul had never been able to hold out. Not that he'd ever wanted to, or thought he'd need to.

Seven years they'd been together...before their partnership had screeched to an end. Unexpected and well before its time, in Paul's opinion, but he didn't have what one might call a choice, now did he?

“Hey,” Max said, his handsome lips tweaked into a sexy, teasing grin with lashings of temptation and just a hint of a challenge. “Paul. C’mon out to the bridge. I have it on good authority that it’s gonna be a sunset to remember.”

“Is it that late already?” Paul asked, startled. He knew he tended to lose time when he poured himself into one task or another. He checked the position of the sun in the sky and realized the afternoon had worn into evening without him noticing.

“Yeah.” Max withdrew one hand from his pocket and extended it to Paul.

When Paul didn’t move to take it, Max brushed his fingers over Paul’s wrist, as sure as he could be that Paul wouldn’t push him away. *He knows me all too well*, Paul thought, both amused and rueful. He tried, very hard, to hide his small shudder at the feel of Max’s touch, so sorely missed these past few weeks. Traitorous body, refusing to act in its own best interests.

“You know you want to,” Max coaxed, amping the wattage of his smile. Cheeky, clueless bastard. “One more for the road.”

Paul stared. Did Max mean sex? Not that he’d say no, of course, but good God, where had that come from? They hadn’t. Not even for weeks before Max had made his decision, packed up all his things, and moved out. *Making the break easier when I leave St. Augustine*, he’d claimed. *The dried-up old ladies and jowly grandsires already give you hell for falling under my “evil influence.” This way, when I go they’ll have forgotten we were together. They’ll leave you alone instead of gossiping about the two fags and trouble in Paradise.*

Like fuck it’d be “easier.”

“What are you --” he hazarded.

“The bridge. Our favorite place.”

“Yours, you mean.”

“You love it, too. Don’t lie to me.” The rebuke sounded teasing, the way Max spun his words and added a dash of mischievous humor. “We need to say a real good-bye.”

*Oh.* “You’re finally leaving for London, then.” It wasn’t a question. “When?”

Max shrugged. For the first time since Paul had opened the door, his old partner and lover looked away, focusing on a spot centimeters to the left of Paul’s face. He didn’t do that often, preferring to fix all his attention on whomever he happened to be trying to charm. Lord, but he could whistle the birds out of the trees when he chose. A gift or a curse? Paul wasn’t sure.

“Tomorrow,” Max murmured, seemingly fixated on the wisteria growing wild over the latticework side of Paul’s front porch. “Tomorrow morning. I’ve got a ride to the airport, and my friend Rich says there’s an opening where he works that ought to keep me in Pot Noodles until I land a role. Some little bistro. He can’t pronounce the name. No big deal. Anyway, there’s room on his couch for me as long as I help with the bills, and --”

“Don’t.” Paul held up a hand, palm facing Max. He looked away, too, felt a muscle working in his cheek. “Just don’t. All right?”

“I’m sorry.” Max shuffled a couple of steps. “I didn’t think.”

To give him credit, Max did sound as if he were genuinely penitent. Might be an act. Might not. You never really did know with Max. Most often, people chose to believe him -- to take the man at face value. It wasn’t a bad choice. Max rarely lied. You’d think that would get him into no end of hot water, but nope.

“Hey.” Max’s voice dragged Paul back to reality. He glanced up to see the man’s smile, broad and white, whiter in contrast to his warm toffee-colored skin. Max was suddenly somehow caressing Paul’s cheek, the lightly callused pads scraping his skin and sending a shiver through his stomach. “You’re thinking too much.”

“Always have.”

“And that’s one of the things I lo -- like best about you.” Max tapped the soft skin just underneath Paul’s eye. Gentle. He could employ such tenderness when that was his whim. It

almost took away the sting of his hasty self-correction and the reminder that they, the two of them, belonged to a past that would be finally long gone when Max flew away.

Paul exhaled, knowing he was beaten. "All right, then. Lead on, Macduff. What new adventures are burrowing away in your weaselly mind?"

Max laughed and pounded Paul on the back. "A trip to the bridge. Honest, that's all."

"That's never all with you," Paul informed him. He flipped the dishtowel off his shoulder -- ah, yes, big old white stain; looked like he'd had an unfortunate run-in with a colicky baby. He was a mess, but Max wouldn't care about dishevelment. Never had before. Matter of fact, as Paul remembered, Max took great glee in rumpling up the both of them. His preferred methods involved sex. "Let's do this."

"That's my best guy." Max hugged Paul, enthusiastic as a child.

The problem, Paul thought as he let himself sink into the embrace, was that Max hadn't been a child in twenty years. But like Peter Pan, he'd never grow up.

But that shouldn't happen, should it? Paul would feel real dismay if Max ever lost his free-wheeling, open-arms approach to life. Max was one of the world's rare changelings, a man born to dance and sing and let his flame burn bright. A bit of the old wildness that used to flourish on this island. Not the sort of man made to flourish in the gray and mundane world the rest of them had no choice but to slog through.

Paul knew that. He also knew that others thought he went far too easy on Max, he who broke hearts with careless abandon and never seemed to have a second thought. They didn't know Max like he did, and besides, there were more ties than love and sex binding them together. Paul couldn't change the way he felt about Max, not at the end of the road. Wouldn't.

He'd made up his mind and made his peace with the inevitable decision to give Max his head, and let the love of his life walk away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The bridge was one of the things about St. Augustine that had remained a constant through all the changes of the seasons and passing years. Constructed perhaps a hundred years ago, its copper overlay had fast gone as green as the Statue of Liberty. The city had declared it unsafe long before Paul was even born, and another had been built out of serviceable but soulless concrete or asphalt or whatever they used for building materials. No one went near the old structure.

No one but them. It took a mind like Max's to even conceive of the notion. He'd been the one to test the bridge and satisfy himself that it would hold the weight of two adult males -- *if* they were careful.

It had been the spot where, as he sat with his legs dangling off the edge and above the tumbling brook below, Max had nuzzled his ear and whispered the words "I love you" for the first time. The memory of that moment still filled Paul with a buzzing wonder.

He stopped at the edge of the old warning signs and took a breath to shore himself up. Max didn't notice, nimbly climbing beneath the guardrail and tripping his way across the rusted girders with light, feline-like steps. Paul stayed where he was and seized the opportunity to drink in the sight of his ex-lover in all his wild glory. Also, to ogle his ass.

For all his noble sentiments, he'd miss Max like hell.

*I love him still.* He knew he always would.

Max stopped, twisting to peek over his shoulder. "Paul?"

"Right. Right, I'm on my way."

"You don't want to miss this."

"Not for the world." Paul studied the guardrails, tsking to himself at how even they had gone damaged by time without being repaired. There was *laissez-faire* attitude, and then there was just outright laziness. All the same, it wasn't entirely bad. Plenty of room for even a man so long-limbed as he to wriggle underneath *here*, put a leg over *there*, and -- *voilà!*

He emerged on the other side of the barriers, holding his arms out in the style of a successful gymnast after the final dismount. "I've still got the moves, eh?"

Max applauded, his approval honestly given. He held out his own arm, crooked like a proper gentleman. "May I have this dance?"

"Too right you can." Paul found it easier going now, tracing out old paths to Max's side. He slipped his arm in the bend of Max's elbow and found himself dragged into a bear hug, Max thumping his back with an open hand while he rocked Paul back and forth. The embrace surprised Paul, but he didn't reject Max's exuberance. He returned it with his own tight squeeze as he tucked his chin into Max's shoulder.

*I will miss you so very much.*

"Right," Paul said, clearing his throat. "One more dance and I'll have to go." It was an old joke between them, one that had apparently stood the test of time, for it still made Max laugh. "So where's this sunset you promised? Looks cloudy to me."

"Patience." Max flicked Paul's nose, annoying Paul and making him want to sneeze. "Easy target."

Paul scowled, but had to admit he *did* have quite a beak to clip. Max had always said the hawkish cast to Paul's features was -- how had he put it? Oh, yes. "Sexy as hell." Paul remembered the first time Max had said such words to him, his eyes full of impish teasing while he shimmied up close and cozy, putting his strong hands to the small of Paul's back and grinding his stiff cock against Paul's hip.

*There I go again. Up, up, and away into the clouds.*

Max was chuckling at him.

"All right, you. I know. I've no poetry in my soul."

"Nope. Not even a glimmer." Max brushed the tip of Paul's nose, gentler this time. "Good thing I like prose. Sit down with me."

All right; he could do that. The bridge didn't feel all too sturdy but it held as they found a good position with their legs kicking free over the side. A warm breeze blew across them, perhaps too warm, thickening the already stuffy air. The smell of honeysuckle and exhaust fumes filled Paul's senses.

He knew where to lay the blame for the honeysuckle. "That's a girlie scent, even for you."

Max laughed. He was well aware that he flamed and had absolutely no regrets. "It was a free sample in a magazine."

"Oh, God. Tell me you're not reading *Maxim*."

"Okay. I won't say a word." Max twinkled at Paul. Casual, as if the move meant nothing, he laid his hand over Paul's and twined their fingers together. He gave them a squeeze and moved the joined hands to his own upper thigh.

The memories that move brought back stunned Paul. He looked down, but away from their hands, unable to face Max. Not that this surprised him, but he didn't think Max noticed. The man seemed to be studying the way their brook flowed out and widened into a stream, following that path up to the setting sun.

"I brought you out here for a reason," Max broke the awkward silence to say, not looking at Paul. "I told you it was to say good-bye. A real good-bye. And that's partly it. But it's partly not. I couldn't leave before you knew how sorry I am to do this."

Paul's heart sank. "Ah, God, Max, no. You'll put your foot in it. Words will get in the way. Better to act."

"That's your thing. Words are mine." Max grinned. "Sorry. Gotta."

"Sod you."

"That's the Paul I adore." Max kissed his cheek, darting in quick under Paul's guards. The touch of his lips burned. "You know you were the first man I ever loved. How long has it been, now? Seven years? God, I still remember how hard and fast I fell when I saw you

eyeing me across the footie field. You were on the opposing team, remember? You loved sports and I hated them. I wanted to learn modern dance instead of Aussie Rules. You didn't want to be paired up with the flashy kid fresh from Whitechapel, still smelling like spray paint and chippies, but Coach wouldn't let you say no. You thought you were going to loathe me, and you tried, but I knew better right from the start. Something in your eyes. Something guarded and hidden from the rest of the world. You couldn't hide it from me. I think that scared me more than it did you."

Paul massaged his forehead. "Max, please. What are you hoping to accomplish here?"

"You have to understand."

"You think I don't?" Paul fought to remain calm, though he knew he wasn't having spectacular success. Max could read him easily as a book. Or a playbook, given Max's tastes. "I was there, you know. I can see everything you're talking about as if it happened only yesterday."

"Yeah." Max sighed -- not a sound of sorrow, exactly -- more like wistfulness. He flexed his fingers around Paul's. "I know I hurt you by letting you go. Saying good-bye to you just feels wrong. Doesn't it?"

Paul bit back the words that wanted to come: *Bastard. You haven't got the right to pull this kind of shit. You don't want to leave me here? Then don't go. Stay in St. Augustine with me. We'll deal with the gossip-hounds. Move back in. I'll have you again.*

That'd be wishing for the moon upon a star, wouldn't it? Clapped-out pipe dreams.

Beside him, Max took a deep, abrupt breath. "So I thought maybe once I'd found a flat in London, some place to stay, you'd come and move in with me. Or spend the weekends. The summers. Holidays. Whatever. As long as I had you there at least some of the time." Paul heard the desperate hope and had to bite the inside of his cheek to choke down a reply he'd later regret.



“Paul?” Max prompted, the weight of his sparkling eyes scorching Paul’s cheek. “Come on. Say something.”

Instead of speaking, Paul pressed Max’s hand in a quick, rough squeeze and glanced at him briefly.

“Uh-uh. Talk to me, Paul.”

*We always play by your rules.* Paul refused to look at Max. “Country mouse,” he said at last. “City mouse. The worlds don’t meet, love.”

“You still call me ‘love.’”

“Yeah, well. What you’re asking, I’ll think about it, but...” Paul shrugged. “St. Augustine is my home. I’ve seen part of the wide world, and I like this hamlet better.”

“I don’t like this. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Then don’t,” Paul suggested. “Stay.”

“Paul...”

“I thought as much.” Paul found himself laughing under his breath. “Look, you, let’s enjoy this sunset, if it ever decides to make an appearance, and part ways without a lot of fanfare.”

Max snorted. Paul took another quick look at Max to see that he’d quirked one eyebrow into a scornful arch. He’d always had a knack for such things with his mobile face. Paul faced the probable location of the setting sun before Max spoke. “Since when have you ever known me to do anything subtle?”

Paul snickered. “Since never, I think.”

“There you go.” Max exhaled, still thoughtful. Nearly introspective. Not a natural state for him. “I want to kiss you,” he said then, surprising Paul so badly that any rejoinders escaped him. “I really, really do. I want to remember what you taste like when you’re miles away and maybe even years ago. Can I?”

Paul tried to evade. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Leave the past in the past.”

“That’s the thing. It’s never going to be completely history, what we had between us. You know that as well as I do.” Paul could *feel* it when Max turned to gaze at him, feel the heat and weight of that thoughtful stare tracing him from forehead to chin. “So let me kiss you.”

Paul squirmed. “No. Don’t make this --” He stopped himself. “That’s not who we are anymore.”

“I know, but it’s what we were.”

“What game are you playing at?” Paul finally demanded, frustrated. “Trying your hand at the role of cocktease, are you? It doesn’t suit you. Now leave it.”

“Can’t.” Max released Paul’s hand and trailed his fingers up Paul’s forearm. Paul closed his eyes and shuddered. The bridge was hard and cold as ever, but he thought his body was all too warm. His heartbeat picked up speed, thudding in his ears. It wasn’t right that a man should be able to turn him on so quickly and with nothing more than a chaste touch.

“You shouldn’t,” Paul managed to say.

Max blew air out through his nose. He sat still for a moment. “Okay. I get where you’re coming from. I’m being cruel.”

“Damn right you are.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Yeah, well.” Paul couldn’t stop himself from slowly lifting his eyes to meet Max’s. “What’s done is done.”

“I know. So this is probably hurting more than it helps. All the same, I want to make one last memory.” Max moved to rest his head against Paul’s, their noses touching and his lips a scant few millimeters or so away from Paul’s mouth. His breath smelled minty. Paul wondered what he himself smelled like. Flour and tea, more than likely.

“One last memory,” Max whispered, scooting his body closer. “Something to keep us warm at night.”

The spirit was willing, and the flesh, as ever, was so damnably weak. Paul closed his eyes with a soft moan as Max pressed their lips together, swallowing both breath and sound.

“Let me take care of you,” he heard Max murmur in between kisses, Paul’s favorite kind, the sort that started off near-virginal but progressed quickly to wet and deep, Max’s tongue flickering over his and teasing the entirety of his body to full awareness. “Let me make you feel good.”

“Yes. God, yes.”

Paul tilted his throat, giving Max access, letting the man drop kisses down his lips to his chin and on his neck. Max found his favorite spot, the small divot between collarbones, and thrust his tongue in before sealing his lips over it to raise a mark. He heard someone making desperate little noises and realized it was him. “Don’t stop,” he begged. “Please.”

“Not going to,” Max whispered, moving up so that his breath blasted hot on Paul’s shoulder. “Here. I have something even better in mind.”

Before Paul had time to process that, Max’s nimble fingers were slipping inside the fastening of his jeans. They knew their way out of long practice and found his cock without a misstep or hesitation for even a second.

And the way he curled his hand into a fist around Paul’s cock still made his back stiffen and his erection swell to full length and girth. Max crooned approving sounds against Paul’s skin, licking almost dainty stripes up his neck before burrowing deep to raise red blotches in his wake.

“Oh, fuck,” Paul breathed. He put his hand over Max’s, on the outside of his jeans, and pushed. He rolled his head and bit back a cry. Lights sparkled over the insides of his eyelids like it was the Fourth of July or something equally daft; bloody colonials. Well, for Max he’d sing “Yankee Doodle Dandy” if need be. “Max. God. Please.”

He felt Max grin, his lips curving on Paul's neck. "All for you," he whispered, moving his fist up Paul's cock in a hard jerk and then down with a brutal stroke. "All for you, babe. Kiss me?"

Paul had no hesitation this time. He swung his head around to catch Max's lips with his own. Max's tongue plunged inside his mouth; Paul did the same in turn, tasting the man himself under the overlay of peppermint mouthwash. Max purred in approval, the rumbling noise making Paul crazy -- although the tight, hard fist punishing his cock in the best way ever with the rough tugs and pulls drove him completely around the bend. He was aware of raising his hips to meet Max's fingertips on the downstroke while breathing in ragged gasps on the way up. Max broke away from their kiss to croon nonsense words in Paul's ear before and after tracing the shell with his tongue and sucking the fleshy lobe between his teeth.

He bit down on Paul's ear in perfect timing with a long drawn-out tug, a combination that never failed to undo him. The white-hot moment drowned his senses, the moment that made Paul glad to be a man, happy with his sexuality, and bloody fucking ecstatic to have such a clever partner. Max muffled Paul's shout with his own mouth and hung on through each rock of Paul's hips and pulse of sticky, hot seed that burst over Max's fingers.

He held Paul steady when Paul might well have fallen off the bridge to tumble down and break his crown, and he kept his arm wrapped around Paul's back when he withdrew his hand. Paul focused dazedly on the sight of Max slipping cum-covered digits in his mouth to suck them clean with a naughty, wonderfully wicked gleam in his eye and pure mischief in his smile.

Paul laughed, worn out to the bone. "You're incorrigible."

Max lapped at his forefinger, fellating the tip as if it were a small cock and grinning around the digit between his teeth. No shame. That was Max.

“Never change,” Paul told his lover, his friend, before sagging to rest his head on Max’s shoulder. He saw the stain on the front of Max’s thin-washed jeans and burst into what might have uncharitably been called giggles. “My God. Couldn’t wait, could you?”

The question was spoken in jest, but Paul sobered fast as he took in the full implications. He would have done for Max in his turn, as soon as he’d been able, but Max had deprived him of the chance at one last taste of cock and seed. Prevented Paul from loving him one final time.

Paul closed his eyes in regret and a vain attempt not to dwell. He found it all too easy to obsess, and he’d not have that nasty tendency mar the moment.

Max held him close. He kissed Paul’s temple and started them rocking as if they were on a porch swing. “Watch the sunset,” he whispered. “And every evening, when you see day pass into night, remember this moment. I’ll watch the skies and think of you.”

He would, too. Paul knew he would, and he felt his heart break a little further.

And he would never, *never* let Max know. “All right,” he agreed, tucking close to Max. “Bon voyage, love.”

Max didn’t object to the old pet name. He kissed the top of Paul’s head. “Bon voyage,” he echoed.

And Max being Max, when he started to sing “When You Wish Upon a Star,” it seemed perfectly right.

*Max. Love. Yes. I love you enough to say this much and try to mean it: Good-bye.*

## Chapter Two

### *Act II: One Year Later (Age Twenty-Four)...*

“Oh, good. You’re still here.” Paul stuck his head out the car’s window. He waved to make sure he attracted Mrs. Tarnec’s eye. The middle-aged -- well, on the iffy side of middle-aged -- woman turned from her conversation with a woman of equal years, puzzled until she lit on Paul.

He grinned. “Paul’s Taxi, where our motto is: ‘We’re still looking for a nicer name.’ Here to ferry you about at the going rate. Bit of engine trouble -- sorry to make you wait -- but better late than never, eh?”

Mrs. Tarnec kissed her companion’s cheek in the affectionate way of the elderly and the innately genteel, patted the woman’s hand, and turned to face Paul. He liked Mrs. Tarnec. Sarah. Sweet woman, Sarah Tarnec. Lost her husband fifteen years ago but stubborn as the very devil and refused to move in with her children. Not that he blamed her. Horrifying lot of scoundrels, they were.

So he did what he could to help.

“I can see you did have trouble,” Sarah said, after a moment of eyeing up Paul’s backup vehicle. She clicked her tongue, not doing a fantastic job of hiding her amusement. “They don’t make cars like they used to. I keep telling you, you should buy a Citroen. One of the older models. Take care of her, and she’ll last a lifetime.” Sarah nodded, decided in her mindset. Paul stifled an uncharitable snicker. “Now. Help a feeble old lady with her shopping?”

“Yeah, be glad to.” Paul unbuckled his safety belt and opened the car door. “Lord, it’s like an oven out here. Whatever happened to the North being cold?”

“Global warming?” Sarah shrugged. She seemed much more concerned with the state of her milk and ice cream than the vagaries of the planet’s weather, which was fair enough as they were more pressing at the moment.

Paul unfolded from the driver’s seat and stood, stretching his legs. He did love to drive. Pity he’d never found a car with ample enough room for his long limbs. “Come on,” he chivvied. “Inside. The air-conditioning takes a moment to get going, but it’s nicer in there than out here.”

Sarah gave him a grateful look as he helped her to the backseat of what he and the rest of St. Augustine called the only taxi service in town. Town? Burg? Hamlet? Close enough to “village,” really. Less than a thousand residents according to the last census, St. Augustine didn’t have a need for another taxi enterprise. In fact, the inhabitants had gotten along fine, and then he’d set up shop, wanting and needing something to do that didn’t involve driving over to Brownbury to work in the mill.

Not that it mattered. He called St. Augustine home and always would. Regardless of who left and who was left behind...

He tightened his jaw, determined not to walk down that particular memory lane again, and made quick work of loading Sarah’s shopping bags. What did she have? Felt like a good, big Sunday roast of beef, a chocolate bar gone squishy in the heat, and a carton of melting

sherbet that dripped down his wrist. Lime, if the neon green color of the sludge was anything to go by.

One long-ago hot afternoon much like this, Paul had been lazing on the lawn behind his house. A spoonful of Italian ice cream, some sort of soft concoction with a fancy name he could never remember -- gelato? -- dropped lightly atop the hardness of Max's chest and left to melt its way down, followed by an eager tongue...

*This will never do.* One full year gone since he and Max had parted ways, and he was still moping about as if Max had left just the day before. Rot. He couldn't let himself sigh and mourn like a Victorian maiden, could he? He had things to do. A living to earn. Places to be. Keeping himself busy, that was the cure for a wet, lovelorn mood.

Or so he told himself, and since staying active did work for the most part, it was good enough to get by on.

Paul finished piling Sarah's shopping on the passenger seat and shut the door with care. This backup vehicle, also known as the car he'd had since he'd first learned to operate one, was getting some serious age on her, but she was a stubborn girl. Never said die. He patted the bonnet as he crossed back to the driver's side.

As he slid in, grabbing his seatbelt in a move so practiced as to be almost unconscious, he dredged up a sunny, completely innocuous expression. "Right! Where to, Sarah? Home?"

She didn't hear him. The fingers of one hand had gone to her lips, which were open in -- shock? Paul turned around in alarm, searching for what she'd seen. Purely human nature.

The only thing new to the ASDA parking lot was a young man on a bicycle. Paul gave the fellow a second look, himself -- very nice specimen, in the prime of his youth, attractively muscled but not grotesquely so. He wore a pair of shorts made of that Spandex stuff, and they left absolutely nothing to the imagination.

Upon spotting Paul, the bicyclist winked and blew him a kiss.



Paul grinned. Well. Unexpected, but he'd certainly take it.

"Oh. Oh, good heavens. I never saw such a...it's a shame, it is. Doesn't he have any parents? What does he think he's doing? For shame, acting like that in broad daylight." She clucked in disapproval. A bloody cluck, for fuck's sake, as if she was part chicken. "I don't know what the world's coming to when his kind of people are walking around without shame."

Paul bit his lip. Hard. It hadn't taken long for folks to gloss over what they called his "mistake" in letting Max influence him. Max, with his flame burning bright, who had kissed him in the middle of the town square at Paul's insistence. Who'd tried to shield Paul by claiming, the rest of the time, that they were "roommates."

Lord, but Max had been hated. They'd nearly thrown a fucking parade when he left, and not long afterward an old church dame had tried to set Paul up with her daughter.

And then, for sweet pity's sake, there were the Mrs. Tarnecs of the world.

St. Augustine no longer remembered who Paul had been when Max had lived there. He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised.

And so he said nothing.

Three stops later, and Paul wanted nothing more than to get home for a cold shower and a colder beer.

"Where to?" he asked a prospective passenger who'd flagged him down outside the single coffee shop the town boasted. He wasn't in the mood to hop out and chat with his fare. About anything. He'd more or less used up his chivalry for one day. "I go anywhere in the St. Augustine area, one pound and fifty p. per kilometer."

"Holy shit. That's all you charge?" The would-be fare's accent startled Paul into swinging around for a quick examination of him. A stranger, someone he'd never laid eyes

on. "God, do you know how much a cab costs in The Bronx? It's fucking unreal." Pause. "Shit. I mean crap. Sorry about the language."

Paul chuckled. "It's not as if I haven't heard worse before, usually from my own lips. You're old enough to speak as you like. I don't mind."

"Hey, thanks, pal." The fare, a thirty-something sort with his tie loosened and suit jacket tossed over one arm, shook his head in exaggerated wonder. "One buck fifty cents a mile. Or something like that. I don't get metrics."

"American heathen," Paul teased, testing the waters.

The man hooted. "Oh, yeah. No apologies. Fuck me, they're never gonna believe this back home. One pound fifty p. It's a deal. Take me away, Jeeves."

"Right." Paul waited until the man had gotten settled and he was well on the road before asking, ever so casually, "You're from New York, then?"

"What, you couldn't tell?" His passenger snorted, but with good humor. "Yeah. Born and bred."

"You're not moving here, are you?"

"Would that be a bad thing?" The man looked at Paul in the mirror. It was his day for being flirted with, it seemed. Talk about feast or famine. Paul returned the man's smile and nodded to up the ante. A homely sort, but cheerful-natured, not a poor catch at all. "Nah," the man said with mild regret. "I flew over to take care of Gran's things she had put in storage. I'm not staying."

Paul stifled his mild disappointment. Shame. He liked this fellow already. Would have liked to get to know him, as well as fuck him. Not that he wouldn't take what was on offer. Reminded him a bit of Max; there was the old soppiness coming through again. Still, it was what it was. "Are you here through the night, at least?"

An obvious line, but they hadn't time for messing about. A gleam heated the man's eyes. "I am. Maybe I'll see you around."

A fuck would do him a world of good, Paul knew. It had been long enough since the last one, and a man could get terribly sick of having only his hand to keep company with. “Yeah,” he agreed. “I think that’s likely. What’s your name?”

“Roger.”

“Nice to meet you, Roger.”

“And you...?”

“Paul.” He grinned at Roger in the rearview mirror. Roger winked at him, obviously satisfied with their unspoken arrangement, and settled back. Paul heard paper rustling as he turned his attention back to the road and surmised that his fare had dug out a newspaper of some sort.

A few minutes passed before the man remarked, “You know much about London theatre?”

Paul winced. “Some.”

“Makes me think of Broadway. Pretty good stuff. They’re reviving *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* again. Sheesh. Let it die, already.”

Paul listened, curious. The man’s heavy New York accent coupled with the mention of a stage play... “Is that a current performance?”

“God help us all, but, yeah.” More rustling, the sound of pages being flicked through. “*Cats* is coming back... *Miss Saigon*... *Rent*... huh. Something new called *Tales from the Wild Woods*. Sounds interesting. Cast is mostly unknown. I like that. Give the kids a chance, I say.”

Paul nodded. He turned his taxi off the main road and down a rutted dirt lane. He’d decided, against his first impulse, not to ask if this New Yorker had heard of Max while in London. How likely would that be, anyway? How many millions of people and would-be actors called it their home? Ridiculous to even think of asking out loud.

He did still have a mind for casual conversation. “Who’ve they cast?”

“Hmm.” *Crinkle, crinkle, crinkle.* “Elizabeth Lynn...no idea, but she’s hot. Janey Davis. Cute. Got that girl-next-door thing going on. Good God, Barrett Thompson needs a better stylist, stat. Sweetheart, I’m sorry, but you should not leave the house in that shape. A mullet, for Christ’s sake. A mullet!”

Paul wouldn’t call himself fashion conscious -- he kept his own hair shorn tight and close to his head for convenience -- but even he knew better than this Barrett bloke. “Think it’s for the part he’s playing?” Paul asked, hiding his flinch of sympathy.

“Could be.” His passenger sighed, flicked a page, then leered. “Oh, yeah, baby. Yeah, I could eat this one up with a spoon. Very, very hot. Max Waterhouse.”

Paul lost control of the wheel.

\* \* \* \* \*

*What am I doing here?* Paul wondered, for about, oh, the fifty-seventh time. He cleared his throat and smoothed nervous hands down the front of his charcoal button-down shirt. Silk, if you’d believe it. A gift from several Christmases ago. He wished he had proper dress slacks, but he didn’t. Hadn’t ever needed any. His black jeans were almost new. They’d do. He thought.

A stone-faced usher -- or whatever they called the help; in the rarified world of London musical theatre, they might have a different name -- escorted Paul silently toward the front of the smallish stage. Not exactly the Royal Shakespeare Company, was it? Didn’t make any difference to Paul. This was a playhouse, and he was in the heart of London. Right about the same thing to his mind.

A wire tripped Paul up, sending him windmilling forward, almost landing on his face. *God, I’m green.* Paul hid a wince behind a smile as he picked himself up and took his seat.

The usher changed his facial expression not a whit as he moved off to take care of another guest. *Think I understand now why Dorothy preferred her farmhouse in Kansas.*

*The air in here's so moneyed I'm about to breathe in a noseful of champagne wishes and caviar-fucking-dreams.*

This wasn't his world. He didn't belong. Daft idea to come visiting. He ought to have left the past where it belonged and done no more than smile over his long-ago lover's success.

Would've been the smart thing to do.

Love did have her ways of making a man act the fool, didn't she?

The noise in the theatre rose, unexpectedly, to an excited rush of voices. Paul glanced curiously about, wondering what had happened to get them all het up.

Oh, there. Looked like some of the actresses had come out to mingle with the audience. Smart move, he thought. Get them interested before the show started so they'd be more inclined to like what they saw. Made sense.

Paul laughed to himself at the sight of a tiny slip of a woman in a flimsy sort of fairy costume. She'd decided to dance in the middle of the bloody aisle, blocking patrons from their seats, though to be sure they didn't appear to mind waiting. Pretty as a picture, she was, finishing her jig with a kiss to the cheek of an older, red-faced fellow who looked as flattered as he could be.

Paul was still chuckling under his breath, completely unprepared, when he felt someone touch his back, right in the middle between his shoulder blades. Thinking it would be a member of the audience wanting a better look, he turned around to grin and nod as manners demanded.

He stopped halfway there, lips all of a sudden parting and his mouth dry. He stared because he couldn't *not*.

Max. Not so recognizable under the heavy greasepaint and the elaborate, fake eyebrows someone had slapped on his face, but it was Max all the same and so fucking sexy-hot he was

fit to burn through his costume. The sight of him made Paul's heart give a painful squeeze. He couldn't speak, no. He could only drink in the sight of his beloved and try to breathe.

He hadn't thought it would be like...he hadn't thought at all, not once since he'd thrown a few things in a bag and pointed his backup car toward the ass-end of England. What the hell had he been thinking?

Well, he knew, if he'd admit it to himself. He'd been dreaming about a magical moment just like this one. Should have known Max's sense of drama would lead him to take advantage.

Max gazed back, wholly immovable, not a single bit of emotion in his eyes and not a hint of a smile. He and Paul might as well have been strangers.

Paul started to worry after a moment had passed in silence. *He's not forgotten me -- has he?* They'd talked a few times on the phone since Max had left, and Max had sent a couple of postcards before they faded into radio silence. Things weren't awkward between them, no, but they were cooling down, and that was as it should have been.

Such a startling relief, then, when Max slowly raised his own finger to his lips. He didn't wink, nor blow a kiss, but he didn't have to, did he? Paul could see the silent mirth and knew Max recognized him. More, Max was surprised, but happy to see Paul there. He bent to whisper, ever so quickly, in Paul's ear.

Paul desperately hoped he'd heard Max right and he had indeed said "Meet me after the show."

Damn right he would. Damn right.

He'd no idea what he was doing, and figured this was a bad, bad idea, but frankly, he didn't care.

Things like this happened in London.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You know this isn’t a good idea,” Max said, sorting through the amazing number of keys jingling chrome and bronze on a lime-green ring. “I should’ve walked away when I saw you, Paul. I knew it was you right away. You couldn’t be mistaken for someone else, sitting alone, grinning the way you do while you watched Janey dance.” He shook his head as he sucked his lower lip momentarily between his teeth. “Thing is, I sort of lost all control over common sense when I saw you again. You looked at me and I flipped my mind. *Fuck*, Paul!” Max’s hand twitched, the keys dropping from his fingers to land with a noisy clatter.

Paul put his hand on Max’s shoulder. “Shh, shh, shh,” he soothed. “We’ve got all night. Maybe longer, if you like.”

“I like. I would so like. I’ve missed you. God, I’ve missed you.”

“Then you’ll have me back for one night. Calm down; the door’s not going anywhere. There’s time.”

Max bit off a laugh and picked up the keys. “Time? I almost tackled you to the theatre floor and you’re talking to me about ‘time.’”

“I’ve still got the ‘It factor,’ then, do I?”

“And then some.” A trick of the light made one of Max’s eyes gleam during the brief look he threw Paul, leaving Paul feeling as if he’d been poleaxed. “If it wasn’t for the show, I *would* have tackled you and kissed you stupid. Hell, knowing you were out there distracted me so much it would’ve been as well to call for the understudy. I ad-libbed half a dozen lines and stepped all over Janey’s cues; she’s going to kill me when her bruised toes heal.”

Paul leaned against the door frame, laughing. “Ah, Max. You don’t walk into chaos. You bring it with you. It’s odd...” He chose his words with care. “Odd, yes, but I thought the way I felt about you, that fire, had died down to a faint candle’s glow.”

“Wrong?” Max asked. “I know I felt the same way, and, boy, was I ever mistaken.”

“Yeah.”

“I should be sorry. I’m not. I can’t be, when I know if I wanted to I could slam you against this door hard enough to rattle the knob. Huh.” Max finally located the right key and jiggled the door open. “That’s not a bad idea. Don’t mind if I do.”

“Mmph!”

Max shoved him through the door, slammed it behind them, and pushed Paul against the chilly metal, knocking Paul’s skull against the wood, and then seized his mouth. His embrace was less of a kiss than it was a full-frontal assault. The roughness turned Paul on and fast, almost more than the memories. Max had changed, a little.

Paul liked the changes.

Max purred as he scattered hot, biting kisses over Paul’s throat. “Drowning, not waving,” he mumbled. “Don’t want to be saved. This is way too good to miss out on any longer.”

The feel of Max’s mouth against his own, warm and hard, salty from some kind of snack and slightly bitter with the traces of whatever he’d used to take off his makeup -- surely they were the headiest aphrodisiac to be found in any quarter of the globe. Paul turned them roundabout and leaned his full weight against Max’s body, pinning the man fast against the door to his own flat and not letting him move more than a couple of centimeters. He didn’t know where this was coming from. He didn’t want to question. He only wanted to feel.

Max whimpered into Paul’s mouth as Paul deepened their kiss. It wasn’t at all a gentle embrace, no. Paul was unable and unwilling to stop himself from tilting his head this way and that, thrusting his tongue between Max’s lips and dominating his mouth, refusing to give Max a turn at playing with his own. He needed this far too badly, and it might have been selfish, sure, but he couldn’t deny the fire even if he’d wanted to.



*Max*, he chanted to himself, three letters turning into an exultant ripple of passion. *Max, Max, Max, oh, God, Max, I never thought I would, not ever again, but here you are... Max! Fucking yes!*

He wasn't able to get close enough. He kissed far too roughly, pushing Max's head back so that his neck was at a strained angle and Max made a strangled noise of protest -- but didn't stop kissing back as much as Paul would let him. To ease the pressure, Paul shoved one hand between Max's skull and the door, pulling the man's mouth so hard and so close that he couldn't properly kiss, but only hold their lips joined together. He relearned Max's taste and the way he moved, as his beloved pleaded with his body, begging for more with his strong arms thrust under Paul's, short nails digging into Paul's back.

If the fire burned any hotter, he'd be consumed, Paul thought, too stunned to speak aloud. Nothing but ash left.

He couldn't think of a better way to go, though, and so he explored Max's mouth without pity until he tasted still more salt and realized he was crying. Or was that Max? Paul wasn't sure and didn't care. Nothing else mattered but stripping the clothes off the man in his arms and flinging him onto the nearest flat surface to fuck him till he begged.

Sounded like a good idea, actually.

Paul put thoughts to action, fumbling for the hem of Max's shirt and shoving it up until he could spread his fingers over heated skin, muscles jerking underneath. He had to stop, just for a moment, long enough to regain some tiny bit of control. Otherwise, this would all be over before it began, and he wouldn't let that happen.

When their lips parted, Max sagged against his door, breathing in shallow, choppy bursts. His eyes were three-quarters closed, only a small glow shining through. His tongue traced his swollen mouth, and he swallowed with a painful-sounding rasp.

"Paul," he whispered. "Fuck. Paul. You feel --" He swallowed again, then laughed shakily. "I never dreamed."

“Neither did I,” Paul told him, nuzzling his lips in Max’s damp hair. He licked the top edge of Max’s ear for the fun of listening to him whine in frustration. Good. So good. He’d forgotten, or made himself lose the memory. Either way, it was all coming back to him now, except that it was far better than any encounter had ever been before.

Max rocked his hips, bringing them into contact with Paul’s own. A ragged hiss escaped Paul as Max’s cock, so hard and so hot, thrust against his. Paul had been ready to fire from the moment their lips met. Almost ignited from the wicked friction there and then.

“Behave yourself,” he warned, stringing kisses across Max’s strong jaw, loving the way Max moaned and lifted his chin in a plea for more. “You like this, eh? Want more?” He took Max’s sob and jerk of the hips as a “yes.” “Then let’s see what you think now.” He grasped Max’s ass in both hands and hauled the man in tight as he kissed him. He ground in circles, raunchy as he pleased, drunk on the desperate noises Max made and the way he quivered from head to toe with need. “What do you want?” he goaded. “You have to ask for it.”

“You,” Max rasped out, no hesitation. “*You*. Please. Have to have --”

Good enough. Paul squeezed Max’s ass, kneaded quickly for the sake of watching him buck and for the feel of Max’s cock stabbing against his lower stomach, then backed away. Paul shook from head to feet, trembling with wildfire-burning lust, and drank in the sight of Max with only the door behind him holding him upright -- struggling to catch his breath, reddened lips open, and brown eyes hazed over in desperation.

He’d done this. Him. He’d never seen anything that could compare.

He wanted more.

“On your knees,” Paul ordered, the words bypassing his brain to leap off his tongue without permission. They sounded good, though, so he let them stand. “Go on.”

Max shuddered, his hand wandering to the zipper of his own jeans. Paul dashed it away. “That’s mine. Don’t touch.”

“What are you going to do with me?” Max whispered, sounding drugged. He laughed the way Max always had when he teased, but there was no mistaking how badly he needed Paul to finish what he’d started. “Please say you’re going to fuck me.”

“No.”

Max opened his eyes fully to stare, confused. Paul gave in and kissed the man to wipe away his puzzlement. “I’m not going to fuck you. I’m going to...” he did pause, there. “You know what I’ve got planned.” *I’m going to make love to you* hung unseen but definitely understood between them. Sappy, yeah, but true as it went.

Max swallowed a sob and nodded. “I’m all yours,” he breathed.

*As if*, Paul thought, amused. “Are you, now?”

“I’ve always been a fool for love.” Max’s eyes shone with impish lust. “Please.”

“I like the sound of you begging. I could get used to this.” Paul kissed Max hard and frantic, his fingers hastily doing away with the zipper of Max’s jeans, pushing the denim and the cotton boxers down the man’s hips. They fell to his knees -- Max must have lost weight. He led Max’s hands to his own fastenings, demanding the same favor in turn, which Max was clearly more than happy to provide.

Max’s powerful fingers grasping Paul’s cock were almost his undoing. He dragged himself away with a final kiss and a raw groan, pushing Max down. “Go on, then. On your knees.”

Max gave Paul a cloudy, hungry look as he sank down with absolutely none of his usual grace. Paul watched him go, heart pounding in his ears. Too fast. His pulse was racing like a rabbit’s. He didn’t care. Not when Max was on his knees and staring back in devout worship.

He thought, but only for a moment, about ordering Max to take his cock between those red, red lips, then discarded the idea. He’d not waste this on a simple blow job. It would be fantastic, yeah, but he knew he wouldn’t hold out past the first touch of Max’s tongue.

“On your hands as well as your knees,” he clarified, suddenly knowing exactly what he wanted to do. “Let me see you.”

Max knew how to read between the lines of Paul’s words. *Oh, God.* The flare of heat in his face was enough to blind a man. His gaze lingered on Paul’s face, twisting to keep Paul in his sights as long as possible. Finally, he turned around, and balancing on his forearms, he raised his bare ass high and spread his legs wide to display that which Paul needed a look at.

Despite the best of intentions, Paul couldn’t stop himself from dropping to his own knees and spreading Max’s ass open to drag his tongue over the puckered, contracted hole. Max shouted, garbled sounds that choked and rattled in his throat as Paul licked him, holding the man firmly enough to prevent his getting away, probing with the tip of his tongue until the shouts turned into frantic whines and Max was thrusting back for more.

“Fuck,” Max groaned, the craving in his voice enough to knock Paul dizzy. “Fuck. Please. *Paul.*”

“I’m here,” Paul crooned as he reluctantly pulled away. He kissed one cheek, gave it a light slap, and sat back to catch his breath. His jeans had to go. While he dealt with them, he quickly scanned the poky little flat -- details escaped him completely, except for lack of spying what he hunted for. “Max, tell me you’ve got something. I’ll lose my mind if I can’t have you.”

Max finally lost the strength to hold his head up. “My coat. On the rack to the left. Should be some in the pocket.” He contracted the muscles in his arms and legs, doubling up, tense as a coiled spring. “Hurry.”

And how could Paul say no to that? He managed to get to his feet without falling -- there was a miracle for you -- and jerked Max’s coat off the rickety hat stand where it hung. A hasty fumble through the pockets provided him with an individual sachet of lubricant. Not as much as he might have liked -- he hadn’t topped since, well, since Max, and not often even then. Max would be tight as it was. Paul didn’t want to hurt him.

For all that, he knew he couldn't dally around. This would have to be enough. He tore the packet open with his teeth and squeezed almost the whole thing on Max's ass, working it in and trying to stretch Max open without being too rough. Not much chance of that. Lucky for him, it looked like Max didn't mind at all. He writhed and tensed and made small catlike noises. His face twisted in beautiful ugliness.

Calling the job good enough, Paul coated his angry red cock with the bit of lube that remained and lined up to press in.

Max went stiff as Paul probed. "Wait," he choked. "Paul. Wait." He shuddered. "Condom," he said, so quiet that Paul almost didn't hear him right. "You need a condom. I don't know if I'm..."

The implication took a moment to sink in. When it did, it socked Paul with the power of a pile-drive to the chest. "Oh," he said, the word inadequate but all he could think of.

Why the knowledge that Max had been catting around bothered Paul, he wasn't sure. He hadn't logically expected Max to live celibate. Their relationship was well in the past, after all; not like Max had been cheating. Besides, no one who loved sex as much as Max did would be able to turn down any chance.

The knowledge was one thing. The reality hurt. More, it made him jealous.

*What on earth has gotten into me?*

"Right," Paul said, mulling over the words as he did the mood. "Do you have one? I don't." The last was added out of sheer, cussed meanness, which he suspected Max picked up on right away.

His nod seemed abashed. "In the hip pocket, right here." He shimmied his left leg. "Just one."

As if that made a difference.

Paul stuffed his confusing anger down, determined not to let his irritation have a negative effect on his erection, which he planned to put to very good use indeed, thank you.

He concentrated on digging out the condom packet with lube-slippery fingers and tearing it open without shredding the whisper-thin latex inside. Sheathing his cock in rubber felt odd as hell. He hadn't bothered with anything of the sort since he was young. Certainly not after he'd discovered how foul they tasted compared to the salty musk of a bare cock. Besides, Max had been the only man for him, and for a good long while, he knew he had been the only man for Max.

*Give it a rest*, he told himself stubbornly.

With a little effort, he put the thoughts from his mind; a hand to his cock, working up a nice rhythm, helped return him to his state of blind and stupid lust. Max must have sensed what he was doing and heard the wet sounds of stroking, for he, too, fell back into the moment. Before long he was mewling, raising his ass for Paul.

Paul angled his cock in the right position, closed his eyes, and pushed. Max gasped, a sharp, shocky inhalation that melted into a wailing moan. He begged for more without words and Paul obeyed straight away, thrusting until his tightly drawn balls rested on Max's rump and both had to stop to breathe.

Not for long. Close, too close. Paul kissed Max's back, used his teeth for a sharp nip, and whispered, "I'm sorry" before he let his body have its way and fucked Max with hard, fast strokes that refused any mercy. The feel of him swallowed Paul's mind; he knew nothing more than slick warmth and pressure on his cock until, with one deep, shuddering thrust, he roared loud as a lion and burst into a climax that left him nigh unable to breathe.

He had enough wits about him to give Max the courtesy of a reach-around, but no sooner did his fingers wrap about Max's cock than the man shouted, hoarse and painful, and bucked forward. Spunk dripped heavy and thick over Paul's fingers, raining on the floor beneath them.

Max collapsed forward and onto one hip, dragging in lungful of air, still sobbing out short cries. The look on his face was pure bliss, his mind vanished somewhere. Well-fucked and blissed-out. Beautiful. Loved.

*Loved?* Paul wondered in dismay. *Can't be.*

*Shit.*

*Loved. Still loved.*

He'd known all along, hadn't he? Lied to himself, more fool him. Had he been mad? The vague fantasies about fucking Max until he realized what he'd lost and decided to come home were pale and foolish after the blaze of need had passed and the moment ended.

"I shouldn't have come," he muttered.

Max shifted onto his side, slitting one eyelid open. "Mmph?"

"Hush, now," Paul said absently. "Time for me to leave."

"You just got here." Max frowned. "What's wrong?"

Paul made himself smile. "Nothing you need to worry about. Let me up."

"Wait." Max caught Paul's wrist. He appeared to try for his old devil-may-care smile. "Come back again some time? We can have fun, you and me."

"Why? You don't still want to warm up the old routine, do you?" Some perverse imp popped the words off Paul's tongue. Once spoken, though, he decided he didn't want to call them back, and waited to see what Max would say in response.

Max hesitated.

Paul waited.

Max's eyes turned to his, surprising Paul with the sudden revelation of naked loneliness. "Please?"

## Chapter Three

### *Act III: Two Years Further In (Age Twenty-Six)...*

“Well, look at *you*.” Max swung backward in an easy, graceful walk that was so close to dancing, one might as well have called it that. Paul was treated to the pleasure of being undressed with Max’s eyes -- which, he decided, he had no complaints about. None at all. He dropped his duffel bag, tucked his hands in the pockets of the well-broken-in leather jacket he’d decided, at the last minute, to wear. Looked like he’d made the right choice.

“You are just too sexy for your chapeau. Hey, baby, hey, baby, hey.” Max, never one to be shy, tangoed close to Paul and caught him by his hips. “Mmm, gorgeous. I could eat you up.”

“God, you’re a sleaze. As for eating me, I wish you would,” Paul commented, grinning hopefully.

“Ooh. Nasty boy.” Max swatted Paul’s ass. “Don’t stop. I like it.”

“Bite me.” Paul sobered, giving Max a curious look. He hadn’t exactly known whether or not to believe what he and Max had talked about during Max’s last phone call, inviting him to London for a visit. Among other things.



“Uh-oh. I know that look. I’m in trouble now.”

“You always are, but I’ll go easy on you in exchange for the truth.” Paul tapped Max’s pert chin. “Are you serious about this long-distance relationship rigmarole? Honestly, no joking around?”

Max gleamed with mischievous cheer. “Serious as death. Biggest mistake I ever made, letting you go. But now you’re here, and you are *such* a sight for sore eyes, handsome.” Max dazzled Paul with his roguish grin, then spun him around, athletic and nimble as befit a stage performer. Paul hooted as he let Max lead him in a few steps of some crazy dance -- Max with the effortless skill of one born to trip the light fantastic, and Paul with the clumsiness of a natural wallflower. Both were laughing, Max at what Paul didn’t know; Paul at the sheer joy with which Max approached life.

He looked forward to seeing how Max’s proposition worked out.

Paul thought he’d better show Max some proper appreciation for his willingness to try. He wasn’t so accustomed to taking the lead, but Max had seemed to enjoy being dominated the last time Paul was in London, so... God, what a night they’d had, fucking turn and turn about until the ass-end of sunrise. Paul’s cheeks still burned when he thought about that night.

“You’re planning something,” Max teased, guiding Paul’s hips into the part of the dance that had once made its closest cousin illegal, or should have done. “You’re cooking up a really wicked plan in that sly brain of yours. I can always tell by the look right here.” He tapped beneath Paul’s eye. Paul shivered with pleasure and anticipation. “I wonder what you’re thinking about...right...now.”

“That you’re the sexiest thing ever to walk the face of the earth.”

“Yeah, but that’s what you always think.”

“Full of yourself as always, you are.”

“I’d rather be full of you.” Max grinned, broad and bright and dazzling. He executed a wicked shimmy that made Paul gasp and his cock try to drill a hole through his jeans “Mmm. I think you like *my* scheme.”

“You have no idea.”

“I think I might have some kind of clue.” Still grooving to the unsung music in his head, Max guided Paul through a few moves Paul knew damn well the man had just invented. Good, though, so who cared? “Come on,” his lover wheedled. “I showed you what I was thinking about. Your turn. Fill me in on whatever schemes you’re concocting.”

“Nothing. I already told you.”

“The gleam in your eyes says different. You’re all full of the devil’s special fire and up to absolutely no good. I hope.”

“You’re having me on. I do not get a ‘look’ when I’m planning anything -- not that I am right now, thanks.”

“Like hell you don’t, or aren’t.” Max circled Paul, fingers trailing lazily over hot spots designed to crank Paul’s arousal into overdrive. Such a fucking cocktease, he was. To give him credit, though, he usually delivered what he offered. With Paul, anyway. Paul didn’t mind about any of the others Max might have flirted -- or done more -- with in the past. Honest, he didn’t.

But now that they were giving being together another go, Max had damn well better keep his pecker in his pants around anyone but Paul. He was willing to give Max the benefit of the doubt, but if Max was jerking him around, he’d not let the door hit him where the good Lord had split him on his way back to St. Augustine.

“Fine, then. I might have something cooking in my mind. Do you want to hear about it?” Paul decided to surprise Max by turning the dance back so that he was leading. Max looked startled for a half-second, but then a slow grin parted his lips. He let Paul support

him, clearly putting all his effort into not just undressing Paul with his eyes, but having his wicked way with Paul's naked body.

"I was thinking," Paul said, lowering his voice to a whisper, "how much I'd like to throw you up against a wall and suck your balls."

"Whoa." Max blinked. He laughed. "You used to want some courting, but you don't waste any time these days, do you?"

"Not really." Paul frowned. "Should I?"

"Uh-uh, baby, uh-uh." Max snuggled closer to Paul, nudging one muscled thigh between Paul's. He gyrated, letting Paul know exactly how he'd reacted to the suggestion. "Except I think I want to be the one on my knees. Eating your ass."

"Fuck." It was Paul's turn to be stunned. Lovely; proof of Max's sluttish city persona served up on a dented silver tray and rubbed into his face. Er. So to speak. "You never before..."

"Yeah, well." Max shrugged casually. "They're a lot more open about things in London. I've learned a few tricks. You're right about not dancing around the point. If you want something, ask. Never hurts." He lifted his chin, appearing to be shamelessly begging for a kiss. "So what are the magic words?"

Paul studied Max, wishing this moment could never end. He felt like a randy teenager again, but with the definite improvement of being 99 percent certain he'd end up getting fucked by the object of his affections. "Magic words, eh? How about these: I'm going to take your ass. Going to have you. Turn you into mush. Sexy mush," he amended when Max chortled. "Right, make fun of me. You asked for this."

"And you're doing a fantastic job. Come on, baby. Talk dirty to me."

"Seriously?"

“Gets me wound up.” Max emphasized the statement with a thrust against Paul’s leg. Paul swallowed a moan. The hardness of Max’s cock, bringing back so many bloody amazing memories, all but made him lose his senses.

“Talk dirty to you, eh? I don’t know if I can.”

“Spare me. I remember you doing a great job back in…” Max’s turn to trail off and turn pink. “You know when. Where.”

*St. Augustine, Paul thought. Back home. I remember, too.*

“So come on,” Max coaxed. “Indulge me, and I’ll make it worth your while.” He lifted Paul’s hand and used it as the fulcrum on which to turn in a languid pirouette. “Pretty please?”

“Imp. All right, then.” Paul cleared his throat, searching for the right words. What the hell was he supposed to say? He babbled when he was getting laid, he knew that much. Kind of spur of the moment, though, wasn’t it?

“I’d like to…” *Aha.* “Come here, you.” He jostled Max up close and personal, a firm hand gripping and massaging Max’s ass. Max moaned like a wanton and dove for Paul’s throat, where he latched on and sucked. “You like that, hmm? Think about how it’s going to feel breaking open your ass.”

Max hissed without shame, eyelids drooping. “Oh, yeah. Keep going.”

“Mmm.” Paul was getting into the spirit of the game. He tried -- subtly, he hoped -- to guide their dance toward a friendly looking wall. He spied a nice spot between an IKEA bookcase and a drooping plastic palm tree. What the fuck? He hoped Max hadn’t been guilty of that particular decoration idea. “I’m going to strip you bare using only my teeth. Lick every square millimeter of skin as it comes free. Neck. Nipples. Armpits.”

“Ugh!” Max made a face -- but was still laughing, still with him. “You’re kidding.”

“Not at all.” Paul maneuvered Max two steps to the right, calculating their trajectory. “I want to taste you. All...over.”

“You know I’m ticklish.”

“That’s half the fun, isn’t it? And you’ve given me an idea.”

“Oh, you scoundrel. There, see, there’s the double-wicked smirk of yours I was talking about earlier.” Max pulled away and reached up to touch Paul’s lips, teasing him. “I like that. Do I want to know what you’re planning this time?”

“I’m going to find a feather and use it on your feet.” Paul leered, over the top. “I remember you used to scream for mercy back when we were young.”

“Yeah. And people wondered why we loved wrestling.”

“I know why *you* did. Easy way to cop a feel without anyone the wiser.”

“Yeah,” Max admitted happily. “Don’t get jealous. I only really liked practicing with you. And we practiced all the time. Remember? You were as horny as me. Don’t think I didn’t notice how you got a hard-on every time Coach said ‘Go.’ Ooh.” Max shimmied. “Pavlovian response. Nice.”

“Wretch.”

“And you love me for it. So, go on. Give me some more.”

“I think I’m done talking.” They had reached the couch, or what passed for one. It might have been a folded-up futon. Either way, it’d do for what Paul had in mind. He stiff-armed Max back the last couple of steps, loving the way Max’s eyes opened wide when the backs of his knees collided with the padded bench-bed and he toppled down. “What are you...oh.” His eyes became slack and heavy, cloudy with lust. He looked up at Paul as if Paul was an oncoming tiger who planned to eat him up. “This ‘me-Tarzan, you-John’ schtick is new.”

“Not really.” Paul enjoyed the sight of Max sprawled out before him, supporting his weight on his elbows, hair mussed, lips shiny and swollen and expression dazed. He’d done that to Max. Him. Felt fantastic.

“Then where have you been hiding it?”

“You’ll never know.” Paul eased down on the futon, straddling Max’s hips, and laid his palms flat on either side of Max’s head. He braced his weight there, snuggling up so closely they might have been a single person. Max’s cock pushed hard and insistent against Paul’s stomach. Paul returned the favor, giving Max a taste of his own medicine with his leg between Max’s accompanied by a nicely nasty bump and grind. A low noise, something between a groan and a growl, egged Paul on.

“Looks like you have me at your mercy,” Max goaded. “What are you going to do with me?”

“I thought I’d start by shutting you up.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Max breathed before Paul stole his words, swallowing them down as he sealed his lips over Max’s. His lover’s breath tasted as sweet as his surrender, body warm and pliant, obviously glad to let Paul manhandle him around as long as Paul didn’t break contact between their cocks. He whimpered so wonderfully when Paul adjusted their position that Paul groped him again in time with slipping his tongue between Max’s lips and thrusting.

Max did growl, then, an actual growl, winding his arms around Paul’s neck. He scratched at the back of Paul’s scalp, fingers looking for something to twine through and hang on by.

“Grow your hair out,” he muttered when they broke for air. Paul’s eyes had closed, but instinctively fluttered open at the sound of Max wetting his lips. *Fuck*. His lover looked like pure sex. So hot, so masculine, so hard. So eager for him. Him, Paul, and no other. Paul surged into Max as if he could fuck when fully dressed -- damned shame that wasn’t possible.

The next order of business, then, was to get those far too restrictive clothes out of the way.

*Don't let him tease. I need him far too badly.* Paul licked Max's lips for him, chuckling at the sound of the man's voice as he whimpered. Horny bitch. "Go on," he whispered against Max's chin. "Turn around for me. On your stomach."

Max's eyelids snapped open. "You're serious?"

"As the grave." Paul caught Max's lower lips between his teeth and nipped. "Around and around he goes, if he knows what's good for him."

"Yes, *sir*." A thrill of excitement burned Paul's bones at Max's sultry tone. He gave Paul a look so smoldering the both of them ought to have ignited on the spot, lingering as long as possible while he turned. He went one step further, then, and stretched his arms as far as they would go, nearly to the far edge of the futon. He grasped one wrist with the other hand, locking himself in place. "I hope you're planning what I think you're planning."

"You're the one insisting I'm a criminal mastermind. I'm just trying to live up to expectations."

"As if you could disappoint me."

"Mmm." Paul itched to relearn the weight and shape of Max's cock, to feel the solid, satiny skin and taste his bitter-sweet-salty flavor. More, though, he wanted to bury himself in Max's ass and drown in lust. "Going to fuck you so hard," he breathed behind Max's ear, smelling herbs from his lover's shampoo and some lightly woody cologne. "God, you're wonderful." He thrust down, not a rhythm, not yet, just letting Max know he was there. Max moaned, soft sobs of sound that made Paul insane. "Let me see you naked, unwrapped just for me."

Max's shoulders hitched. "Can't. Too close. If I move, I'm going to pop."

"What if I order you not to?"

"Then I'm going to explode even if I don't move." Max hissed on a particularly hard thrust. "This is good, Paul, just like this. Kinky."

"Want to be inside you."

“Later.” Contrary to what he’d stated, Max had absolutely no problem moving -- at least not so far as pushing back in time with Paul’s humping. “You feel way too good like this to stop now.”

Paul whined, desperate for the feel of skin on skin. “You’re paying for this later, you are.”

“Threat or promise? Oh, *God*, Paul. Yeah. Just like that. Harder.” Max threw his head back, mouth slack and dry, eyes closed tight. “More. Please. More.”

“I’ll lose it,” Paul warned. “Too fucking close.”

“Lose it,” Max gasped. “For me. *Fuck!*”

Max pitched forward, driving into the tough futon mattress, his hips pumping as his body was wracked with shudders. He made desperate noises, the sounds of a hapless sailor riding rough, choppy waves on a sea beyond his control. It was one hell of an orgasm, the kind which made a man sure he was going to die, but knowing he’d go out with a smile on his face. This was Max at his most vulnerable -- and he, Paul, had driven him there.

Too hot. Way too fucking hot.

Paul clamped Max’s legs between his own, bit the nape of Max’s neck, and let himself pump in staccato jerks until he shot, sticky and wet, knowing he’d soaked through his jeans and left a spot on Max’s denim-covered ass with this payload.

Both were soaked with sweat and shaking, breathing in ragged gulps, when Paul returned, ever so slowly, to his senses.

“Damn,” Max said weakly, voice rattling with a satiated laugh. “We’re doing this again.”

“That’s a deal.” Paul lapped the small red bite mark he’d left on the back of his lover’s neck. “Did I hurt you?”

“You didn’t break the skin?”

“No.”



Max purred. "Then I'm fine." He wriggled over on his back. Paul let him, too tired to stop him. Besides, he wanted to see the drunkenness of afterglow on Max's face. "Can I kiss you now?"

"You bloody well had better do."

"Talk Northerner at me, talk dirty to me, it all turns me on." Max let Paul rotate him until they were face-to-face. "Mmm." He had the look of a man who'd just eaten a feast fit for a king. The food of love, he'd say, and Paul thought he'd be right. "Are you always this easy?"

"Only when you're tempting me."

"I was tempting you?"

"Please. Innocence doesn't work on me. I know you far too well."

"Damn shame." Max raised up the centimeters or so necessary to drop a light kiss on Paul's lips. "You taste good."

Paul felt a familiar stirring. Max had that effect on him. "How about you find other things to taste?" he suggested. "I can think of a few."

"And I'd love to wrap my lips around each and every one," Max murmured. But then, to Paul's dismay, he leaned back to brace his shoulders on the wall and sighed. "Thing is, Paul... God, this sucks, but I have to be on stage this afternoon."

Paul gaped. "You're joking."

"Wish I was. Sorry." Max tried to cup Paul's cheek, but Paul wasn't having any of that. "Don't get mad. Please? This is a big chance for me. I'm understudy for the lead and he's got a sore throat today. I told the manager I had company, important company, but he asked me if I really wanted to turn this down, and..."

Paul sighed, well and truly irritated. Yet he couldn't ask Max to sabotage his career, could he? "You might have warned me," he grumbled, making to roll off.

Max caught Paul by the shoulder. He bit his lip, looking honestly chagrined and a little embarrassed. "I would've, but I didn't know, either. Not until you'd already left the train station and were on your way to the flat."

"All right." Things happened. He could accept the story thus far as the truth. "So why not tell me when I first arrived?"

Max's cheeks turned pink. Very nice look on him with his dark Romeo complexion. "Cause you looked so damn hot I forgot everything else." He succeeded in insinuating a hand between them and caressed Paul's face. "Don't stay pissed off. Okay? I promise I'll hurry. This won't take more than four hours tops."

"That's a long performance. What play?"

Max twinkled at him. "*Les Miserables*."

Paul stared.

Max giggled.

"Oh, you're paying for that, you are. Come here!" Paul tackled Max and rolled him off the futon. Max howled with laughter when they hit the floor and wrestled each other halfway across the room.

Max angled up for a kiss when Paul took pity and stopped their progress. "You're something else," he murmured. "Like you always told me, now I'm telling you -- don't ever change. Stay exactly the way you are until you're old and gray. Deal?"

"We'll see." Paul stood up. He dusted his jeans with the flat of one hand and offered the other for Max to take. "Up you get. 'Sooner you're gone, sooner you'll return, and then we can pick up where we've left off."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Max rose, graceful as a swan, to his feet and brushed his lips under Paul's ear as he cantered by. "Start thinking about all the different ways you're going to fuck me."

"Stop topping from the bottom."

“You only wish, sweetheart.” Paul looked over his shoulder as Max blew him a cheeky kiss. “You only wish.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul kept himself busy after Max had gone. He took a quick shower, one wary eye on the alarming life forms growing on Max's spigots and had a rummage through his own bag to find clean shorts and jeans. He gave into the urge to tidy up, not going so far as to sweep, but threw out empty takeaway tins and rinsed what appeared to be Max's solitary coffee mug.

He didn't think anything of the promised four hours fading into five.

He started to frown when five melted into six.

By the time six became seven, his placid good humor had morphed into snarling irritation. He tried to resist the terrible urge to flick open the blinds and scan the sidewalk. Hoping against hope that he would see Max loping along with a grin and a wave to the people he passed. Heading back -- “home” -- to Paul.

So Paul could kill him, the dirty stop-out.

No, wait. No. Paul ground his teeth and tried to talk sense to himself. Trouble was, he wasn't listening.

*Max made no promises to me*, he stubbornly reminded his brain.

Or had he? The more he thought about things, the less Paul was sure of what was and what wasn't the case.

*Balls!*

*Stop it, I said*, Paul ordered his treacherous mind, deliberately turning from the window. *Damn fool romantic notions. Show some sense.*

Mind made up, Paul headed resolutely for Max's recliner, hidden under a ratty throw blanket. He blinked in surprise after twitching the gray-washed crocheted monstrosity away. A surprisingly lush-looking recliner. Pricey, as well as posh. Good God, was that real leather?

He tested. It was. Buttery-soft, smooth, welcoming a weary man who wanted to take his leisure. Fan-fucking-tastic. Not much odds that he'd get Max to fuck there -- slob or not, you didn't treat good leather that way.

Still, it would be a likely spot for fooling around once he'd given Max a piece of his mind, and Max had apologized. Paul could so clearly visualize what it would be like to have Max there, kneeling on his lap, knees thrust into the cushions and cock grinding into Paul's with the ebb and flow of kiss after kiss. Paul grew warm, too warm, thinking about the way Max would take him over, pinning him down and in place with the weight of his body, drawing out the lazy rocking into one another until Paul tore away, breathless, demanding they take this somewhere else...

Having Max spread open for him, legs splayed wide, hand on his own cock, lips parted with need...

Taking Max's swollen cock in his mouth, hearing him gasp and curse, tasting the warm cum spilling over his tongue...

*God!* Paul shook off the fantasy half a moment away from ruining yet another pair of jeans. As it was, he had to think of decidedly unpleasant things -- flat tires, icy roads, running out of petrol -- before he could move without the threat of messing himself like a schoolboy.

After a moment, he laughed. "Would you look at this," he murmured to no one in particular. "I'm so easy that it's shameful."

The phone rang, a welcome distraction. Paul glanced about, searching for a mobile or a Bluetooth receiver, spying neither. He laughed when he lit on what was rapidly becoming an old-fashioned type of phone, plugged into a land line, receiver connected to the base via a twisty cord. Some weird modern-art design that would have made it complicated to figure out without the cord. As it was, Paul had to guess which part you spoke into before picking up on the fifth ring.

“Max’s flat,” he announced. “He’s not in at the moment.”

“Yeah, but don’t I wish I was?”

“Max.” Pleasure flooded Paul’s chest, overriding his annoyance and making him feel light as a feather. “Are you done for the day, then?” Ah, there was the scolding he’d wanted. “Where the fuck have you been?”

“What time is it?”

“It’s past the dick end of dusk, if you’re not near a window.”

“Really? Shit! I didn’t know. Paul, I’m so sorry. You’re mad at me, aren’t you?”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because if I were you I’d kick my ass.” Paul could almost see Max’s impish grin. “Look, they want me to do the evening show as well.”

“Oh, come on!”

Max sighed. “I know. But they loved me, Paul. There’s supposed to be a reporter from *The Times* at the evening performance. Don’t hate me for staying.”

Paul didn’t miss the fact that Max hadn’t asked if he minded. Maybe because he knew the answer. Maybe not.

“The show ends at eleven. I’ll be home right afterward. Soon as I can make it on the Tube. My hand to God.”

Paul scowled. Something didn’t ring true. “The man, he doth protest too much.”

Max groaned. *Not* a sound of sexual ecstasy. “Come on, Paul. What can I do? It’s my job. If I visited St. Augustine during the work week, I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t take a night off if you knew you’d be needed.”

“Actually, I would. That’s what I’ve done, racing up here to see you on a whim and a moment’s notice,” Paul pointed out. “There’s fares to be made and people who need to get around on the weekend, Max.”

Silence.

“Max?”

“Yeah. I’m here.” Paul could hear Max tapping a staccato beat on something metallic, probably the surface of a pay phone. Max drew out the pause, waiting for Paul to speak next, no doubt. When he didn’t, Max plowed forward, his voice laced with suggestive hints and the promise of heat. “I’ll make it up to you. Think of something really raunchy you want to do tonight. Think as hard as you can and surprise me when I get there. We’re going to have a fantastic night, baby. You, me, and a bottle of wine. I’ll keep you going until dawn.” He growled playfully. “Say you’ll be mine.”

His teasing broke down Paul’s defenses and irritation. “God, you’re hopeless, aren’t you?”

“Is it working?”

“All too well, which I’m sure you know. Fine, then, rehearse your lines, but think about the ways I plan to bend you around like a pretzel when you’re back in my arms where you belong.”

“Ooh, yeah,” Max purred. “Watch for me by the moonlight.”

“‘Though hell should bar the way’?”

“You know it.” He hesitated. “I really am sorry. Okay? It’s not just the manager. The supporting actor, Donovan, he’s new to the theatre. So is Lucia. They’re rookies. Green. And they need the money. If I take off, the show closes and --”

“I get the point, Max.”

“So you know where I’m coming from. Trust me, Paul,” Max wheedled. “I’ll even ask not to be disturbed the rest of the weekend. Not for anything. And I’ll be sure to tell that reporter about the hot young stud waiting for me back at my flat.”

“Imp.” Paul bit the inside of his cheek. “I’m taking a lot of faith, here, Max,” he warned.

Max whooped. “This? This is why I love you. You’re a peach. See you, oh, probably around midnight?”

“Hang on a --”

Max had hung up. Paul stared at the phone for a long moment, slowly shook his head, and replaced the receiver.

They’d see, wouldn’t they? They’d see.

And in case this worked out, well, hmm, he *had* promised to be creative. “He wanted me to have a good long think?” Paul murmured, levering up from the recliner. “No need. I’ll blow his bloody fucking mind.”

Satisfied that he could move without danger -- nothing like an unresolved fight to dampen the libido -- Paul stood and steadied himself on his pins. He was a little shaky, but he’d do. Max had to have the sorts of things he’d need. A man like him would. They’d be covered with dust and shoved to the back of one cabinet or another, but if he knew Max -- and he did -- he’d be able to set the scene exactly as he wanted...

\* \* \* \* \*

Eleven o’clock and then midnight had long since passed, and there was still no sight of Max. Paul shook his head in grim resignation. Was he surprised? Not really. Flighty as ever, Max. He’d forgotten that about him.

Moonlight looked well on its way to pinkening into dawn as Paul rested his head on Max’s windowsill. The sidewalks had scarcely thinned. Did no one ever sleep in this city? Or were most of them in search of or waiting for some prima donna who didn’t even have the good manners to let their lovers know they were alive?

*You’re being an alarmist*, Paul tried to scold himself. Didn’t work quite so well as it might’ve done a few hours previous. *If he’s not dead, I’m going to have his eyes out.*

*That* felt far more satisfying. He deserved some punishment. Just look at the wrack and ruin he'd caused! The candles Paul had dug out and lit after Max's phone call had melted into shapeless streams of wax. The glasses of wine he'd poured had gone flat and sour. The multiple-choice CDs loaded into Max's desperately confusing sound system had all played through, leaving a buzz of white noise in their wake.

Paul stood by the window, not bothering to fool himself any more about watching for Max. He waited until his legs went numb, the sky began to turn the lavender that would soon be blue, and a whole new crowd of joggers flooded the path.

Then, he dropped the blinds. Enough was fucking well enough, and be damned if he didn't have a least a little pride left.

Paul slouched back to Max's futon and stretched out in the hopes of catching a brief nap. He'd need some rest before the long train ride back. Tucking his head into the crook of his arm to block out the dawn's early light, he wasn't expecting Max at all -- so, naturally, Max chose that very moment to return.

Paul's first and only warning was horrible, off-key singing. He twitched irritably, wondering who the hell was still so drunk at six a.m. as to be murdering a chorus of *Sweeney Todd* at the top of their lungs.

So loudly they might as well have been...on stage...

The door crashed open, and Paul got firsthand confirmation as to who'd be that stupid. He took one grouchy, sideways look at Max. The man's shirt hung half-undone -- half tucked-in and half hanging loose. He was also half out of his mind -- no, scratch that, completely gone. Smashed, piss drunk, and possibly stoned if Paul correctly identified the sickly sweet smell of pot wafting off Max in nauseous waves.

"There he is. Mr. America," Max slurred, giggling at his own wit. "Told you I'd be home soon."



Paul refused to take a second look. It'd only turn his stomach. "You're a damned fool," he muttered. "Shut up. I'm trying to get some sleep before I set out."

"But -- but you just got here." Max cocked his head owlshly. "Is the weekend over already?"

"It is for me, and if you think I'm staying any longer after you've acted such a child, then you really are a prize idiot. Now shut it, and go sleep off whatever you've had."

"Sleep. Yeah. I could sleep." Max hiccupped. "You wanna sleep with me, baby? You been thinking hard like I asked?"

"I *was*. Hours ago. You've fucked up your chances, just so you know, so for God's sake go and have a shower before you give me a headache with the stench of you."

"Aww, now, that's no way to act." Paul heard Max shambling clumsily -- awkward as a colt -- in his general direction. "So I'm late." He philosophized, his shadow hanging heavy over Paul while he swayed. "It's not a big deal. Time is kinda...it doesn't...it's different. Here. Don't have a schedule or anything. I can do whatever I want." Giggling, he collapsed horizontally on Paul's legs and smacked Paul's ass. "Oh, nice. Really, really nice. That's nicer than nice."

Paul tried to buck him off. "You don't have a prayer."

Max either didn't hear or didn't care. "Mmm. Pretty ass. Gonna fuck you. Gonna drive you crazy."

Paul sighed.

"Whassamatter?" Paul glanced up to see Max peering at him with the goggle-eyed concentration of the habitual drunkard. "I did something wrong?"

A small piece of Paul's heart ached. Not the whole thing. Enough, though, to make his chest burn. "I'd tell you, but you'll never remember when you've sobered up. Go to bed, love. I'll leave you a note on the kitchen table, where you'll find it after you wake up. So you don't worry."

“You’re awful nice like that,” Max crooned. He flipped over, wriggled around and stretched out atop Paul. He sighed, cozied his arms around and his hands under Paul’s torso, and sloppily kissed the nape of Paul’s neck. “Need a nap,” he mumbled. “Stay with me, okay? Don’t leave me alone.”

“I don’t have a choice now, do I, with your great weight pinning me down?”

The question and its inherent, grumpy sarcasm soared right over Max’s head. “Knew I could count on you.” Max yawned. “Good ol’ Paul...he never changes...always there when you need him. Love my Paul.”

He probably did. That didn’t change anything, though, did it?

Max babbled happily on. “Donovan and Lucia, those are the two I act with -- I told you about them, right?” Max prattled on. “Lucia’s really sweet, but her tits are way too big. I almost drowned. And Donovan, he’s not half as good a guy as you are.”

“And isn’t that nice to hear?”

Max chortled. What he said next froze Paul’s blood. “He’s a great, I mean a *great* fuck -- he was so fired up tonight, *damn*, he was electric -- but you know what?”

Paul’s mouth had gone far too dry to make any sort of reply.

Not that Max waited for one. “He tried,” he said, full of self-importance, “to get me *drunk*. He thought I was gonna lose my inhi...my inna...those. But guess what I did?” He beamed sloppily. “I thought about *you* while he was blowing me, and told him you were way better with your mouth, and here I am, see?” He snuggled. “I love you, and you love me, right? We’re forever...just you an’ me...so happy together...” he sang, slurring the words into a fit of giggles. “Always you an’ me. Forget Lucia’s tits and forget about Donovan. *Fuck* Donovan. I only love you. You believe me, right?”

Paul clamped his lips tightly together, holding himself in check. He bit down the enraged roars he wanted to voice until he heard the soft snores he’d known would be coming

soon. He wouldn't waste the energy on a man who wouldn't even remember being torn a new one until he sat down and wondered why he was sore.

So. Donovan, eh? He'd wondered.

Max had been on the job, all right. On the pull. Welcome to fucking London.

Fool me once, fool me twice. Paul decided he'd be damned before he'd give Max any more chances to screw him over. Soon as he could wiggle free of Max's bulk, he'd be shaking the dust from his boots, and he'd not let Max sweet-talk him around if he ever figured out what he'd let spill.

This would not happen again. The final, clean break would hurt like hell, yeah -- already did -- but there was nothing else to do.

Paul let out a long, deep breath. He stared at the ceiling as Max snored into his neck. Better to have loved and lost, they said, the almighty "they" who knew so damned much about everything. Bollocks to that. What was the panacea for loving still despite the bruises, and knowing you loved all in vain?

## Chapter Four

### *Act IV: After the Span of Five Years Has Passed (Age Thirty-One)...*

How many centimeters of snow had fallen since the night before? Had to be at least sixteen or seventeen. More likely twenty, if Paul was any kind of judge. He thought he had a pretty good eye after all the years he'd lived in St. Augustine. British weather never played around. Stubborn, cantankerous old bitch.

Paul saluted Mother Nature with his half-full mug of Jamaican Blue Mountain blend, far too strong, but sweetened with two sugars and lightened by a drop of cream. An indulgence he didn't mind allowing himself on frigid winter mornings.

"...and honeysuckle, I think. Replace this old wisteria. What do you think?"

Paul startled. "What?" He swiveled his head around to look at the long-limbed young man who was currently hunched up like a praying mantis -- the knees of his jeans no doubt soaked through from the snow that had drifted onto Paul's porch -- happy as it was possible to be. Cheerful hazel eyes twinkled at Paul from behind the man's square-rimmed glasses. Very old-fashioned style, so Paul suspected they'd be the latest word among the trendy set.

"You didn't hear a thing I said, did you?" The man grinned. "Where were you?"

“Land of Nod.” Paul stared narrowly at the wisteria, assessing the old vines. They’d been there as long as he or anyone else in the neighborhood could remember, but they did look clapped-out. Past their prime. “Honeysuckle, Gerald?”

“Oh, yeah,” Gerald enthused. He stood, uncaring of his sopping trousers. He beamed at Paul with the slightly mad exuberance of the natural-born gardener. “I’d love to see how they take. Or maybe blackberries?”

“Blackberries, yeah, let’s try those. In summertime. Not now, you daft horticulturalist. Go inside and get some coffee before you freeze.”

“I don’t feel the cold.” Gerald clapped his blue-tinged, mitten-free hands together and pivoted to examine the shriveled wisteria, incidentally providing Paul with a nice free ogle of an ass you could bounce coins off. Gerald was a hard one to peg. Always blushing when the ladies were around, pink and white as an English rose under his mop of bramble-brown curls, but he had a startlingly sweet smile that only reached its full potential around handsome young men.

Young, yes. That was the thing. *I’m getting old*, Paul decided, rueful as he rubbed his hand through the short bristles of his hair. He’d thought about growing it out longer, then changed his mind as soon as he remembered old men with three strands combed across their shining, freckled scalps, or, even worse, chrome-tops with limp, greasy ponytails. No, thank you. If his hairline *did* insist on receding any further, well, he’d accept it as part of his early thirty-something years with as much grace and dignity as he could muster.

Which, in the calming age that had passed since he’d last seen Max, had grown easier and easier. He liked to think of himself as “dignified” now. St. Augustine had managed to neatly block out any memories of Paul’s time with Max. They’d shunted aside memories of the dazzling and brilliant man and severed all ties, big famous star be damned. The ruling patriarchs, let alone the matriarchs, did not easily forgive. To them Paul was, and always had been, a bachelor.

Someone had actually asked Paul, not three days ago, why he'd never married.

Paul lifted his mug and took a long sip to hide his smile.

Gerald was turning in slow circles, wearing the frown of a man who'd know he'd forgotten something but had no idea what. Paul cocked his head and waited. He didn't mind, and he had a nice view to entertain him in the meantime.

"Patch!" Gerald exclaimed.

"What, the dog? Inside, last time I checked. Snoring away in front of a fire, the lazy old sod. Probably chasing cars in his sleep and toasting his paws."

"Sounds like him. He's worse than a cat for napping."

"Cats are never that undignified," Paul said, thinking of the mutt with great fondness. He didn't own Patch -- he was just fostering him until a better home could be found. No one had any idea where he'd come from, but who could say no to his dumbly adoring face? Not Paul. So far he'd refused to think about making Patch a permanent part of his household. Wouldn't be fair, as often as he was away in the taxi.

"Did he ever learn to fetch?"

Paul snorted. "Not likely. He'll run after *treats* well enough, now, but --"

Gerald hooted. "You really should keep him."

"We'll see," Paul hedged. "Is there anything else you need, Ger? Only if we're going to talk about blackberries four months too early, I'll go join Patch and warm my toes before the frostbite carries them away."

"Wuss." Gerald smacked his palms together again, but with a strange reluctance. Piqued Paul's curiosity. Seemed as if he wasn't sure about what he wanted to say. Sort of...gathering courage. Oh? Oh! Well, now. This could be interesting. Paul laced his fingers behind his head and took a longer, deliberate scan of Gerald's long, slim body. He'd take that over shoveling snow any day.

Gerald blushed under the heat of Paul's blatant assessment. He looked down. "I was wondering..."

Paul nodded. "Wondering...?" he encouraged.

Gerald's pupils dilated. "You know."

"Do I?" Paul felt pretty sure of his quarry, but be damned if he'd take a chance without being 100 percent positive. How had Gerald known, anyway? Maybe it had something to do with like calling to like. "Say what's on your mind. I don't bite."

"Oh, Lord." Gerald dithered on the spot. Huh. The indecision did make him cute as a button, but Paul realized he was only finding the whole song-and-dance annoying. "Hell," Gerald muttered. He bent at the waist, gripped Paul's shoulders in icy-cold fingers, and laid his lips over Paul's.

Well. There was confirmation for you, if you liked.

Paul led Gerald's inexperienced lips and tongue through learning the intricacies of how to kiss. Quick learner, he was, and he tasted pleasantly of minty mouthwash, besides. Had he come prepared for this? Paul rather thought he had. His cock approved. It liked even better the surge of boldness that led Gerald to palm Paul's swelling prick through his jeans and press down, kneading awkwardly but with the eagerness that made a man feel like a god.

Unlikely that this would be more than an investigation into his urges for Gerald -- Paul didn't see lazy morning snuggles in the offing -- but who'd be stupid enough to turn down a hard young body?

He'd just gotten started showing Gerald how good it felt to wrap his fingers around a cock not his own, and gotten Gerald whimpering into his mouth, when the mobile tucked in Paul's shirt pocket shrilled with obnoxious cheerfulness. Gerald leapt away, eyes huge, lips swollen and glossy.

Paul knew what was coming. "You don't have to leave," he offered quietly. "I'll not tell."

All he got for his pains was a horrified stare, and then Gerald was away, long legs scrambling through the snow. He might as well have screamed and clutched his heart. At least it was fairly certain he wouldn't go blabbing this to anyone.

And, Paul bet, he'd be back later, creeping under Paul's bedroom window. Pacing grooves through the snow until he summoned up the nerve to toss a pebble against the glass.

And Paul would let him in.

He took what he could get.

Paul sighed, a long exhalation of breath, then shook his head. "That's enough of that for one morning," he told himself firmly. "There's work to be done, so get moving." Which didn't, in his opinion, include wasting time feeling sorry for himself.

His mobile, a new model they'd demanded he trade in when he last renewed his contract, warbled at him, insisting that Paul pay attention. God almighty, for such a small device, it had a mighty roar, didn't it? Nearly earsplitting. Paul poked the tic-tac-sized TALK button and lifted the phone to his ear. Cleared his throat. "Hello?"

"Guess who?" a familiar -- all too familiar -- voice asked, tinged with weariness, yet still impossibly young and enthusiastic. "Don't hang up! Don't hang up!" It rushed on. "Look, I know you probably hate me, but I'm in town and I hoped that maybe you would meet me for a cup of coffee. All I want to do is apologize. Honest." The speaker caught his breath. "Hello...? I thought maybe we could get together."

Paul's knuckles went white from the force of his grip on the phone. He loosened up before he shattered the damn thing. His mind raced, spouting one question after another, mixed liberally with warning. *What is he doing here? What the hell? What game is he playing?*

He intended, fully, to say no.

Didn't quite work out that way, although he had no clue as to why.

\* \* \* \* \*



The warmth and force in Max's bear hug of welcome came perilously close to making Paul's brain explode with confusion. He didn't know what he'd been expecting to happen in the poky, small terminal of the local airport, but certainly not a pounce from behind, a hearty smack of a kiss below his ear, and being squeezed within a millimeter of his life.

Paul's roll of laughter was unbidden, startling him. "Get off, you! God, you nearly scared me to death. Come on." He wriggled to try and buck Max off -- it could be no one but Max, he was sure. He knew those arms as well as or better than his own. "Stop choking me. Since I'm here, turn around and let me have a look at you."

Max growled, kissed Paul's neck hard enough to leave a mark, then capered around to obey the order. "Oh, Paul." Max brushed Paul's cheek, thumb beneath his chin. "You haven't aged a day."

*Wish I could say the same for you*, Paul thought, dismayed at the changes he saw in his old lover. They weren't dramatic, but definitely there and didn't handshake with the Max he used to know. A few silver hairs among the black ones, grown out more than he'd ever seen, the curl relaxed or something like that until his hair hung in waves down to the upturned collar of a pricey-looking leather jacket. Slight crow's feet. Not many. Skin tougher than before. Weathered. Came of standing under bright lights, Paul supposed. He'd gotten thinner, lost some of his muscle mass. There was a faint scar on his chin.

He still smelled of the woods. Maple and pine.

He looked far, far too appealing for Paul's taste. Dangerously tempting.

Unfortunately, libido trumped common sense. Kissing Max was pure impulse but felt natural as could be. Max's lips moved beneath his as soon as they met, pressing lightly but firmly, the tip of his tongue tracing delicate lines on Paul's mouth.

It was like falling back through time -- and that was why it had to end. Paul pulled away, licking off Max's taste, and looked past Max's shoulder, pretending not to see Max's face. He pushed his hands in his front pockets and tapped one trainer-clad foot. "Well. Same

old Max, I see. Suppose I don't need to ask how you've been, but I've been doing great, thanks."

Max faltered. Surprised, Paul guessed, at the quick end he'd brought to their embrace. He stared at Paul for three eye-blinks, then shook his head and covered quickly with a broad grin. He pounded Paul's biceps with the flats of his hands. "Oh, yeah, you're doing great. You look terrific. Completely terrific. I bet you're beating the guys off with five sticks."

Classic Max. Any ardor that had been hanging impatiently about, demanding that Paul return to the much more enjoyable pursuit of kissing, tipped its hat and left the terminal. "I attract my share," he lied. "Quiet men, mostly, not your type. As I recall from the last time I picked up a tabloid, you get off on wrestling twins in banana pudding these days. Or were the reporters just having a laugh?"

"Fuck, no." Max grimaced. "Chocolate pudding. Accept no substitutes." He grinned, poking Paul gently beneath his ribs. Did he look wistful? No. Couldn't be. Too much shine and too hectic a glitter in his eyes for that. "You want to get out of here and find something to eat?"

"You've been away too long. There's nothing open in this weather."

"Weather?"

"This is the North in the winter. We're bloody well snowed in."

Max frowned. "You made it here."

"Yeah, but that's because I don't have enough sense not to drive when the roads are nearly a meter deep and frozen over." Paul softened his scolding with a tilted smile. No need to make a scene in public, and truth be told, the old anger at Max seemed to have softened around the edges when he wasn't paying attention. Odd. He didn't know why, but after a moment's consideration decided he'd just gotten old enough not to waste his time on nursing grudges.

Much.

Besides, willingness to treat Max like a civil gentleman didn't mean he'd go and *trust* the bastard again.

He realized Max was grinning at him. "Oh, get that smirk off your face."

"You're thinking again." Max reached out as if to touch, drawing back at the last moment with a grimace of uncertainty. "Sorry."

"Mmm." Paul pursed his lips in thought, then made a snap decision. "It's all right, Max." He took the initiative and slipped a hand out of his pocket to catch Max's fingers. Lord, Lord, the shock in Max's eyes and the way his lips parted nearly made Paul hoot. "You'll swallow a fly. Why the layover?" he went on, not giving Max a chance to gather his thoughts. "If you think I'm too countrified to know no airline would dream of laying over here when they could head for Gatwick or Heathrow, you're out of your pinheaded mind. So, what's the game?"

Max was still staring at Paul's hand. His mouth opened and closed.

Paul decided he was enjoying the hell out of this. "Jetlagged, are you? I remember hearing somewhere that you've spent the last year on Broadway. New York. Back to London now?"

Max wet his lower lip with the tip of his tongue, making the plump flesh shine. Paul had the urge to nibble the soft skin until Max went weak in the knees. "Um...sort of. That was actually year before last. I just spent a couple of seasons in Sydney." He gathered coherence as he went on, but didn't look up to meet Paul's eyes. "Hence the tan and the leather face." He gestured at himself and tched. "So, how badly do I need a haircut?"

Paul wanted to tousle Max's untidy mop. He didn't. "It's not an awful look on you."

"Oh, thanks."

"Seriously." Paul studied Max, deciding that for all it was new, he liked the longer waves. Didn't make Max look girly, not one bit; he always had been the sort who could get away with blurring the lines between genders. "You look good."

Max beamed -- shyly? *I must be seeing things*. "Yeah. So do you." He put out his free hand to touch Paul the way they'd both once been accustomed to, flat palm open between Paul's nipples. An unspoken code between them: *I want to fuck you*.

Hell to the no. Not again. Paul jumped away, his fingers releasing Max's. Despite his shock of anger, he regretted the move as soon as it was made, but he couldn't have let Max touch him that way. It might be wonderful while it lasted, but after Max had gone...no, not to be borne, and weakness of the ethical fiber now would be unbelievably stupid, besides.

Max saw the flinch -- of course he did; how could he have missed it? -- and looked wounded. He didn't understand, then. *Poor, blind fool*.

Paul spoke abruptly, hoping to distract them both. "I've got some tea in the car. I wasn't sure if you'd want any, so I didn't bring my satchel in. Should have done; it'll have gotten cold even in the thermos. Be back in a flash."

"No." Max's hand was on Paul's before Paul could stop him. Intense brown eyes surprised Paul as he looked up sharply. They caught his and refused to let go. "I'm coming with you. I want to talk somewhere private. Okay?"

"No," Paul said, as soon as his brain scrambled back in working order. "I'm sorry. No." He rested his hand on Max's, intending to gently pry his fingers loose. Instead, he found them intertwined with Max's own, the man's grip relentlessly firm. "Max, please. Don't make a scene."

The anger that sparked to life in Max's stare surprised him. "If you don't want a scene," he said, deceptively pleasant, "then let's go to your car. Otherwise, everyone can watch. Is that what you want?"

"You bastard."

"If that's what it takes."

"Always have to have your own way, you selfish sod." Paul huffed, indignant. "You haven't changed at all, have you? Not where it counts."

“I guess not. Neither have you.” Max tightened his hold and refused to break the connection between their eyes. “Let’s go.”

And Paul had no choice but to obey, didn’t he?

\* \* \* \* \*

The distance between them grew heavy as if they were still miles apart by the time they reached Paul’s car. He’d traded in the old backup for a sturdy SUV. Not new, but reliable, and more than a match for the snow when he had to drive. The drawback was how much cold air it let in. The heater could only compensate so far before it gave up the fight and lay down.

Paul kept his attention focused on twiddling the knob as Max shrugged into the passenger seat and shut the door with a bang. He didn’t say anything. Probably waiting for Paul, but be damned if he’d speak first. A goodly portion of his own temper had started simmering during their slog through almost-virgin snow. No one else was simpleton enough to go trudging through this mess if it wasn’t necessary. Temper was fueled by resentment and indignation at Max’s attitude. What had Max expected, that he could blow into town and enjoy a quickie, kiss him good-bye, and then trip merrily and carelessly off on his way?

Wasn’t going to happen.

Max fidgeted. He opened the glove compartment and tumbled the meager contents about -- license, registration, a partially used tube of lip balm, and a glove that was missing its mate. Shut it. Stared out the side window, then traced the tip of his finger through the condensation. Nonsense pictures. One started off looking vaguely like a heart -- Paul had turned to look without thinking -- but corrected itself into a squiggle before it was halfway drawn. Max twitched his shoulders and wiped the window clear. He tapped his foot and drummed a rhythm out on his knee.

Paul waited.

“Are you going to talk to me?” Max finally asked, looking resolutely away. He sounded lost. Young. Lonely. “What happened to you?”

*God, that he even has to ask.* Paul made a neutral sort of noise, not really an answer, but neither was it dead silence. That was all he was prepared to commit to at the moment.

“I shouldn’t have called,” Max said. His rhythm devolved into jerky taps made by one finger. “I’d have been better off trying to nap in the terminal.” He was angry. Good. “Maybe I could’ve used up some mobile minutes to call Joseph back in Sydney. He’s a nice guy. Great fuck. Stamina like you wouldn’t believe.”

Paul exhaled softly and closed his eyes for a moment.

Either Max didn’t hear, or the sound of Paul’s sigh irritated him further. “I wanted to film us when we got together for one last party before I flew out.” His voice had grown brittle. “He had this whole setup arranged. Champagne. Candles. Music. Unbelievable sound system. He’s suave. Sophisticated. Smart.” Max spat each word, clearly deliberately trying to hurt. “He was the tightest, hottest thing I ever stuck my dick in. I can still hear him wailing, begging for me to touch him, just once, because I’d made him so hot that was all he needed. I made him beg for almost half an hour while I fucked him.” Max half-turned to glare at Paul, tears bright in his eyes but not permitted to fall.

Paul heard the next lines without them needing to be spoken aloud. *I have a life. I don’t need you. How could you ever compare?*

“Sounds like a fine man. Do you know, he reminds me of Danny,” Paul said, glancing away. “Oh, right. You’ve never met him. Danny Ryder. Came up for the summer to paint in the village. You can’t see them now, but St. Augustine is surrounded on all sides with green hills.”

“I *know*.”

Paul shrugged. “You’ve been gone so long, I thought you might’ve forgotten. Anyway, Danny, now he was special.” There was no one named Danny, of course, but Max didn’t need

to know the truth. He cut the imaginary lover out of whole cloth, mentally decided that he looked like Gerald, and sewed up a story as he went along. “Danny, yes. Sweet nature, gentle hands. He loved the taste of me, or so he said, and if the number of times a man orgasms while sucking you off is any indication, he was telling the truth.”

Max flinched. “Don’t.”

“We’re sharing conquest stories, aren’t we? Not that I had to work very hard at winning Danny -- he was the one to approach me. Something about ‘like minds’ and ‘wishing on stars’ and dreams coming true. He had a pretty way with words.”

Paul felt like a complete bastard and sent a silent apology to Gerald for using him so, wherever he might’ve run off to and hidden by then.

Max’s jaw worked. Paul could see the figurative steam pouring from his ears. Made him all the more determined to see this through.

“I can’t tell you how many times I woke up in the middle of the night to find him wrapped around me, leg thrown over mine and the proof of wicked dreams drilling a hole through my side. He loved to be woken from those dreams by my mouth on his cock. Such a sweet man. I’ll cherish his memory forever.”

“*Don’t.*”

“Why not?” Paul demanded. “Are you going to pretend you have some kind of claim on me? Make out as if I’m cheating or something equally unbelievable? Fuck, man, listen to yourself. All I’m doing is returning tit for tat. Learn to cope.” *I had to. Your turn.*

Muscles worked in Max’s cheek. “You’re not the man I remember.” It was an insult, or meant to be. Paul knew it was simple truth. He hoped Max would see and understand that sooner rather than later. “I don’t think I know you anymore.”

“Probably not, no.” Paul bit the inside of his lip. God help him, he was weak, but in the face of the pain he’d caused, he burned to gather Max in his arms and rock him until they

both found some comfort. "I think you're right. You shouldn't have called. But since you did, it's my fault that I came when you asked. We're both in the wrong."

Max blinked hard. He raised a hand to rub his forehead and conceal his eyes. "Yeah. Guess so." He inhaled sharply. "Okay. I'm sorry. I'll go now."

*Stay. Please stay.* "I think that would be best," Paul said through numb lips. "Good luck with your next play."

"I don't need luck," Max said as he reached for the door latch. "I have talent. I'm good at making people like me."

*You always were. You made me love you -- but at the time, that was all right, because you loved me, too.*

*We're better off parting as enemies than we'd be as friends.*

"Good-bye," Paul said when nothing else seemed forthcoming on Max's part. "Safe flight."

Max bit his lip. He had his fingers on the lock, but lingered there instead of finishing the job of walking away. Again. He closed his eyes, anger twisting into pain. "Paul," he whispered, mourning. "God, Paul, please don't let it end this way."

He writhed around to stare at Paul, seeking and searching desperately for something. Hope, perhaps.

Paul made his big mistake, then, of letting his glare soften into sorrow. "Max," he whispered. "God, I loved you so much once upon a time..."

"*Paul.*" Max thrust his palm hard against Paul's cheek, holding him still, and then Max's mouth was on him. His kiss was rough, frantic, clawing for more and yet more. Paul gave Max as much as he could and then some, losing himself equally in the frenzy.

"Max, love, please," he heard himself, babbling between open-mouthed kisses full of desperately stroking tongues. He'd lost his mind and he couldn't stop this thing building between them, a ravenous, red-eyed devil of lust. "Need you. Need you so much."



“Need you more.” Max rested his forehead on Paul’s, breathing in ragged gasps that were hot on Paul’s cheeks. His hand shook. “Let me. Hate me all you want, but I have to.”

Paul’s mouth opened in a silent wail as Max writhed down, fingers heated and spasming when they jerked Paul’s jeans open. He looked at Paul’s stiff cock in frantic hunger, licked the tip, and covered the shaft with his mouth. Paul did cry aloud, then, bucking hips and cock up in search of more warm, wet tightness. Max swallowed and searched for more. His hands kneaded Paul’s flanks, begging, pleading. Hot drops of moisture landed on Paul’s thighs. Tears.

Paul thrust his fingers through Max’s hair and hung on. It was all he could do. His head collided with the SUV window, shocking him with its cold. He was wedged between the seat and the steering wheel, thinking he’d died and gone to heaven.

If heaven had room for despair.

When he shot, it wasn’t with a sense of joy, but with hopelessness. Max’s throat worked, gulping down the sticky cum. He licked Paul clean, drew off, and shoved his head against Paul’s leg. More of the hot liquid soaked into Paul’s skin.

Paul loosed his grip on Max’s hair and stroked him.

The moment went on forever, lasted far too long and yet didn’t take any time at all. Max lifted up, quaking fingers searching for Paul’s face. His eyes were red and swollen. He swallowed, a choked, painful sound.

The look on his face would have destroyed a lesser man. Loneliness, sorrow, anxious craving to hear the words he wanted Paul to say. Paul had to look away from those eyes to gather the strength he needed.

Even then, all he managed was a short jerk of the head. *No*.

Max sniffed. Paul knew he would be staring in disbelief, shock turning into anguish -- or would it be wrath? He said nothing to give Paul any clue, and perhaps that was the way it should’ve been.

Moments passed, stretching out for years, before Max sniffed again and trailed his fingers down Paul's leg. He did up the zipper and button he'd almost torn free, stroked Paul's hip, and -- *God, why'd he do that?* -- kissed Paul's cheek with a ghost of a touch.

"I love you," Max whispered as he opened the car door and stepped out into the snow.

And then he was gone. The sound of his boots crunching as he staggered through the shin-deep snow filled Paul's ears, echoed, and slowly faded away.

Paul kept his face blank and his lips firmly pressed together until he was sure Max was well out of sight.

Then, hoarse yells burst from his throat, rasping him raw and sore. He pounded the steering wheel with both fists, raging as he sobbed without respite. He struck the wheel and screamed, not stopping until the tears overtook him, and he hunched into himself with his head on his arms to hide away from the world.

He'd done the right thing. He'd let Max go. Driven him away, even.

He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes. *Leave me alone this time, Max. Don't ever come back. You have to understand what I need. The only way I can survive this separation is to stay away from you. Forever.*

*I thought you'd understand that, too.*

## Chapter Five

*Interlude: After the Space of Three More Years (Age Thirty-Four)...*

“Would you mind moving a few steps to your right? Yeah, exactly like that. Thanks.” The man glanced up from behind girlishly thick, dark lashes, a fringe of sooty black surrounding eyes so deeply gentian that one might dare call them purple. If, that was, one didn’t take a second look and deduce from the man’s wiry strength and tough, scarred fists, that he’d thump one blind and stupid if one even so much as thought about poking fun.

Paul liked him right away.

“Sorry,” he murmured, edging fully around the table that had caught the man’s eye. Was that a -- oh, yes, he was in luck, wasn’t he? A definite second look back at him. Too early to tell what the man thought of what he saw. Paul could still hope. How long had it been...?

Way too long, if he couldn’t remember.

“Do I have something on my face?” the stranger inquired, his lips quirking in an almost-smile. He had a different sort of voice. Deep, melodic, the kind of voice that belonged with Gregorian chants and deeply shadowed corners of history. Didn’t match his physical

appearance at all. Paul would've bet good money he'd used that voice to his advantage in the past. He'd have been a fool not to, and though they'd barely just met, he knew for a certainty that this man, whoever he was, was no fool.

"You're staring," the stranger explained. "Either I've got a smear of egg yolk on my chin or a splash of something unmentionable on my nose. Or you're a rude son-of-a..." -- he stopped himself, eyeing the prim and proper matron two tables over -- "...son-of-a-son. So, which is it?"

"Rude. Sorry."

"Not a problem. I'm just too pretty to escape the adoration of my fans." One gentian eye closed in a wink. "Is this where I try some kind of line like 'What's a nice guy like you doing in a place like this?'"

Paul glanced uncertainly at the woman and then at the rest of St. Augustine that had decided to trade trash and treasure at the church's annual flea market. If they heard...wait, no. What did he care if they heard? He had nothing to be ashamed of.

"You could try one of the tired, old pickup lines," he allowed. "Why do I think you're capable of originality instead?"

"Ooh, you've got my number." The man picked up a broken alarm clock, clicked his tongue disparagingly, and put it down in favor of half a food processor. "My name's Jake," he offered without looking away. "Jakey, to my mates." He grimaced. "Stupid, but what can I do?"

"Good to meet you, Jakey." Paul shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Fuck, he was nervous. Hadn't had to do this in a couple of years, not since Gerald -- and hadn't he proved to be a sexy, responsive lover once he'd gotten over his nerves -- had gotten that job in the Loire Valley tending shrubbery. Hadn't had a chance, come to that. "I'm --"

“I know who you are.” Jakey put down the processor and picked up a candlestick that might or might not have been bronze at one point in its existence. He frowned and began trying to polish the thing with his shirt.

Paul wanted to snicker. He could so easily see Max behaving exactly the same. Jakey looked a bit like Max anyway, didn't he? Same dark, dark hair, cut short -- although not in Max's style, old or new. A similar type of stubborn chin, hard enough to crack nuts on. Different eyes, of course, and a wholly different nose. Crooked in a couple of places -- likely broken, no doubt in fights; he looked quite the scrapper -- it should've made him ugly, but only lent him all the more fascination.

“You know me?” Paul tilted his head, questioning. “Have we met? I don't think so. There's not a chance I could've forgotten someone like you.”

“Like me, how?” Jakey was innocence itself, peering at the candlestick from all angles. Pure as the driven snow until Paul looked at the way he handled his chosen object d'art, smoothing his closed fist up and down the length in a fluid motion no man could misinterpret.

Was Jakey coming on to him that blatantly? Fuck, but Paul hoped so.

“This is a small town,” Jakey said as he circled his thumb around the empty hole where a candle should fit in the stick. “I don't have a car. Never liked driving. I asked around about taxis and guess who they referred me to? They described you pretty well, although I have *got* to say they didn't tell me everything.” Jakey looked at Paul on the slant and dropped his deep voice to a whisper. “They didn't tell me you were this hot.”

Oh, yes. *Hell, yes. Score!* Paul fought to keep himself from grinning. “There's a pretty good pub on the corner of Pine, downtown. It'll open in --” he checked his watch. “Actually, right about now.”

Jakey chuckled.

“So.” Paul fidgeted. The invitation had been subtle, but, he’d thought, obvious. “Do you...er, would you care for...” Hell. “Want to go have a drink?”

“I thought you’d never ask, Paul.” Jakey finally replaced the benighted candlestick, fifty pence as-is, and held out his rough-hewn hand for Paul to take. His fingers were hard and his palm warm but dry. “The pleasure is all mine.”

He bit his lip ever so slightly as Paul squeezed his fingers, and Paul knew: this was the beginning of something good, and about damn time he had a man who wasn’t Max to focus on.

Getting to know Jakey would be the best thing he could ever do for himself.

“Kind of a hot day,” Jakey said, shading his eyes with his hand and squinting at the brilliantly blue sky. “Is the pub air conditioned?”

“Not really,” Paul admitted-slash-apologized. “Few places are. It’s generally cooler around here -- the higher elevations and all that. We’re not prepared for heat waves, as a rule.”

Jakey snorted. “Tell me about it. So who does have A/C?”

Paul wasn’t sure why he offered what he did, but couldn’t find it in himself to regret the words once they were spoken. “I’ve got central air at my place.”

Jakey’s widening grin made the gamble well worth Paul’s while.

\* \* \* \* \*

And so there they were, Jakey standing behind Paul -- almost too close for comfort -- while Paul jiggled his lock open. “Sorry. Tends to stick when it’s this warm.”

“Humid, too,” Jakey commented in a neutral sort of way. “I’m glad I had a haircut before I moved into St. Augustine, or I’d look like Shirley Temple.” The unspoken challenge to call him “pretty” or “cute” hung threatening in the air.

Paul wouldn't be taken in so easily. "Yeah? I had a -- friend -- once who had the same problem. He never let his hair get past the bottom of his neck. It was black, like yours."

"Dark brown," Jakey corrected.

Paul shrugged. "His was black. He had eyes almost the same color."

"Sounds pretty sexy." If Paul had had any doubts remaining, that would've put paid to all of them. That, and the way Jakey nudged close enough for his groin to brush Paul's ass. Very interested groin. Hard, hard cock apparently insistent on poking its way out.

Paul groaned softly, the sound escaping before he knew what he was doing.

"I thought so," Jakey said, voice positively gloating. "I don't really want a beer. Do you?"

"No." Paul swallowed on a dry throat. "I don't."

"Bet I can guess what you'd rather have sliding down your throat."

"Am I going to get that lucky?"

"If I am. And I know I will." Jakey nudged his cock harder against Paul's ass. "What do you think? How're my odds?"

"I think you'd better get inside before we embarrass ourselves in front of the neighbors' yard gnomes."

"Can't shock innocent gnomes."

"That sounds promising. Are you planning on doing anything shocking?"

"I could frighten the natives with what I have in mind."

The door, thank God, came open at last on a desperate jiggle. "Come inside, then, and let's see if you live up to your sales pitch. Go on, give me all you've got."

A strong hand stole around unerringly to grope Paul's cock through his jeans. "I will. Prepare to be amazed."

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ahh! Oh, God. Harder -- yeah -- right there -- *fuck* -- ahh, God, Paul, please.” Jakey arched, ass clearing the bed as he thrust into Paul’s more-than-willing mouth. Paul sucked in every centimeter Jakey had to give and went looking for more, glad to choke himself if it moved Jakey to wail even louder. The man had a set of pipes on him as well as a cock a stallion would be proud of. And he wanted to be with Paul. Paul! In all the months they’d been together by that point, he’d never so much as looked at anyone else. Good man.

Not that there were too many others in St. Augustine to choose from. It didn’t matter. Jakey liked him. Told him so. Often. Loudly.

And Jakey loved what Paul could do with his tongue. Eager to impress, Paul licked around the crown of Jakey’s cock, savoring the flavor of morel mushrooms and salt that leaked out. He moaned in the back of his throat, hoping to egg Jakey on to greater heights of orgasmic chanting.

“Stop!” Jakey pushed frantically on Paul’s shoulders. “Stop. Too much.”

Paul drew off with a slurp and a skeptical look. “And this is a problem?”

“Do you want me to come in your mouth?”

“I wouldn’t hate that, no. As a matter of fact, I was trying, so can I get back to it?”

Jakey whooped softly. “So you’re saying you don’t want me to fuck you?”

*Oh, really, now?*

“Any time or any place would be fine with me.” Paul stole another lick, twining his tongue around in a manner carefully calculated to make Jakey shriek -- which, gratifyingly, he did. “You taste so fucking good. I want more.” He tapped out a short rhythm on the shaft. “But if you’re serious about topping, well...” Paul trailed off hopefully. He burned for the feel of a fat, hard cock pushing inside. Way too much time had passed since he’d had a chance to bottom.



The problem there was that Paul didn't believe Jakey would ever *really* want to. He loved taking cocks up his own ass far too much. Paul's cock, for choice, which he couldn't seem to get enough of.

Paul waited to see what Jakey would do, to hear what he might say. Was he serious?

"I'm tempted." Jakey drew his knees toward his slim waist, exposing his cheeks. "Maybe next time. You know what I want right now."

Paul did, and for fuck's sake, plowing a tight ass like Jakey's could scarcely be called a hardship.

Especially considering the way Jakey caterwauled and stretched his arms toward heaven when Paul stroked deep on a slick of lubricant and his own spunk.

"Harder, harder, *harder*," Jakey begged.

It couldn't get any better than this.

Paul refused to let himself think otherwise. Jakey wasn't Max, but he didn't need or want another Max. He'd do. He'd do.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come on, slowpoke. You're going to miss the best part."

"They're stars," Paul pointed out, hurrying to catch up with Jakey. Excitement had lent him extra speed. "Flaming balls of gas fixed in the firmament. They're not going anywhere."

"Shows what you know." Jakey stuck his tongue out at Paul, wagging away between his teeth. Paul stumbled, shocked, mind filling with memories of Max doing the same damned thing. He'd caught his breath every time, knowing full well the wicked thoughts behind that particular smile, knowing Max was about to make him scream...

"Paul?" He blinked out of his brown study to see Jakey staring, one eyebrow raised. His smile was guarded and not so cheerful. "Where'd you go this time?"

Paul blushed. "Sorry, Jakey. Just my daydreams again."

Jakey studied him, the lines of his face unreadable. Paul looked back, hoping to God that Jakey didn't think he had another lover occupying his thoughts. He *didn't*. Not really.

"Okay," Jakey said after the space of a few breaths had passed. He reached for Paul's hand. He'd lost all the spring in his step and sparkle in his marvelous eyes. Paul felt precisely two centimeters tall. "I put the blanket down in the far edge of the backyard. There's a good view of Mars tonight."

Flat. Flat and lifeless, he was, and Paul had brought him that low. Repentant, Paul took Jakey's hand in his and kissed the bony knuckles. "Forgive me? I'll do better."

"Yeah." Jakey looked away. "You always say that."

\* \* \* \* \*

He made the suggestion after breakfast one muggy summer morning. July. He liked July. Doing his best to appear casual, Paul waited until Jakey had finished eating and occupied himself with idly swabbing his crusts through the remains of a fried egg. Paul lifted his coffee cup to his lips, speaking before he took a sip. "Ever thought about moving in?"

The surprise, then joy, in Jakey's eyes and broad smile should have made Paul the happiest man alive. Didn't, not quite, but he savored the small glow of pleasure and figured that was good enough.

More than most men ever got. It'd do.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You only love me for my body, don't you?" Jakey asked, toying languidly with Paul's fingers.

"You'd rather I didn't?"

"Nah. I like knowing where I stand."

“Or lie,” Paul teased, running a thumbnail up Jakey’s spine. Jakey shivered so prettily -- although Paul would never tell him so; he liked his balls intact, after all. He did it again to watch the man’s skin ripple over his muscles. Tough, taut, tiny, wiry -- that was his Jakey.

“I do like your personality. Your courage is nice enough. You have a knack for making me feel like the god of fucking. You know how to wash dishes, and I suppose it’s not a bad thing to use more than a microwave when you cook.” Paul faked a yawn. “Yeah. I really do just lo -- love you for your body.”

Jakey had to have noticed Paul stumbling over the L-word. He couldn’t have missed that. To Paul’s relief, he said nothing, raising Paul’s fingers to his mouth to suck one in and begin lapping it with moist heat. “As long as I know where I stand,” he mumbled around the digit.

Paul ended up nailing Jakey to the mattress for the second time in two hours and forgot the whole conversation.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Welcome to Reilly’s. How many will there be this evening?”

“Just two, thanks.” Paul put his hand briefly on Jakey’s shoulder, squeezing. Jakey bumped Paul’s hip with his own.

The hostess looked slightly puzzled. “Business dinner?” she tried asking politely. It had been years since St. Augustine had forgotten about Paul’s sexual orientation, and he’d never had cause to raise the rainbow flag again. No one he cared about enough to live openly with until Jakey, and even then no one officially knew they were more than good mates sharing a place to save on expenses. Jakey preferred to keep his personal business private.

Although their “close friendship” *did* have to strike people as odd. How could two men such as they have so much in common as to keep them that tightly tied at the hip? Paul’s taxi business and Jakey’s spice trading affairs didn’t come anywhere close together. Not unless

you counted frantic midnight runs to the airport to pick up a fragile shipment of this or an oh-my-God delicate parcel of that which could in no way handle the cold/heat/rain/dry.

“We’re --” Paul started.

“-- friends,” Jakey finished. He didn’t overflow with charm like -- like other people Paul had known before -- but he had enough to dazzle the hostess with a smile. “Anywhere but the smoking section would be great.”

The hostess dimpled at him. “You must know we don’t have a smoking section, sir. Most restaurants haven’t had those for years now.”

“A man has to try, doesn’t he?” Jakey gave her his best rakish wink. “How about a seat at the bar instead?”

She blushed an attractive, pale pink. “Let me see what we have available. One moment.”

Jakey eyed her with definite appreciation as her curvy backside wiggled off in search of a decent table. It was more crowded by far than Paul would’ve guessed. Reilly’s hadn’t been open long, maybe a month or so. The food must be good.

“She’s enough to make me wish I like women,” Jakey remarked under his breath but clearly meant for Paul to hear. “Look at her go. Mmm!”

Paul rolled his eyes. “Don’t even try. You can’t make me jealous.” He thought he remembered the hostess, now, a little girl with unraveling pigtails and a gap-toothed grin. Chocolate ice cream smeared across her chin. She’d gone and turned into a va-va-va-voom set of dips and curves overnight, hadn’t she? He vaguely recalled her name as Emma.

“Stop perverting over the infants,” he snapped, suddenly irritable. “You’re here with me, after all.”

“Am I?”

Paul didn't have a chance to ask Jakey what the bloody hell he meant by *that, Mr. No-One-Needs-To-Know*, before Emma returned, bearing leather-backed menus that probably weighed more than her head, silky brown mane of curls and all. "This way, gentlemen."

"Anything you say," Jakey murmured, falling into step behind. Checking her out. Paul knew Jakey was only trying to make him jealous. The little fucker. It worked.

When he tried to quiz Jakey as to his mood, Jakey deflected the question. He distracted Paul with a discussion over the relative merits of shrimp versus lobster until Paul forgot what he'd been worrying over. Again.

He decided later that he wouldn't push his luck. Why rock the boat when he was enjoying a good, strong sailing wind?

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mail's here." Jakey swung into the sitting room, tossing a messy stack that was held together with a rubber band onto the telephone stand. "I didn't sort through there yet. It's too cold to stand around the post box."

"Delicate, wilting flower." Paul, who'd stayed put on the couch as any sensible man would do during a blizzard, rolled his eyes. Jakey made a rude noise with his tongue before getting on with stripping off the multiple layers he'd donned for a trek out to the end of their drive. Scarf, Wellingtons, ski coat, sheepskin gloves. "Best go have a hot bath before you fall prey to the vapors."

"Shut it, you."

Paul chuckled. He scooped up the post, investigating with a practiced eye. Not much of import -- never was, when they had a ton to sort -- *Wait, what's this? A letter? Who the fuck still sends actual letters? It's all e-mail and faxes and text messages these days.* Computer-generated address label. No return address. Odd.

He slit open the thick, cream-colored envelope. Expensive stuff with an unfamiliar watermark. The letter itself, crowded with a cornucopia of words written in heavy black ink, was open in front of him before his brain caught up. He recognized the handwriting before the signature came into focus.

His wrist jerked as if he'd been burned. He found himself scrunching the letter into a ball, telling himself he didn't care, that he wanted to destroy this communication. At the sound of crinkling paper, Jakey popped his head free of the bulky knit jumper he was removing and looked curiously at Paul. "Something wrong?"

"Nothing," Paul lied, kicking two ivory chits that had fallen from the envelope under the couch. Tickets to *Sunset Boulevard*. Box seats. "Nothing at all. Come here, would you? I want to hold you."

Jakey didn't understand, that much was clear, but did as he'd been asked all the same. His head fit comfortably in the crook of Paul's shoulder, his hand reaching for Paul's out of long habit.

"You fit so perfectly with me," Paul said, kissing Jakey's curly head. "All your bends and kinks match mine to a T."

Jakey made a small, happy noise. "I could stay like this forever," he murmured, following up with a yawn.

"So could I." Paul put the letter out of his mind. "You're in my heart."

"I love you, too."

Paul stroked Jakey's arm, and said nothing in return.

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul lay with his forearm flung over his eyes. The chilly burn of a late winter's night made his head hurt. He had no idea what was wrong with him. There Jakey was, doing his best to please him, but was he grateful? Excited at all? Fuck, no. He'd lost his mind, hadn't

he? No man should ever turn down a hot, wet mouth enveloping his cock, but God help him, the last thing he wanted right then was a blow job. More, he didn't feel the least bit interested in fucking Jakey afterward, the way he knew Jakey would likely expect.

How was he supposed to say no? He loved Jakey. Really, he did. He wasn't -- someone Paul had imagined spending the rest of his life with -- but he'd do. He'd do.

Nothing could be allowed to get in the way.

Jakey nibbled lightly at the side of Paul's cock. He cried out despite his earlier misgivings and realized that, despite what he'd thought, Jakey *could* easily change his mind.

"Good," Jakey crooned in between laps of his clever, wicked tongue, his tough fingers kneading Paul's hips hard enough to leave bruises. He liked making marks that would last. "So good."

\* \* \* \* \*

Early morning, the last gasp of winter. Not enough hot water for both. Jakey rattling open the shower curtain and stepping in with a warning glare.

Paul moved over, no comments, and wordlessly passed the stranger whom he called his lover the soap.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh, hey, leave it on this station." Jakey nodded in time with the slow, seductive beat pouring from the radio. "Paul?"

"Hmm?" Paul frowned through the lenses he'd been told to wear for reading, trying to make out the small print of the newspaper ad that kept swimming out of focus. "What is it, Jakey?"

"Why don't you like dancing?"

The question surprised him, although he had known this would be coming *someday*. Paul had prepared his answer long ago. "I don't know how."

Jakey shrugged. "It's not hard. With a song like this all you have to do is hug and sway." He paused. "Want to?"

*Abort. Abort.* "I've got to finish this reading."

"It can wait." Jakey was suddenly there -- Paul hadn't seen him move -- plucking the glasses off his nose and taking him by the wrists, tugging him onto his feet. "Dance with me."

"I'd rather not."

"You dance with me, and I'll fuck you tonight."

Paul wondered at how completely the offer failed to move him. He felt cold and still as he gazed at Jakey. "No."

And that was the end of that.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Want some coffee? I made a fresh pot."

"Thanks, but no. Too tired."

"Going to bed?" Jakey asked lightly -- too lightly, as Paul would later realize. "Or we could stay up and go watch the stars."

"Nah. I'd fall asleep and you'd have to lug my carcass back in." Paul dropped a casual kiss on Jakey's temple. Good old familiar Jakey. He'd become like part of the furnishings. Simple, comfortable, familiar. Always there to be counted on. "Night, love."

He didn't hear Jakey's reply until he was halfway up the stairs.

"Goodnight," his lover, almost more like a stranger now, said, followed by a hard slamming noise Paul almost didn't register. The sound of a fist punching into the hard old wood of his kitchen table.

He didn't think to listen any harder.

\* \* \* \* \*



“Sorry I’m late.” Paul strode through the den, flipping through the daily mail. Bill, bill, junk, junk, junk, bill, a postcard for Jakey. Paul flipped it over, casually curious. Someone named Paddie. Strange name, he thought idly before forgetting it for an envelope marked “PAST DUE” in bright red ink. VISA something or another. Jakey’s name on the envelope.

Paul opened his mouth, concerned, meaning to ask if Jakey was having a problem with money, He hadn’t said anything about the spice shop in a long, long time. Paul had assumed that meant things were going well. Maybe he should have asked before.

The words were on the tip of his tongue when he looked up and saw Jakey standing alone in the sitting room, his wiry arms folded tight across his chest, looking flatly at the answering machine. Almost angrily.

“Something the matter?” Paul asked, worried. Jakey looked as if he wanted to kill the innocuous-looking plastic box. He thought, with a guilty flinch, about the kisses he’d stolen from Jakey a few nights before under a blacked-out streetlight. Jakey had gotten so touchy about public displays of affection, insisting who and what he was, was nobody’s business but his own. He always scowled and muttered imprecations and glared daggers at anyone he thought might be talking about him, or worse, poking malicious fun. “Don’t tell me someone’s making a fuss.”

“Uh-uh.” Jakey stuck out his jaw. He turned his back to Paul and asked in a small, small voice. “So. Who’s Max?”

Paul’s heart sank. *Fuck.*

\* \* \* \* \*

BEDROOM. BEDROOM. BATHROOM. TAX RECORDS. KITCHEN STUFF (SPOONS, FORKS, ETC.)

Tiny sticky-backed packing and moving labels written in red Sharpie. A collection of tags that marked the end of an era.

Fucking *years* he'd spent with Jakey, and this was all Paul had to show for himself.

He'd tried so hard. In the end, though, it wasn't enough. He'd been a fool to think it ever would be.

"I can't compete with a ghost," Jakey had finally said with a shake of his head, overgrown black curls brushing his collar. "I don't even think I want to."

"He's not been a part of this relationship," Paul protested. "Not once. Not ever."

"Liar." The accusation held no heat. "You never mentioned him, no, but now that I know what to look for and look back on, he's *always* been right there, Paul. Right *fucking* there, and you never told me."

"Because it didn't matter! He's in the past. Long past."

"You keep telling yourself that, Paul. Maybe someday you'll realize what you sound like." Jakey rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Don't make this any harder than it has to be. Okay? For the sake of the good times we had."

"Please. Stay. We can work past this, we can --"

"No. We can't." Jakey looked away. "You know Paddie?" he asked abruptly. "Paddie of the postcards? I lied to you. Paddie's not a she. Paddie's a he. We used to be...we had a thing before I left Aberdeen."

Paul had gone numb. "And now?" he asked through frozen lips.

Jakey's shrug was all the answer he needed.

"So."

"Yeah." Jakey smiled. "Hey. It was fun while it lasted. Right?"

Paul wasn't able to think. His entire world was being dragged out from underneath him, a-fucking-gain, and he was powerless to stop the tide.

“See you around,” Jakey said, after the pause had gone on long enough to get awkward. He shouldered a small box of books, the ones that used to clutter up his half of the nightstand, and walked out the door, out of Paul’s life.

He didn’t so much as kiss Paul good-bye.

\* \* \* \* \*

And now Paul was alone again.

*I can’t compete with a ghost.*

*I don’t even think I want to try.*

Paul’s eyes burned. Dry. “Ah, Jakey.” He still felt the need to apologize, although that would be pointless, wouldn’t it, as Jakey had long since left the house for the last time.

As he rubbed at the pain in his temples, the phone rang. Paul let it peal unanswered for the ninth or tenth time. No need to pick up. He knew the message that would be left by heart.

Knew the voice.

How could Max pick his moments with such deadly precision?

“Paul? Paul, are you there? Pick up. You’re scaring me. I need to know if you’re all right.” Pause. Sigh. “Call me.”

As the message clicked off, Paul put out a finger to press the DELETE button.

He couldn’t talk to Max just then.

He wasn’t sure he ever would be ready again, after how he’d fucked Jakey over for the sake of loving a “ghost.”

How was it possible to know someone had ruined you for life -- made you unfit to love another, even when they deserved all you could give -- and not hate them in return, but know you loved them all the more? That the very fucking sound of their voice filled you with more joy than you’d felt during *years* with the man you’d chosen to share your life?

Fuck Max. *Fuck* him.

*And fuck me, too*, Paul thought as he lowered his face onto his arms.

“Find someone to love you better, Jakey.” Paul shut his eyes. “You had a wretched good-bye, you did. Less than you deserved. Get out of here and go nail down a man with good hands and a kindly heart who’ll give you what you’re worth.” He looked up and away, out the window. “I did love you, Jakey, or at least I tried, but you were right.”

Jakey had been in Paul’s arms. That should have been enough.

But Max had been in Paul’s thoughts, in his heart.

“Sorry, Jakey,” Paul mumbled as he sought the whiskey glass never far from his hand these days. He gulped a searing swallow of something with the flavor of peat smoke. “So very, very sorry. Here’s to you.”

## Chapter Six

### *Act V: Three Years after Jakey's Departure (Age Forty-One)...*

“So, okay, he was the love of your life. Cry me a river.” Ricky didn’t look impressed. He scoffed at Paul as only a teenager could and got on with the serious business of stirring his Blizzard, hunting in vain for any possible chunks of cookie dough he might have missed.

Not likely, in Paul’s opinion. God, kids were like little Hoovers these days, weren’t they? He remembered being young, sure, and what a voracious appetite he’d had. Not for food, though.

Now, as then, more often than not, he forgot to eat. Food took up too much time that could be used for something far more interesting. His passion for cooking, evidenced by attempts at biscotti-making, more or less faded when confronted by his amazing ability to scorch or overboil any food that couldn’t be prepared by pressing a preset button on the microwave. Ah, well. He ate just fine at the small restaurants in town when he’d a mind to, and they made heat-and-eat meals in every color of the rainbow these days.

Where had he been? Oh, right. Ricky the Stomach, and Paul’s uneasy desire to be anywhere but there. Why had he thought this would be a good idea, again? Well, it wasn’t as

if he could have just left Ricky to his own devices. St. Augustine was far too small a community to reject the company of like minds, especially when they were trying to deal with inclinations others would consider deviant. Paul couldn't have lived with himself if he'd turned an unsympathetic shoulder to a lad seeking guidance, albeit with a decided lack of grace.

It did make him feel fucking old, though, to have a boy of seventeen looking to him as a near-father-figure mentor. Time didn't just fly -- it broke the sound barrier.

Ricky was staring at him in the deliberately scornful manner of one who didn't know anything yet about life, but was convinced he'd seen into the hearts of mankind -- and didn't like what he'd found there.

"Sorry." Paul tapped his spoon against the sweating paper cup his own modest serving of -- what was it? -- chunky banana rum monkey? "I tend to lose myself. Age, you know." He winced internally. Still hard to believe he'd passed the forty-year milestone. It was still in good sight and waving distance, but that wasn't the point, was it? Not when working up a proper sulk over birthdays.

Ricky accepted Paul's explanation at face value. Only remembering how it could've been for him, if there hadn't been a Max, kept Paul from thinking the teenager a sour, surly lout with no redeeming features. And he had his life of the past however-many-odd years to draw on. No doubt the folk of St. Augustine considered him to be a dry old misanthrope.

If only they knew...

Ricky's eyes betrayed the tiniest flicker of fear. He glanced from side to side, painfully obvious yet fully believing himself to be performing a covert sweep. Then he leaned across the table, beckoning Paul to come near enough to whisper to.

Paul didn't. That'd be a great thing, wouldn't it, if someone got the wrong idea about what he was doing with a barely legal boy in a bloody ice cream parlor?

Ricky looked cross, but fortunately for Paul, didn't push his agenda. "Okay," he said, taking a deep breath. "Okay. Forget about Max."

*It's hardly that easy*, Paul thought, parching his tongue on the dryness of that particular observation.

Ricky, on the other hand, seemed to have no trouble at all putting Max out of his mind. He had other rabbits to chase. "How did you know?" He withdrew his plastic spoon from his melting Blizzard and set to drumming a sticky two/four beat on the tabletop between them. "I mean, is it obvious or something?" He looked up at Paul, clearly worried now. "Can everyone tell?"

Paul couldn't hold back a smile. "Not at all. Homosexuality can be obvious to the naked eye if the person's nature inclines them to dramatics." *Max*. "Take me, for example. I don't think anyone else within the city limits, saving your presence, knows I like other men."

Ricky's spoon faltered between taps. "Yeah. I didn't know. Not for sure. There are a couple of stories that I never believed."

"Stories?" Paul asked, snapping to attention. "There are stories?"

"Yeah." Ricky shrugged. "Mostly just old church biddies wondering why you never got married. They say you're still pretty hot for a guy your age." A new idea struck Ricky. "Hey, do you still...do it?" He lowered his whisper to a hiss. "You know. Have sex?"

"Good Lord." Paul was glad he hadn't chosen that moment to take a bite of ice cream. "Not recently," he said, pleased at the way he remained outwardly placid and -- mostly -- unbothered. "It's been, oh...two, maybe three years?"

"Huh." Ricky looked skeptical. "I thought gay men were all about fucking everything that moved."

"Language," Paul reproved. "And you've been watching too many reruns of that dusty old *Queer as Folk* tripe if you believe that tangle of fiction."

"The magazines --"

“Are what every lonely man would like to believe is reality. Trust me, the adult world does not behave so irresponsibly, nor, as you can see, are we all under twenty-five, built like tank trucks, and blond. Nor can we all dance.”

“Dude.” Ricky was impressed. “That’s cold.”

Paul raised one shoulder. “That’s life.”

“Were you always this bitter?”

Ah, the lack of restraint in the young. Paul licked ice cream off his spoon to give himself a moment to compose his thoughts; in the end, he stuck with truth. “Not always. I knew a man, once, who wouldn’t have let me get away with copping this kind of ’tude.”

“Dude. Don’t, with the slang. It just sounds wrong when you say it.” Ricky made a face. “So this man, he was the one you mentioned earlier, right? The love of your life and all, blah, blah, blah?”

Paul nodded. “I loved him very much.” He could make the statement with neither anger nor regret these days. “He was everything to me, when he was here.”

“He lived in St. Augustine?” Ricky’s eyes went wide with -- what? Horror, disbelief, awe? “No way. And you and he were together? Like, openly and shit? Get out of town. You never.”

“We weren’t a secret, but neither were we flamboyant. Well. *I* wasn’t flamboyant. Max is another story. And what did I tell you about minding your language?”

“Like you never cuss,” Ricky accused. “I heard you shouting at your car when it broke down in the parking lot outside the post office. Man, the letter carrier was impressed, and I heard he’d been in Viet-fucking-nam.”

“I doubt it. He’s from Bristol.”

“Give me a break, okay?”

Paul had to concede Ricky had a good point. “Fine. I’ll watch the parental impulses. Go on, then.”



“You still love him. You’re transparent, man,” Ricky observed. The lad was good with tangents. “So, tell me about him. Everyone really knew he was gay? And that you were, too, and that you were a couple? Seriously, man. People must have shit themselves.”

“I wouldn’t start hanging rainbow flags in town square just yet. Pretty much everyone objected to us. Max was one thing, he wasn’t born and raised here, whereas I was. Lord, the ruffling of feathers over how I was ‘throwing my life away.’” Paul rolled his eyes. “At the time, I didn’t let that bother me, much less stop me. We were young and in love. I might have mellowed with age if Max hadn’t...well. I didn’t get the chance, so there’s no need to belabor the point. They decided I’d reformed when he was gone and I didn’t draw any further attention to myself. Perhaps that was my mistake. Perhaps I should have done. Regardless, believe me when I say that when you find someone like Max, you’ll understand. I would have gone to the ends of the earth for his sake.”

*Only not*, Paul realized too late to correct himself. After all, he *could* have followed Max to London -- if he’d ever been seriously asked, not as a weekend fuck, but as a full civil partner. He and Max would have been together for over twenty years by then, and wasn’t that a thought to give a man pause?

Ricky stared at Paul with a look of respect. “You *really* love him. Wow. Fuck. I kinda wondered if it could actually happen with two men.”

“You hoped for nothing better than sex with strangers?”

Ricky blushed, which made Paul smile. “Sort of,” the teenager said, looking down. He traced his forefinger through the trails of melted ice cream he’d spattered about during his spoon solo. “This town, you know? I couldn’t see myself finding anyone who’d be open about who they were, or okay with me not hiding. No insult; it’s just the closet life isn’t for me.” Ricky made an impatient movement, a sort of full-body twitch. “What would my friends think? And spare me that whole ‘If they’re really your friends, they wouldn’t care’ speech. Half the guys I hung with are calling me a ‘filthy fucking queer’ already.” He shoved his Blizzard aside and glared at the wall. “No one lets you be yourself anymore.”

“They never did, this almighty ‘they,’” Paul said gently. “It’s learning to ignore them that helps you find your place in this world.”

“Uh-huh. Sure. So why doesn’t anyone else know you’re gay?”

Ouch. “You don’t spare anyone, do you? No, no need to answer; that was rhetorical. I suppose no one knows because, as I told you, they’ve forgotten who I was when I was younger, and there hasn’t been anyone since then who might tempt me out of a monkish state.” He hesitated. *Forgive me, Jakey.* “No one I cared to live with openly, or who wanted to live openly with me. Don’t mistake my meaning. I haven’t been celibate. Far from it, in fact.”

“There was a guy, though, wasn’t there?” Ricky guessed shrewdly. “That guy with the weird-ass spice shop, right?”

Paul rode right over the lucky shot. “If there were there to be someone I -- loved -- in my life, loved like that, I’d hold their hand as I walked down Main Street.”

“We don’t have a Main Street.”

Paul chuckled. “Literal-minded, you are. Sometimes. You know what I meant.”

“Yeah.” Ricky sucked his spoon clean with a noisy slurp. “Tell me more about Max.”

“What do you want to know?” Paul spread his hands. “He was here, I loved him, he loved me, and then we went our separate ways. Pretty much end of story right there.”

“There has to be more than that. Tell me what he looked like.”

“You’ve likely seen Max for yourself. Do you remember the televised production of *Phantom of the Opera* that came on BBC Three last Valentine’s Day?” Paul hadn’t watched, himself, but that was beside the point. He’d seen a commercial, so he knew, and he’d avoided the telly for the rest of the season to make sure he didn’t stumble on Max professing his love for a skinny blond chav dressed up as Christine, because really, a man could only take so much. “He played the role of the Phantom.”

“No shit?” Ricky’s mouth opened in surprise. “He’s hot! He actually lived here? Wait. Wait a sec. My mom and her bridge biddies talk about this gay guy who left St. Augustine a long time ago. They talk about him like he’s the Son of Sam or some such shit. Is that Max?”

“Son of Sam. Yes, that’s probably Max.”

“And you were in love with him. Hottie leaves the hometown boy.” Ricky mused over that. “Didn’t it feel empty when he left?”

Ouch, again.

“Why did he leave?” Ricky persisted. “Was it to go act or something? Man, why split up? Why the hell are you still here?”

“I’ve asked myself that same question more than once.”

Ricky drew up and froze like a forming icicle as a hand touched his shoulder.

“Hi, kid. I don’t know you, but I think you know me.”

Ricky’s lips barely moved as he stared at Paul. “Is he...that’s him behind me?”

“I believe he inspired the phrase ‘Speak of the devil,’” Paul said without looking at more than Max’s hand. God, how easily recognizable just his fucking *hand* was. Even if he hadn’t spoken to Ricky, Paul would have known him right away. Didn’t he always have Murphy’s own timing? “Go on, Ricky. We’ll finish this another time.”

“Uh, right. Okay. Sure.” Ricky swept together his mess of napkins, spoon, and sloshing cup of melted sugar. “Nice meeting you. Sir.”

Max laughed, his good old booming laugh that warmed a man from the inside out. He grinned at Ricky and held out the hand that had been on Ricky’s shoulder for the boy to shake. Ricky, after a startled moment and a hasty juggle of his trash, took Max’s hand in awe.

Max deftly adjusted their grip and raised Ricky’s hand to his lips for a kiss. Ricky gasped. Paul rolled his eyes -- tolerantly. “See you around, Ricky,” Max murmured, laying the charm on thick. “Take care of yourself.”

Ricky nodded dumbly. He glanced from Max to Paul and back again, tore his hand from Max's, and ran.

"I think you scared him off," Paul remarked as the boy made tracks. "He's only just figured out he's queer, and now you've gone and ruined him for life."

"Just figured out? How old is he?"

"Not that it's any of your concern, but seventeen."

"Jesus. That's robbing the cradle. So he's my replacement?"

"I'm not quite that much of a lech, thank you. Ricky is a sort-of student."

"What, you're a teacher now?"

Paul snorted. "Hardly. I don't have the patience."

"I don't know. I'd say you're pretty good with waiting."

Paul cut Max a sharp look that Max avoided by pretending to study the company business statement on the near wall. "Yeah, well, I'm not a teacher, thanks. I drove Ricky and some little chav friend of his out of town to a concert. I made the mistake of telling them I missed Jakey when they asked after him, and I suppose Ricky came to his own conclusions."

"Jakey?"

"Live-in lover. Sort of. No one knew, which was how he wanted things. He's gone now," Paul said, curt and direct. He didn't care to discuss Jakey, especially with Max. "Ricky suspected I might be someone he could talk to, and he was right. He's full of prickles and teenage hormones right now, but I think he'll shape up to be a fine man."

"So, who is?" Max didn't sit down. Just stood there, hands in his pockets, expression unreadable. "My replacement, I mean."

"That's being full of yourself."

"Okay, then, who's Jakey's replacement? Who keeps you warm at night these days?"

Paul started to answer, then stopped himself. Max didn't need to know. He had no right, did he?

Jakey had been too special. But in the end, he hadn't been enough because he wasn't Max, though, God knew, he'd tried. Paul had tried so hard to fall in love with Jakey.

Paul sucked in his cheeks before going on. "And, well, as for replacing you, there's no one really capable of that, is there?" He finally looked at Max, accepting the man's frank assessment of him that was already in progress. He didn't object. He had nothing to hide. "Let's start again, shall we? Hello, love. I've missed you. What brings you to town?"

Max blinked. "Okay...very much *not* what I was expecting."

"Give yourself a moment for the vertigo to pass."

"Yeah. Not a bad idea. Can I...?" He gestured to the chair Ricky had recently vacated.

"Please."

"Huh." Max sank into the seat, giving Paul curious eyes. "You mean it, don't you? Minus a little sarcasm, you really don't mind my being here."

"Not at all."

"Given what happened last time we met, I kinda thought you'd bring out the pitchforks and torches if I ever set foot in St. Augustine again."

"Oh, believe me, I'm surprised as fuck that you had the balls to come around. I might've kicked your ass back then. Not now."

Max frowned, clearly baffled. "Why not?"

"Is that what you want?"

"Actually, no."

"There you are, then. Max, I'm just too old to hold grudges or fight the inevitable. I've always loved you. I always will love you. It is as it is."

He'd baffled Max past recovery with that one, Paul knew. He waited for Max to recoup, drinking in the sight of him in the meantime. Max's eyes were as deep and as sparkling a brown as ever, weren't they? The face he'd grown famous for was far more handsome than it'd been when they were both young. Max had aged well. Well on the way to "distinguished" along with the likes of Harrison Ford and Sean Connery.

Paul was amused by how long the pause went on. Oddly, he was also at peace. "Believe me or believe me not, but I'm telling you, it's the truth."

Max shook his head. Unlike Ricky, he didn't play with assorted distractions on the table or look away. "I have to ask..."

"Go ahead."

"Mmm. If you don't hate me, why haven't you ever made contact?"

"Oh, Lord. I knew what would happen. I'd come running, you'd get your itch scratched, and we'd fall into that nasty cycle again."

"Ouch."

"I'm only speaking plain, which I should have done long ago."

"Yeah." Max looked away. "I can't deny you there."

"Do *not* say you're sorry. I don't have time for that crap."

Max flinched. "Okay. Go on."

"Thank you. All else aside, I'm needed here 24/7, all twelve months of the year. Plenty of people needing rides to and from the airport, and the taxi *is* how I make my living. Besides. I couldn't have been spared. It wasn't personal."

"But you never answered the phone when I called. And I did. Not a lot, but..."

"I've had my number changed."

Max blinked. He hadn't been expecting that. "Was it because of me?"

"Don't flatter yourself, love."

Max fell quiet, confusing Paul in turn. A smile sparked from nothing and teased the corners of his mouth.

“What are you grinning at?”

“I’d forgotten how good that sounds when you say it in that sexy voice of yours. ‘Love.’ It’s been a long, long time.” Max inhaled, then stretched his hand out on the table in a mute plea. “Maybe too long.”

Once upon a time, this would’ve been a terrible mistake. Now, Paul felt no more than a mild sense of surprise, and an unexpected but not unwelcome warmth. He took Max’s hand in his own, turning it over to examine the palm.

He knew what Max was asking. “All right,” Paul said, simple and open. He met Max’s hopeful gaze with a small smile. “You’re a sorry old bastard, and you deserve to be booted into the gutter for all the shit you’ve pulled, but what the hell? You’re a sexy devil, too. One for old times’ sake, then.”

Max blinked rapidly. He wanted to reach up and rub his eyes and maybe wiggle his ears, Paul could tell. “You’re serious?”

“I always have been. You’re the jokester. Come on.” Paul squeezed Max’s fingers. He didn’t question what he wanted. Not anymore. “Your place or mine?”

Max’s laughter, when he threw back his head and hooted in sheer delight, was the sweetest sound Paul had heard in years.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was like, and yet not at all like, Paul’s first visit to London so many years ago. He and Max were still good and flexible, but with age came a certain sense of it being perfectly all right to take one’s time with sex. Urgency? Oh, yes. It was just that the need to draw out and savor took precedence.

For all those noble sentiments, Paul found he could still be swept completely off his feet by the force of Max's personality.

Take, for example, what happened after Paul had swung his front door closed with a quiet click and turned around to face Max. "Would you like some -- mmph!"

He'd been about to offer Max wine or a beer, but apparently Max preferred kissing over refreshments. Quite right, too. The heat of his body through his shirt and jeans, annoyingly in the way, lit Paul's skin on fire underneath his own suddenly far-too-constrictive clothing. Fine for a summer's day, they didn't have a chance against the flames that Max ignited within him.

Paul forgot entirely about wine, ice cream, and his carefully acquired sense of dignity in the face of Max's kiss. The years and the tears all melted away, leaving him nothing but the sensation of being one huge nerve ending bursting with sensation.

It reminded Paul of fireworks and the way they made an ordinary night sky become something magical. Like rising to the surface after accepting that one had drowned. A struggle up, a burst into cool, clean air, and the knowledge that one was *alive*. Paul thought he was drunk already on Max, and that it was the most wonderful thing ever.

To show his appreciation, Paul allowed himself to be walked/shoved backward, kiss by kiss, till his shoulders were pressed flush to the wall and Max had him pinned -- no chance of escaping even if he'd been so daft as to want to try. Not likely. He wasn't going to give up a single second of this chance or not-so-chance encounter.

"You know," he murmured, "having sex standing up is getting to be a habit with us. Have you developed some kind of misliking for beds?"

Max chuckled as his tongue tickled through the seam of Paul's lips, opening them to slip inside. Paul closed his eyes and sighed into the kiss, letting Max have his way and do whatever he liked. He'd picked up a few tricks and mixed them so well with his old ways that Paul went lightheaded with pleasure.



That magic tongue curled around his, stroking and tapping, counting his teeth with a muffled chuckle, caressing the insides of his cheeks. His mouth moved against Paul's as if searching for something, growing insistent as Paul let him dominate. Paul lingered, teasing Max by remaining still until Max was kneading at his upper arms and grunting with impatience; then, Paul slowly did to Max what he knew his lover well enough to want and raised his tongue to lazily return Max's advances. Max sighed, sagging briefly against Paul with evident relief.

Paul happily battled with Max for several long, sweet minutes, rebuffing every attempt Max made to hurry him up and doling out tantalizing hints of his own building need when he wanted to make the man particularly crazy.

Max broke for air, breathing deeply as he leaned into Paul. "Sadist," he accused with what Paul suspected would be a smile next to the open neck of his shirt. Max's breath tickled the skin just above that collar. "When did you get mean?"

"Ah, I'm not. It's just that it's so much fun to tease you." Paul rubbed his hand over Max's back, running a thumbnail up the length of his spine. "You weren't always this easy to pull."

"Yeah, well, you make me nuts. I keep forgetting, until I'm with you, and when I remember, I wonder what the hell I was thinking to let so much time pass in between."

Paul bit back the obvious reply. He nuzzled the edge of Max's hairline, still full and thick, the bastard, despite the sprinkling of salt in all his pepper. "Doesn't matter," he said at last. "We'll enjoy what we have while we've got it, won't we?"

"Yeah." Max toyed with the hem of Paul's shirt, hanging loose outside his jeans. When had that happened? Max's mystifying powers of insinuation again. "Yeah." He drew circles on the flat of Paul's lower stomach. "Make the most before we walk away. Me back to my life, you back to yours."

Paul frowned. The tone was flat as a statement, but he could have sworn he heard a question, a hint of a challenge. "That's all we have left. Isn't it enough for you?"

"What? Oh. No, this is fine with me." Max took a playful nip at the skin above Paul's collar. "One more last time, again, for the memories, huh? Let's make this good."

"I thought you'd never ask," Paul breathed, relieved, and grinned into the kiss Max finally delivered. Their mouths sealed together, flesh to flesh, not even a fraction of space betwixt or between.

Making good on his word to create an encounter neither would forget, Max proceeded to play Paul like a finely tuned fiddle. He drew a moan from Paul with the rough heat of his hands -- how strange, that they were still callused after all this time -- as they slid slowly from his waist to his nipples, drawing trails so hot in his wake that Paul wondered if he'd leave scorch marks behind. Max pinched each nipple between thumb and forefinger, at first hard enough to make Paul gasp -- he wasn't used to the rough handling from another man -- and then made him groan with featherlight pressure that never became quite enough to satisfy. The buds raised into tight knots beneath his touch, flaring nubs that Paul would've sworn had a direct connection to his cock.

Said organ was definitely affected by Max's touch and responding to his presence. Paul gave a ragged cry when Max nudged one solid thigh between his long shanks and humped his lower stomach. The man had grown as hard as Paul himself, betraying his urgency and need with the sharpness of his thrusts.

Paul released himself from their kiss and used the door to hold himself upright, head tilted back and neck arched to receive Max's searing, open-mouthed kisses that were sucking up welts and tormenting them with his tongue until Paul groaned in equal parts protest and plea for more.

Max chuckled breathlessly. "Still got it?" he asked in a murmur before licking the small dent where jaw met throat. "Who's the man?"

“I’m not -- *oh* -- *God* -- not going to inflate your ego for you, thanks.” Paul gasped, grasping the back of Max’s head to pull him closer. His hair was damp, as if they’d already been fucking for hours; Max trembled fiercely as a man might after coming hard enough to see stars.

He was, in fact, so distraught that Paul began to wonder. As Max shook his head and his hands began to move again, scoring lines with the blunt ends of his nails, all but chewing on Paul’s nape, Paul tried to question him in between his own struggles for both air and control. “Are -- Max -- fuck -- are you all right?”

A strangled laugh was his only response before Max began tugging at his shirt, clearly wanting it off and out of the way. Paul helped him -- good thing; it took effort equally shared to fumble the garment off his arms and over his head.

“Fair’s fair,” he whispered above Max’s ear before allowing Max another desperate -- yes, desperate, frighteningly so -- attack on his lips. He slid his fingers under Max’s loose tee for his own taste of skin and pulled with stubborn determination. Max sobbed, laughed, and then helped.

Once one of the barriers had gone, the rest melted away in a wash of kisses, breathless chuckles, and what seemed like more than possible the available number of clumsy hands. They were both laughing, stifling giggles on one another’s shoulders, by the time they figured out that Max needed to remove his trainers before his jeans could be completely removed.

With the last obstacle out of their way, Paul was finally free to rock his almost painfully hard cock in time with Max’s thrusts.

*I swear, rutting with Max is always just like going back in time*, he thought through a red haze. *Too bad it didn’t last and could’ve been this good for always. I suppose we’re both to blame there. Fuck!*

“Paul,” he heard Max chanting, almost too quietly to hear. Max fumbled his way into grasping Paul’s hips, found a good grip, and kneaded the cheeks of his ass with single-minded need. He pushed Paul into the door, his cock pressing insistently enough that Paul wondered if Max was trying to melt them together as one entity. Alarming, but God, what a turn-on.

*There’s time for questions later, Paul decided. This moment has already been claimed.* Paul lifted his face as Max did, blindly seeking Max’s lips while his own eyes rested almost closed.

He knew what Max would want, although he was oddly reluctant to ask, and Paul was glad to give it up. “How...do...you...want...me?” His lips touched Max’s on each word. “Whatever you want, love.”

Max snarled and thrust especially hard.

“Love,” Paul repeated. “My love.”

Max loosed a frustrated, muted yell.

“For me,” Paul entreated, pushing back in a staccato rhythm. “Whatever you want.”

“Oh, God,” Max bit off. “On your back.”

“Right here? There’s a good bed only one flight of stairs away.”

“Uh-uh.” Max clearly fought for speech, licking his swollen, dried lips. “That’s one staircase way too far. You asked, I’m telling you. Right here. Right now.” He blanketed Paul’s body with his own, blatant in his frantic desire. “Need to be inside you,” he breathed. “It’s been way too long since I fucked you. Will you let me?”

A shudder ripped through Paul. He had to catch his breath -- a vain attempt -- before nodding. “Only because I’m a selfish bastard, mind, and I want your cock filling me up enough to tip my heels to Jesus. Has nothing to do with adding to my memory book.”

Max snickered, then tore at Paul’s mouth one final time. He backed up just far enough to let Paul move. Max seemed to have lost the ability to speak, too, but his eyes spoke volumes of lust and desperate craving as Paul awkwardly went to his knees. He couldn’t help

but stop to breathe in the rich, musky scent of Max's cock, burying his nose in the thick curls and taking a taste of the clear fluid coating the darkened head.

Max groaned, hands seizing up and curling into fists, then spasming open to push Paul away. "Too close," he evidently found the strength to explain. "Don't want to waste it."

*Sucking you off is hardly a waste*, Paul protested in the corner of his mind still -- barely -- capable of rational thought. A very small corner, drowning fast.

Out loud, he hissed impatiently and dove for Max's cock. He grazed the salty-slick head with his lips before being pushed down in a rough shove. For the sake of play, Paul got one more lick in before following Max's orders to the letter. Willingly. It had been ages since he'd fucked, much less bottomed, but old habits came back with surprising ease.

Once on the floor, after he'd wiggled about a bit to find a good position, Paul spread his thighs wide open in invitation and used his hands to lift his legs high as he could, exposing the knot of muscle Max would be drawn to as a bee to honey. Never failed back then and didn't let him down now.

Max's eyes went wide with surprise, then hazy with lust. He sank down far more gracefully than Paul to run his fingers over Paul's knees, stomach, and balls. Then, almost reverently, up the parted divot of his ass to touch the hole. Max hissed as he probed Paul's sphincter, his single blunt fingertip feeling as massive as Max's cock used to. "Oh, my God. How can you be this tight?"

Paul shoved a spark of irritation firmly aside. "I'm out of practice."

"It shows. Don't want to hurt you." Max looked doubtful.

"You can't," Paul said without elaboration. Almost. "Want you," he added. *Pain hardly matters when it's you who's going to fuck me. A little pain is well worth the chance to rediscover the way you feel.*

Paul grinned as he let go of one leg to tug on his own cock -- long, smooth pulls up the shaft, pausing to sweep his thumb through the slickness there, and back down to squeeze his balls. "Come on, then," he urged. "Have me."

He needn't have asked. Max was already moving in for the kill, lifting Paul's fallen leg and manhandling it until Paul was able to hook the limb around Max's waist. God, youthful-looking and hard-planed as ever, Max was. Paul's heel nudged the top of one tight-squeezed ass cheek that jumped and flexed in time with Max's cock when Paul tickled it with the toes on his other foot.

"Fuck, you're evil," Max ground out. "You're so paying for that, babe."

"Babe." If Paul closed his eyes, it would be all too easy to think he actually had slipped back in time, or that their separation had only been a fevered fantasy. He betrayed how much the pet name turned him on, he thought, by digging his nails into Max's flesh, startling his lover into a curse. *This must be like what Max feels when I call him "love." Pet names are funny things.*

*He's probably called a dozen men or more "babe" in his day, but honestly, I don't care.* He trusted his body far more than his vocabulary.

Raising his hips in wordless demand, Paul displayed the place where he wanted Max to be.

"*Fuck.*" Max appeared to be fighting a silent, internal battle.

Paul laughed at him. "Yes, please."

"Your wish is my command." Max pressed a kiss to the side of Paul's calf. "No. Wait. Slick," he exclaimed in sudden alarm. "Shit. Do you have any?"

Sad to say, no, Paul didn't, and he'd forgotten about that in the face of pure horniness. "Damn! No, wait, wait." He pointed at an armchair he hoped would be within Max's reach. "Lotion, under there. Unscented. Should be all right."

“Thank *God*,” Max moaned reverently. He had to claw about, searching, but in the end was able to fumble the bottle out. He snapped the cap open, almost separating it from the bottle, and squeezed a massive dollop in his palm.

Paul hated to ask. He truly did. But he’d be a fool to avoid the point. “Max,” he said, managing to catch one of the man’s forearms. “Wait.” He swallowed. “Condom?”

Max sighed, dropping his head. “Damn it!”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.” He glared over Paul’s head, not angry at Paul, but perhaps with himself. “If I said I was clean, you wouldn’t believe me, would you?” he asked with more than a trace of bitterness. “I don’t have any. I’m sorry. I didn’t think -- even if, not right away -- fuck!” He slammed his fist on the floor. “Stupid!”

Paul could have wept. He’d gotten his hopes up for the sharp sting of penetration and he burned for the feel of a heavy cock filling him to bursting point. If they couldn’t, though... And God, no matter how he wanted to believe Max, it wasn’t possible to trust him like this.

He let out a shaky breath, lowering the leg he had curled tight around Max, and petted the man’s thigh. “It’s all right,” he said softly. “It’s all right. Come here.”

“I wanted to fuck you,” Max said, face and voice bleak. “I needed to. I just didn’t think.”

“Well, what else is new?” Paul teased, dancing his fingers along Max’s hip. His erection had started to wilt with disappointment, but he felt sure he could summon it again. Perhaps later, after he’d had a chance to visit the drugstore. Max didn’t look to be in any shape for fucking anymore, either. *Damn it!*

“It’ll be all right,” Paul repeated, opening his arm for Max to fall into. Which he did, with a small moan of unhappiness muffled in Paul’s ribs. It wasn’t often that Max got caught short, he suspected, and it was a hell of a mood killer. “Shh, shh,” Paul crooned, sifting his

fingers through Max's hair. He took Max's cock in his free hand and began to tease the shaft back to life, gratified when it hardened in his palm. "Shh. Let me make you feel good."

He didn't need or want the favor returned. Working Max to the point of quivering and gasping incoherently in his arms was good enough.

And, as Max came with a jerk, spilling hot spunk in thick spasms, Paul knew this would be the end, again, for now.

And that was fine. He loved Max enough to let him go.

Someday, Max would understand.



## Chapter Seven

### *Act VI: Two Years Later (Age Forty-Three)...*

“What are you thinking about, love?”

“Mmm?” Max glanced over his shoulder, not seeing Paul, exactly. More looking at something long ago and far away. “Oh. Sorry.”

Paul leaned on his elbow, feeling the sharp-edged spring grass prickle through his sleeve. He smiled at Max, awash with fondness and amused patience. Silly old thing. “You were off in another world, weren’t you?”

Max smiled back, ever so faintly, as if something else had tickled his fancy. Something dancing around in the past he looked at instead of the present. “Yeah. Sorry. That’s usually your thing, isn’t it? I can’t stop thinking...”

“Introspection doesn’t suit you. Try for something with a little bounce to it.”

Max laughed, a sharp bark of sound. “How can you be this good to me after what I put you through? God. You must hate me sometimes.” He turned around to face over the steep drop down to the river that ran through St. Augustine. They’d set up their picnic blanket

there at Max's insistence, not Paul's -- he would have chosen somewhere a bit safer, although he couldn't deny that Max's eye for beauty had not led them astray.

The afternoon sky was brilliantly clear and blue, wisps of white clouds drifting lazily across but never blocking out the sun. Paul lifted his face to feel the warmth -- not yet heat -- playing across eyelids that drifted shut for a long, peaceful moment.

He used the silence to mull over what Max had said, tasting the notion and finding he didn't like it. Too peppery and too bitter for his tastes. When he answered the question that might or might not have been rhetorical, he spoke with honesty. "I don't hate you," he said. "Not at all."

"Mmm." Max tucked his arms behind his back, grasping one wrist with the other hand. A slight breeze ruffled up his hair, cut in the short black spikes he'd once boasted. They weren't at all stylish these days, but Paul thought they suited him, and he looked fine all cropped and smiling.

Paul suspected Max had done it to please him, to remind him of what Max perceived to be happier days gone by. It troubled Paul. He'd have rather had Max keep the older, softer style, but had no idea how to suggest such a thing without hurting the man. He was...sensitive, these days. Paul had the feeling that he needed to tread lightly, lest he pop this fragile bubble they'd found to live in.

Max said nothing -- not even a sigh escaped -- but Paul could tell, from the especially stiff way he stood, that Max wanted to crumple in despair. "Don't," he said, quiet and flat. "Please. I can't bear to see you lash yourself to the whipping post again. Those days are over and done, Max. Time to move on."

"Yeah." Max's shoulders rounded, then stiffened back to their original military straightness.

Paul shook his head. He tried, honestly he did, but he wasn't trained to cope with something like this. All he could do was love Max, stand quietly in support of him, and hope

he'd come around one day. Although what could have happened to drive the spark so far from his soul, Paul didn't know. He wasn't any too sure he wanted to know. Selfish, yeah, for how else would he know what to say to help Max?

"Come on, then," Paul coaxed. "Stop your gazing into the sky like a Hollywood hero. It's not the right time of day, anyhow. You need a proper sunset if you're going to play Heathcliff," he teased. Max's small chuckle heartened Paul to no end. He patted the blanket beside him. "Lie by me. I want to see you relaxing."

Max hesitated. Paul waited. He'd learned to have patience with the man and not push or pry when he was in this sort of melancholy mood. Max's head dropped, probably tucking his chin down, as Paul had seen him do so often. Finally, he drew in a breath so rough-edged and noisy that Paul twinged with sympathy. "Okay."

"Good on you." Paul scooted over, offering Max more than his rightful half-share of their blanket. "Down you go -- right, that's the way." He stroked Max's thigh, arm, whatever he could reach as Max levered himself down. His lover lay on his back, one hand thrown up by his cheek and one resting on his lower stomach. His eyes were brown and deep as ever, but clouded. Still seeing things so far away.

Paul would wait until Max was seeing the present again. He would, eventually. It just took time.

He bent his head against Max's, kissing his hairline, then flung his arm over Max's chest. Max trembled for a brief moment before covering Paul's hand with his own. They idly toyed with one another's fingers, indulging in a fleeting thumb wrestle. Although it was his own dreadful self-centeredness cropping up again, Paul could not help but purr in contentment. He'd long dreamed of afternoons like this, lazing with Max in his arms. Felt far too good to have those dreams come true. The reality was far better than his fantasies.

Max shook his head, his hair rasping against Paul's cheek. He pressed Paul's fingers together. "Seriously. What did I do to deserve you? After all the times I pushed you away, why would you welcome me back and fall in love again with a guy like me?"

"Easy." Paul dropped a kiss above Max's eyebrow. "I never stopped."

"I love you, too," Max said without warning, without looking at Paul. The pressure of his touch spoke worlds instead. "I think, maybe, that's why I ran away."

Paul raised himself on his arm, staring in confusion. "What --"

The phone rang. Paul frowned. "Is that yours?"

"Uh-uh." Max had gone back to staring at the sky -- if, in fact, he'd ever stopped. "Yours."

"I didn't bring mine."

"I brought it for you."

Paul pushed the noise aside. "Doesn't matter," he said, feeling far more like nuzzling Max's throat than talking to who-bloody-ever that didn't have the sense to know when Paul had taken the afternoon off. "I don't need to answer."

"Yeah." Max sat up, dislodging Paul. He wrapped his arms around his knees and narrowed his eyes at something Paul couldn't see. "You need to answer this call. For me."

Paul scowled, confused, but did as he'd been told. He flicked the mobile handset open pressed the ridiculously tiny receiver to his ear. "Hello?"

"Paul," he heard Max groan, almost a sob. "Paul, thank God you're there."

Paul glanced up. "But that's you on the phone --" he started to say, trailing off with lips parted as he saw -- Max had gone. Not even a trace of warmth where he'd lain. "Max?"

"Help me," Max pleaded, his voice fuzzy with static and far away. "Paul. Help me."

And Paul woke up, heart pounding fit to tear its way from his chest.

*Fuck. What was that all about? Wishful thinking, or too much pizza before bed?*

Paul licked his dry lips, his tongue feeling like sandpaper. He could have sworn he'd been in London, but, no. He lay in his bedroom in St. Augustine, on the side of the bed he always ended up rolling to despite starting out in the middle. The night was full on him, dark as pitch in the way only a small town could be after the stroke of twelve. The air had turned thick and stuffy, smelling of the strange sweetness that came before a storm.

His mind raced, but came up with only one conclusion, repeated over and over in a litany that burned his brain.

*Max needs me.*

But that was rubbish. True prophetic dreams were the stuff of fantasy. They weren't real.

All the same...

Paul eased out of bed, slow and thoughtful. Troubled. He rubbed his stomach as he looked, unseeing, through the partially lowered blinds.

After fighting and losing the battle with himself, Paul nodded. "All right, then," he said under his breath. He couldn't shake the strange feeling that something -- or someone -- else was listening.

He'd go and see how the land lay, then. If he was careful, Max would never even know Paul had had more than a passing thought about him.

A daft notion fueled by unfounded worries, but for all that he knew better, Paul didn't have to think very hard to know what he wanted to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Max had changed his number, the ass, and no one low enough on the London theatre totem poles was willing to give Paul the new one. They said Max had been out of the spotlight for almost a year now, asked if Paul had been living under a rock or if he never read the papers, and then hung up on him before he could inform them that, no, he *didn't* read

the papers. But then he would have felt obligated to explain why he didn't, which was to avoid the gossip about Max, so it might have been just as well.

Max, out of the spotlight. Paul didn't like hearing that.

Once in London, Paul turned to his own devices. He'd always learned the most about things from the common man on the street, and once he turned to them, it proved to be easier than one might have thought possible to find where Max lived. Plenty of pretty young boys -- too young, in his opinion, although what did he know? Plastic surgery, which these lads seemed quite rich enough to enjoy, might have made them look younger than their years.

Paul didn't really care, which surprised him; yet after a second thought and even a third, he felt the same. He had no right to judge; he'd let Max go.

Young or not, pretty or not, they were all too eager to gossip about Max. Following their advice, Paul found his way from district to city center, from city center to neighborhood, from neighborhood to Max's favorite sidewalk café, and from the café to an outdoor smoking pavilion. There, he met another one of the boys who had all begun to look the same to him. This one pretended to be a much older and world-weary age than his years. He smoked tarry black French cigarettes one after another, gave a bitter laugh, and told Paul exactly where Max lived, down to the flat number.

"He's crazy enough not to care who knows where he hangs his hat. Got a death wish, if you ask me."

Paul sucked his lower lip between his teeth, considering that statement. "Really, now."

"Doesn't seem to take any joy in life, from what I've seen and heard. You want to pop by and have a chat? Good luck getting that prick to even open the door if he hasn't asked you around for a wham-bam-thank-you-sir fuck," he said, lighting a fresh cigarette for himself with the dog-end of another. "He plays the hero roles, but he's got them all fooled. The man's a right bastard, and I wish you joy of him."

Paul half-wanted to ask the boy what Max had done to him, or even his name, but at the last moment refrained. It really wasn't his business, was it?

Thanking him, Paul moved on, feet leading him more or less in a straight line to Max's flat. Rich complex, shiny and new, utterly soulless down to the identically posh doors. He realized what he was doing, the full import of it, when he raised his knuckles to rap on Max's door.

*What the hell am I doing?*

He hung fire, hand still raised to tap, when the door opened from within and Max stumbled into his knuckles.

Max stopped, looking bleary and hungover, going cross-eyed at the fist he'd bonked with his nose. He was rumped and haggard, and there were far more silver hairs than had been there before. Much thinner as well -- God, how much weight had he shed? The sight of him brought such a rush of emotion, all sorts, tripping topsy-turvy over one another, that Paul blurted, without thinking, "Fuck! What's wrong with you?"

Max took a step back. Paul saw him try to figure out what he'd collided with. He went through sleepy confusion, then the figuring-it-out, and finally comprehension. He flinched back, sparing one terrified glance, retreating so hastily Paul knew he was about to have a door slammed in his face.

He'd hate that. Doors and Max were generally not a pleasant combination in his memories.

Besides, he'd be fucked if he'd let Max push him away when he looked like utter shit.

"Don't," Paul warned, shoving his foot in the frame. "Please."

Max took another shambling step away, hiding his face. "Paul?" he muttered, fingers scrabbling at the doorknob. "Jesus. Paul. It's you. Why are you here?"

"I've come to see you," Paul replied, no embellishments. "Can I come in?"

For some reason, the question -- or perhaps Paul's carefully neutral tone, betraying no more than casual friendship -- made Max laugh, sounding as bitter and as old as the cigarette-smoking youth. "Yeah," he muttered, tugging the edges of his robe closer together and hunting for a sash that seemed to have fallen off. Silk, Paul noticed, rippled and dappled purple and gold. "You're going to come in whether I ask you or not, aren't you?"

"Probably."

"Then God forbid I try to stop you." Max flickered another frightened look at Paul and melted away into the darkness of his flat, gone the second he stepped out of the hallway's ambient light.

Paul did not like this. At all. "Are you fucking *hiding* from me?"

Max coughed. "No."

"Right. 'Course you're not. Are you all right, then?"

"Me? I'm fine." Laugh. "Watch your step. It's kind of a mess in here."

"I've never known you to live in a place that wasn't." Paul tried joking with Max to see if he'd get a reaction. "You thrive on clutter -- or at least you used to."

"Yeah. Used to do a lot of things." Max caught his breath. God, he sounded just about as rattly and wheezy as an old accordion. "I know what you're thinking," he snapped. "I'm fine. Come in, if you're coming." When Paul hesitated, suddenly unsure as to whether or not this was such a good idea, he found himself startled by Max shoving him roughly with a hand in the middle of his back. "I won't bite."

Max, as Paul had once known him, would have added the rider, "Not unless you ask me to," flashed Paul a wicked smirk, and possibly -- no, probably -- copped a feel of his ass. This Max did nothing of the sort, but only waited impatiently for Paul to stay or go and leave him the fuck alone.



The interior of the flat was dark as the St. Augustine night had been. Almost. Edges of light showed around the sides of thick drapes, firmly closed. Paul could hardly see where he was going, needing to test with the toe of his trainer before putting his foot solidly down.

"I don't like using lamps during the day," Max said from behind Paul, startlingly close. Near enough for Paul to feel the puff of heated breath that escaped with his words. "Hangovers. I just rolled out of bed."

"Do you have a bad one right now?" Paul asked, concerned. "Do you want a paracetamol or a cool cloth or something?"

"God! No. No. Don't -- I mean, it's all right. I'm used to mornings after." Paul could hear Max struggling for some of his old, good cheer. It was painful to hear. "Have a seat. There should be a loveseat to your right. Push off the newspapers and magazines or whatever else is on there. Dumping them on the floor is fine."

"Same old Max," Paul said lightly, the words escaping him before he thought. He winced. He didn't know what, not yet, but something wasn't right here beyond a hangover and a cough. "Sit by me?" he asked, hastily tempering the impulsive request with a joke. "As to that, you'd better guide me, or I'll end up taking a seat on your coffee table."

Max's snort of amusement sounded genuine. "As if." He pushed Paul, gently this time. "Two steps and you'll bump into the edge."

Two more steps, and Paul did. He bit his lip, further discomfited. How much time did Max spend in the dark for him to know exactly how to find things by feel?

He wanted to ask. He said nothing, too used to holding back around Max. The rustling of papers as he cleared himself a space filled the uncomfortable silence, almost covering the sound of Max's shuffling footsteps as he made for another seat -- somewhere. When he spoke, his voice sounded halfway across the room. "Good to see you."

"Not that you can see a fucking thing in here," Paul said. Apparently, he couldn't keep his mouth shut. Maybe it was the dark stripping away his inhibitions. "Sorry."

“No problem.” Max cleared his throat. “Looks like all we’re going to do is apologize to each other. I’d say I was sorry for that, but it would kind of defeat the purpose.”

“No more pleas for forgiveness, then,” Paul agreed, smiling despite his misgivings. “Do you know, I think I’m sitting on a pancake.”

Max hooted. “How can you tell?”

“Well, for one, I’m sticky, and not from coming. For two, I smell syrup. For three, there’s a fork poking me in the ass. You’re a pig, you are.”

“You know what the sad thing is? That’s not a pancake. I know exactly what it is. Three-day-old French toast with cinnamon.”

“It’s disgusting, that’s what it is. Tell me it didn’t have whipped cream.”

“Sorry,” Max replied cheerfully. “There should be a box of Kleenex or something to your left.”

Paul checked. “Empty.”

“Damn.”

“Doesn’t matter. Not like it’s the first time I’ve ended up dirty and sticky in an unfamiliar flat.”

Silence from Max. Paul regretted his choice of words. “That was tasteless --”

“No,” Max interrupted. “I don’t mind. I’d be pretty upset if you’d stayed celibate or waited for me or some crap like that.”

“I didn’t set out to hurt you.”

Max made an impatient noise. “Didn’t think that was what you were trying to do. Trust me. I really don’t mind.”

Paul knew, though he couldn’t have said how or why, that Max was lying. He started to formulate a question, but Max spoke before he could.

“So, tell me about the lucky guy you’re seeing now.”

“There isn’t one.”

“Please. What about that Ricky kid? Seventeen then... He’s about, what, twenty or twenty-one now? That’s legal and old enough to know what he’s doing. Fuck, I saw how much he wanted you.”

“He did,” Paul admitted. “I didn’t see it, not for a long time. He surprised me when he tried for a kiss. Never looked at him that way, did I?”

A rustle came from Max’s direction, as if he’d crossed his legs. Silk against silk. “So what did you do?” he asked neutrally.

Paul wished he could see Max’s face. “I gave him a stern warning and sent him on his way.”

“Right. What did you really do?”

*Fucked him hard and fast in the backyard, khakis around his ankles, his fists white-knuckled in the grass, because I was so bloody lonely, and he was young, hot, and willing. I knew it was his first time, and I tried to make it good, but I’m damn sure I failed because I’m out of practice.*

*And because I pretended he was you.*

*He realized that when I called out your name, a mistake I’ve never made before as far as I know.*

*Barely eighteen years old when I had him, and I broke his heart. Should have handled this situation as I did the one with Gerald. Don’t know why I lost control so.*

*What a stupid question, Max. What do you think happened?*

“I thought so,” Max said into the telling silence. “Good for you.”

His tone indicated that he thought it was anything but, yet he didn’t want to assign blame. Max was trying.

Yet he was bristling with anger, too, wasn’t he? Paul thought that ought to bother him more than it did, coming from Max. It didn’t.

“So how have you been?” he asked, knowing how stupid the question sounded and going red with embarrassment.

“Fine.”

“Pull the other one; it’s got bells on.”

“Being the court jester is my job. Don’t poach.” Some warmth laced Max’s scolding. “So what are you doing here?”

“I came to see you. Which would be nice if there was a bit of light to do so.”

“Hangover.”

“As you said, and as I recall I very nicely offered to get you some remedies, and --”

“Don’t.”

“-- and you stopped me with exactly that word.” Paul couldn’t hold it back any longer. “Max, what’s wrong? Why won’t you let me look at you?”

Max said nothing.

“Answer me, or I’ll go and rip the drapes off the rods,” Paul warned. He thought better of himself and stood up. “Matter of fact, I think I’ll do that, anyway.”

Max yelped in protest. Paul walked quickly enough for the man to miss his grab, and although it hurt him, he didn’t turn back at the crashing noise of Max falling. Time to shed a little light on the situation; past time, if you asked him.

One strong tug and the drapes came away, leaving Paul blinking and sneezing from the strong morning light and the ungodly amount of dust that had accumulated on the velvet.

“Paul, don’t turn around,” Max warned, sounding truly furious.

“The hell I won’t.” Paul pivoted on his heel. He searched the room -- good God, what a rubbish tip -- and missed Max on his first look around. The second time, he spotted a purple-and-gold heap huddled by an overturned glass table, hiding its head with two alarmingly thin arms. He hadn’t looked as bad in the entryway. How had he missed this?

“Max?” he asked in disbelief. “Fuck. Is that you?”

The figure raised its face to look at Paul, and he could no longer fool himself with ideas of mistaken identity. “My God,” Paul whispered. “What’s happened to you?” He stopped, throat closing. “Oh.”

Max covered his hair with clawlike hands. “*Please.*”

Paul couldn’t stop. “There’s more wrong with you than a hangover, isn’t there?” he asked slowly, rhetorically. “I’ve got eyes. I can see.”

Max hid his face. “It’s not what you think. I don’t...I’m not...it’s not that, okay?”

“The hell it’s not. Max, why didn’t you say?” Paul had never seen this before, not in person, but he couldn’t have been mistaken. “Look at the state of you.”

“Fuck!” Max pounded the floor with one skeletal fist. He curled that fist so tightly Paul panicked about him puncturing his palm. “I’m okay. Promise. Just don’t...don’t look at me. Please.”

“I can’t look away,” Paul protested. “Do you think I could? Why are you all alone with this?”

Max snorted. “Why do you think?”

“I don’t -- oh.” Paul supposed he did know, or at least he could guess. “I’m sitting down again, just so you know.” He didn’t look away from the horrible sight before him as he felt around for a chair, a couch, anything. “Don’t think I can stand, to tell you the truth.”

Max stifled a mix between laugh and groan. “Yeah. I’m not surprised. Make yourself at home.”

“I can’t.”

Max huddled tighter on himself, silent. Paul changed his mind right about the second his ass connected with a spindly ironwork chair, and not thinking or second-guessing his actions, he threw himself down by Max’s side before Max could guess what he intended. When it was too late and he was there, Max’s gave a shuddering flinch. He would have crab-

crawled out of reach if Paul hadn't thought fast and pinned him down. Far too easy to accomplish. And Max once so strong, far tougher than Paul had ever been.

"I'm not going anywhere, so you can put the idea out of your mind right now, d'you understand?" Paul shook Max -- carefully. "I'm staying right here."

Max shook his head. "It's not safe," he said, muffled. "It's not safe."

"Never has been, loving you. I'm still here, though, aren't I? And I'm not going anywhere until you're taken care of."

"What are you going to do? Turn back time? It doesn't work. Trust me."

"No, I can't spin back the clock, nor would I want to."

Max paused, ticking his head back and forth. "No. You wouldn't, would you? Isn't there anything you wish you could go back and change?"

"More than a few things."

"Then why --"

"Because," Paul said, choosing his words carefully, "I learned a long time ago to accept the cards as they were dealt to me. You can't change fate, you know. You can only adapt and move on. If you don't, you get bogged down, and you'll never do anything else worth doing again."

"Philosopher," Max scorned. "Look, why are you still here? I told you, this isn't safe."

"Yeah, and you're a greater fool than I'd thought if you don't know full well I can't catch what you've got just by holding --"

"No!" Max said, snapping the word out like the crack of a whip, finally good and angry. Excellent! He needed some of his old fire. He glared knives at Paul. "You don't get it, do you? It's not the sickness. It's *me*. I'm not safe for you. I hurt you without trying, every damn time. I've screwed up pretty much all of your adult life, and don't say I haven't, because I know better, and God only knows why you're not laughing your ass off at how the mighty have fallen. You really have gotten hidebound, haven't you? Too old and prim to think about

checking up on the latest gossip.” He stopped, coughing until he turned an alarming shade of scarlet.

Paul waited until the fit had passed, rubbing soothing circles between Max’s shoulders. “Breathe, love. Breathe for me,” he murmured. “Are you better now?”

Max shoved Paul. Would’ve been enough to knock him on his ass, once upon a time. Now, he barely wobbled. Max’s scowl blackened at that. “Why are you still here?” he snapped again. “You haven’t seen enough? Damn you, Paul, why did you come at all?”

The answer needed no thought. “Because I love you.”

“Fuck! Don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s true.” And it was. Paul tugged Max closer. If he let himself stop and think, panicky voices in his head near shouted him deaf, but they could all go get stuffed for all he cared. Logic and common sense, they didn’t matter, and he sure as fuck wasn’t going to let Max push him away. Not here, not now.

“You think you don’t deserve it, Max, and to be honest, you probably don’t. Thing is, I accepted a long time ago that you were in my heart and there would be no cutting you out. I’ve told you as much, time and time again. So, shut up, and let me hold you, all right?”

Max fought, writhing to the left and right. “*Please*, Paul. I’m letting you go. Okay? *Go*.”

Paul was stunned, momentarily, into silence. Max took advantage of his briefly slack arms to wriggle loose and scuttle away. He struggled to his feet, bare feet with thin toes, and loomed tall over Paul despite all his skinniness. His sunken brown eyes flashed fire at Paul as Paul looked up.

Silence fell between them. Paul got to his knees.

Max shook his head. “I can’t make you leave, can I?”

“No.” Paul reached up to take Max’s hand. It hung limply in his own. “So...when did all this start?”

Max shrugged. “Does it matter?”

Paul considered the question. "I guess not, no. Doesn't change anything." He chewed the inside of his cheek. "Surprises me, that's all. You were always so keen on wearing condoms that I wouldn't have thought --" The penny dropped. "Oh."

"No," Max insisted, suddenly vehement. "There's no way I'd have come near you if I'd known. If I'd been -- no. I'm a bastard, sure. I'm not that much of a bastard."

"Then why?"

Max was quiet.

"I think I need to know."

"Because after the first time I slept with another man, I knew I didn't deserve you. All right?" Max barked. Paul jerked away, startled by the force of his anger. Max tugged at his dry, strawlike hair. "I knew you were still back in St. Augustine, still loving me no matter what shit I pulled, and I wasn't worthy. I tried to get you out of my head. It never worked. All I had to do was look at you, and I was right back where I'd started, needing you to make me complete, a real person with something going for him besides lies, and, *fuck*, don't you see? That's why I left in the first place. I wasn't good enough. I had to be someone else."

Paul struggled for words. "You never had to try. It was *you* I loved, not some façade."

Max roared, rough and ragged, in his frustration. "Shit, Paul! Why can't you make it easy on yourself for once?"

Paul had no answer for that.

"Kick my ass, yell at me, and then just...just go away," Max pleaded. "You're free. I release you. Get out of here, and go find Ricky. Someone you can be happy with. Don't waste any more of your life on me."

Paul inhaled, exhaled, thought twice, and went for broke. What did he have to lose? "I might, Max, but know that if I kick your ass, it'll be to knock some sense back into your head."

Max drew up short, eyes wide. "What?"



“You stupid fuck. You’re never driving me away. It can’t happen.”

“*Please.*”

“No.”

“Fuck!”

“Sorry,” Paul said without a drop of regret. “You’re stuck with me. So, what do you do with me? I suggest starting,” he said, recapturing Max’s hand, “by letting me in.”

Max jerked away. “No!”

He stumbled to the window, clumsy from more than sleep. Paul could tell, now.

“Let me tell you a story.”

“You don’t have to --”

“Shut. Up.” Max drummed his nails on the windowsill, a rough-edged *tap-tap-tap* sound that put Paul’s nerves instantly on edge. Probably deliberately. “This is about a stupid kid who got scared off because he thought he was way-too-fucking lucky. He knew he’d break the heart of the guy he loved sooner or later -- no way he could stop it; that’s just the way the world works -- so he figured he’d spare the guy he loved a lot of pain and end it right then. He hated leaving. The man he loved was more than a man. He was home, he was safety, he *was* love. But the kid had to go, because the last fucking thing he wanted to do was hurt this guy. That’s the kind of fucked-up logic that made sense to him back then.”

“You were young. So was I.”

“That isn’t enough.” Max refused to look at Paul. “Anyway, this kid, be damned if he didn’t realize before too long that he’d hurt the man he loved more than his worst nightmares. And it was too late to go back. You can’t change the past. Right?”

“Max...”

“You asked. So I’m telling you. Everything. So you can hate me like I deserve and get out. Okay?”

“I will never hate --”

“Don’t -- say -- that!” Max raged, slapping the window-glass open-palmed. Paul flinched, anticipating the sound of shattering glass, but, thank God, that didn’t come. “You need to hate me. It’s the only way you’re going to be free. Why don’t you understand? I’ve tried so fucking hard to make you hate me.”

“Fine! You want the truth? Here it is, then. Of course I hate you. You’ve fucked both of our lives sixty ways to Sunday. Thing is, though, I love you, too.”

“*No.*”

“Stop that.” Paul went to him and shook him, harder this time. “It’s not going to work. Words aren’t enough. *I love you.*”

“Paul...it’s too late.”

“Wrong. It’s never too late. I won’t let it be. You’re thinking I’ve lost my mind, and you’re not wrong, but you did that to me over twenty years ago.”

“Fuck. Twenty-five years.”

“And I’m still here.”

Max shuddered. Paul stood, awkward as a colt, but determined. He gathered Max to him in a determined tug, letting the man struggle in his arms.

He waited until the worst had subsided before speaking again. “So let me ask,” he murmured against the back of Max’s neck. “I need to know. Do you still love me?”

A deeper shudder. “Paul...”

“Yes, or no?” Paul insisted. “Do you love me?”

“Yes. God, yes. Always.”

“Then that’s all you have to say.” He kissed Max’s hair. “That’s all I wanted to know.”

“It can’t be that easy...”

“Yes. It can.”

“I don’t...”

“If you say what I know you’re about to say, I’ll have your eyes out.”

Max laughed, sounding as if he was in shock.

“Take my hand,” Paul instructed, nudging Max’s fingers with his own. “Go on. Do as I say. There. Not so hard, was it?” He squeezed. Max was so fucking cold. Well, he’d warm him up. “All right, then. Tell me what you want to do next, and we’ll figure out how to get there.”

Max’s grip tightened fiercely. “This is real, isn’t it?”

“Real as it gets, and don’t you fucking dare object. You know, I’ve spent my entire fucking life letting you do what you want, and it fucking well stops here. Not for my sake. For yours. Can’t you understand?” He reached with his other hand to touch Max, to brush a lock of lank hair off his forehead. Max turned away.

Paul tried again and got lucky. He held Max’s chin in his palm, deliberately ignoring the way it hardened and Max’s gaze turned flinty. Cold. “I should have done this long ago, shouldn’t I?”

Max refused to ask what Paul meant. Paul didn’t mind. He’d planned on a demonstration regardless. Not giving Max a chance to guess what was coming, he pressed his lips to the sharply-defined angle of Max’s cheekbone.

Max drew up taut. “God. You shouldn’t.”

“Can’t stop me,” Paul taunted. He moved his lips to the skin beside Max’s eye and feathered it with his tongue. Max sagged slightly, a breath of a moan escaping. “You’ll never be able to stop me loving you, idiot. Never. I’ll go to my grave in love with you; yes, I said grave, so don’t flinch like someone’s just walked over yours. That’s going to be years from now; years and years, if I have anything to say about the matter and be damned if I’m not claiming the right as of this moment.”

“What --” Max swallowed. “What makes you think you can?”

“Because you want me to.”

“I don’t.”

“You will.” Paul squeezed Max tight. It was like hugging a statue and a quivering aspen at the same time. “Let me in, love. Let me love you. I will, whether or not you give me permission, so you might as well get that out of the way.”

Max laughed, a broken sound. “It’s for your own good.”

“Shut up.” Paul rearranged Max until the man’s shoulders touched his chest, angling until they fit together just right. He kissed the hollow at the base of Max’s throat. “I’ve seen through all the bullshit, Max, so tell me truly. What do you want?”

Max said nothing. Paul could see despair in the corner of his long-ago lover’s eyes. “What do you want?” he repeated, quiet but insistent. “You have to tell me.”

“I want you to --” Max stopped as quickly as he’d started. “I need you to --”

Paul waited, holding his breath until he was dizzy. His pulse beat rabbit-fast, roaring in his ears. He flexed and clutched his fingers, digging into Max’s robe. The man he loved smelled of rum, sleep, and hospitals.

Paul waited.

“Okay.” Max inhaled and exhaled unsteadily. “Okay. I want to go home.”

Nothing else had ever sounded sweeter. Paul nearly collapsed from the relief. “Good. Because, you know what? I want to go home, too. With you.” He breathed in the scent of Max, solid and warm, full of potential found, and smiled. “And now we can.”

## Chapter Eight

*Act VII: When All Is Said and Done (One Year Later)...*

*Forty-Four and Life to Go*

Cold lips on the back of his neck nearly startled Paul into dropping the milk. “Jesus Christ!” he yelped, bucking forward. “Max, that had better be you, or someone’s going to feel the back of my hand.”

“I like you when you’re feisty,” Max’s brandy-wine voice purred against Paul’s ear. “Rawr. Do it again.”

“I’ll do more than show my temper if you ever scare me like that again.”

“Promises, promises.” Max blew a slobbery, noisy raspberry in Paul’s ear, finishing up by plunging his tongue in the canal.

“Fuck! What are you now, five?” Paul pushed Max out of the way to scrub at his beslimed ear. “You’re disgusting, you are.”

“Yep, I am, and you love me for it.” Max caught Paul’s hand and teased him around. He grinned at Paul, shameless and carefree as the boy Paul had likened him to, alight with

mischief and mirth in equal measure. His smile was contagious; Paul found himself laughing and shaking his head over the man's antics.

Wasn't it good to see him acting his old self again? Eyes sparkling, face animated, smile fit to blind Paul with its brightness. This was Max as he had been more than twenty years ago -- no, better. He'd thought so once before, but Max aged well. And now that he'd grown up some in addition to growing older, he looked all the better.

Healthier, too, thank fuck. Much better than the last time in London, in that filthy flat. He'd gained some ground back, his muscles filling out and his stance straightening up. He wasn't all the way there, of course. Not yet, but nicely on the path.

His doctor, the one they drove to in the next city over, had a habit of settling his glasses low on his nose and peering at first Max, and then Paul, with deep suspicion and wonder. Max, he'd told them frankly, shouldn't be there at all, much less putting on weight or waltzing Paul around the ward.

Showed what he knew about Max, or, for that matter, Paul's newly recognized power of utter bloody-mindedness. The same bullheadedness that had kept him stubbornly in love worked wonders when it came to bullying a man into taking care of himself.

After all, as Paul had explained to Max, he planned on keeping Max around for as long as they'd been separated -- for a start -- so Max'd better shape up if he knew what was good for him.

Something else Paul had discovered: Max *loved* taking orders. Made sense, after decades of hopping to a director's tune. They'd been exploring that little quirk, they had, and the results were more than pleasing.

"Yeah," Paul said, seizing Max's hand and raising the knuckles to his lips for a kiss. "I do love you. Wouldn't have you any other way."

"Mmm." The noncommittal noise was one of absolute contentment. Max pulled Paul to him with a tug on the hand. Paul let himself be taken over and kissed soundly, not about to

complain. He surrendered his mouth to Max, giving himself full access and all the time he wanted to taste Max's lips -- he had a flavor of cloves this morning -- and explore his mouth with a questing tongue.

Max sighed, sated, as Paul broke their kiss to rest his forehead against Max's. "You're feeling good today, I take it."

"Feeling great." Max nipped Paul's nose. Easy target. "I was thinking..."

"Yes?"

"Thinking maybe...listen to me, would you? I sound like I want to pass you a note in the back of maths class."

"Well, you've gone from age five to fifteen, so that's not bad progress. What do you want? Another kiss?"

"Actually, yeah." Max tilted his head and fit their mouths together all too briefly. He lingered with their lips close but not touching, laughing under his breath. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"You've got me curious, now. Out with it, wretch."

"Okay." Max stole a flicker of a kiss. "I think maybe we could...come on. You know."

Paul suspected he did, and couldn't believe what he heard any more than Max could fathom his speaking. He'd not wanted to, and Paul hadn't pushed...but Paul had wondered if they ever would again. It would be possible if they were careful. He was human, after all, and more than that, he had years upon years to catch up with. "Right. But you have to say it, love."

"You love seeing me squirm, don't you?"

"One of my favorite pastimes. Go on."

Max turned wicked. He drew his tongue along Paul's bottom lip, bit lightly at Paul's chin, then blew cool air over the sore spot. "I want you," he said, sliding his fingers under

Paul's shirt to scratch him, "to fuck me. Fuck me until I'm screaming, and I come so hard I think I'm on my way out. Think you can do that?"

Paul tried for words and ended up with a strangled noise that in no way resembled speech.

Max understood. That was the good thing about him, now that he'd learned to stop himself from blocking his ears. He growled softly and draped his weight on Paul, clinging like a limpet and pushing his groin against Paul's. Not fully hard, but more than halfway there and hinting at bigger and better things. "Fuck me," he crooned, moving strong hands down to grope Paul's ass. "Take me hard."

"Hard won't be a problem." Paul pushed back, letting Max feel just how much it wouldn't be an issue. Max moaned and thrust in return. "Oh, you like that, do you?"

"No. I hate it." Max undulated. "What do you think?"

"I think," Paul said with great deliberation, "that you need something better to do with your smart mouth than use it for talking."

He felt Max perk with interest. "Oh, yeah?"

"Without a doubt." Paul pushed Max's shoulders. "Do your best, and then I'll do mine. Deal?"

Max shook, shoulders heaving.

It took Paul a moment to realize his lover was laughing. "What?"

Max rippled with mirth. "You have to ask."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"Exactly." Max shimmied. "So ask, already."

Fair was fair, and Paul did *not* want to waste time arguing. "Suck me."



He got a look at dazzling brown eyes, only a second's glance, heard the whispered "Your wish is my command," and while Paul was yet reeling, Max had already started going down.

"I have something to ask you," Max murmured, nimbly opening Paul's zipper and easing his jeans down over his narrow hips. "Something different."

Paul quirked an eyebrow. "What?"

"Watch me while I do this. And I'll watch you."

The request took Paul's breath away. God. Max often asked what he'd done to deserve this. Silly ass. Lucky, silly ass.

"All right," he replied, dazed. He glanced down, fascinated, and had to grit his teeth not to come right away at the un-fucking-godly erotic sight of Max's full lips wrapping around his cock, making it disappear in that hot, moist mouth. "Bloody hell." *More like heaven.*

Paul ran his fingers through the short crop of Max's hair, trying not to grab a handful and hang on for dear life when Max started to move, sliding wetly up and down his shaft -- the man was so fucking good at this it was unreal. "Oh, fuck," he gasped, struggling not to close his eyes when Max began to suck. His cheeks hollowed out, then bulged, the sexiest thing Paul could ever remember seeing. "Max. Fuck. Max."

"Max wishes you would," his lover drew off impishly to say, teasing the head of Paul's cock with quick licks between words. "Max is trying to make you crazy enough to just go for it." He cupped Paul's sac and rolled ever so carefully. "I wonder how crazy that's going to be?"

"Never ask a question unless you really want to know the answer." Paul took Max by the arm and shoved. Not terribly hard, but hard enough for Max to get the idea. Which he did, gladly, sloping gracefully back on his heels, resting his weight on his wrists. That tempting pink tongue came out between his teeth to tease his lips. "So how do you want me? This is your show."

“And well worth the price of admission.” Paul sized Max up, making him wait for it. Doing his own part to spread insanity. “Stand up. Undress yourself.”

“Mmm. I can get behind that idea.” Max winked. “Literally, if you want.”

“Later. You offered me the chance to fuck you, and don’t think I’m going to let you off now.”

“Yes, *sir*.” Max rose easily to his feet -- already bare, Paul noticed, approving. Good initiative -- and more, it told Paul this wasn’t completely an impulse. Max had thought about what he wanted before making a move. Good, again. “Think I could convince you to help?”

“Try and stop me.” Paul tugged Max’s T-shirt -- one of Paul’s, he noticed -- out of Max’s jeans -- those were his own. Max had always been shorter and now, thank God, he was broader again. “I’ve wanted to see you naked, completely naked, for far too long, so get to work.”

“You go north. I’ll go south.” Max teased open the fastening on his jeans, then traced a finger around the swell of his cock. The sight made Paul’s mouth water.

“Don’t tease,” Paul ordered, suddenly serious. This mattered too much to joke about.

“Okay.” Max betrayed a split-second’s worth of nervousness, then seemed to shrug it off as if it had never been. He tugged down his zipper, did a wicked little tango-style shimmy, and the denim fell to his ankles. Nice trick. Oh, and he had been thinking about this, hadn’t he? Neither boxers nor jockeys to get in the way or have to wrestle off. Nothing hiding his cock in all its fuckworthy glory, jutting hard and dark in Paul’s direction. Max cupped himself and offered. “All for you.”

“Damn well had better be.” Paul crushed Max to him in a brief, hard squeeze. “Now finish. Arms up.” Max obeyed, letting Paul whip the shirt over his head, giving Paul a wide expanse of chest to touch and taste as much as he wanted. Teeth grazing one of Max’s nipples, Paul ordered, “Finish this.”

Max nimbly stepped out his jeans without once breaking Paul's hold. An even better trick. He shuddered, but not, Paul could tell, with fear or nerves. His cock bobbed as his muscles contracted. "How do you want me?" Max repeated, low and husky. "Anything you want. Name it."

"You." Paul trailed sharp, open-mouthed kisses up to beneath Max's ear. "That's all I've ever wanted."

Max moaned. "Please. Paul. Don't make me wait anymore."

"Not planning to." Paul let himself have one last taste of the salty sweat springing out on Max's skin. "On your back."

Max drew back, brown eyes wide and worshipful, beginning to cloud with need. "Here? You know, last time we were like this, it was you who pointed out there was a free bed to use one flight of stairs away."

"I remember, and I'll tell you what you told me. One flight of stairs is one too fucking many, so on your back, *now*."

"Glad to." Max went to his knees, shifting easily from there to a supine position. He parted his legs, crooking his knees up. "Your turn." He nodded. "Might want to get rid of the rest of your clothes first. I hope."

"Minx." Paul struggled free of his wool jumper and jeans with far less grace than Max, although it didn't matter to either of them. Max did laugh when Paul got tangled up, though, and that was worth a little punishment.

"You think you're clever, huh?" Paul scolded, turning his jeans over his hands to hunt for the condom he'd taken to carrying. Hoping for one day, someday. Looked like that would be now. "I've got a sachet of lube in here somewhere," he said, starting to check.

"Don't bother," Max said, rippling in voice and body with amusement. "I came prepared."

“You what?” Paul forgot his carefully planned stealth maneuvers and hit the floor. Ouch. His knees didn’t like that. He didn’t care.

“See for yourself.” Max lifted his hips in invitation, and, fuck, no one could turn that down. Paul gave his fingers a quick once-over to check for rough nails or broken cuticles -- thank God, there were none -- and cautiously let the curious digits go where they wanted.

His jaw dropped. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope,” Max said, smug as a cat who’d gotten into the cream -- well. Not a bad analogy, considering. “Told you.”

“Be damned.” Paul rubbed his thumb against Max’s well-lubricated, stretched hole. “My God, you took a lot on faith, didn’t you?”

Max looked uncertain. “Is that okay? I thought you’d like...”

“Idiot. I don’t like. I *love*.” Paul withdrew his fingers for the sake of smacking Max’s flank and to unwrap and roll on the condom. “Move.”

He didn’t have to specify how. Max knew. They’d done this before, too many times to count -- way back when -- and it came naturally as if they’d never stopped or paused between. Max hooked one strong leg around Paul’s waist, encouraging him closer. Paul kissed the other calf as he positioned the limb over his shoulder.

He had to stop, then, to breathe, to try and wrest back some control. Not bloody likely. “As if,” as Max would say. This would last thirty seconds, tops. *If* he was lucky. When Max scooted his ass forward, bringing Paul’s cock in contact with the heat of his body, thirty seconds sounded damned ambitious.

Paul had to take one more look. He loved what he saw: Max, head back, eyes closed, skin damp and chest rising, falling, rising. So sexy. He didn’t realize he was touching Max’s chest before he saw his fingers and heard Max catch his breath. “Want me to fuck you?” he asked, half teasing and half serious. “Ask me one more time.”

“If you don’t fuck me, I’m going to kill you.”

“Good enough.” Paul started to angle himself, then changed his mind. “Put me where you want me.”

“God!” Max groaned, slapping the floor with impatience. “Sadist.”

“No need to sweet talk me.”

Max chortled. Still rippling with humor, he reached between them -- damned awkward but hot as the fires of hell -- and nudged Paul’s sheathed cock snug between his ass cheeks. Max didn’t look. Didn’t need to. He swallowed a groan when Paul was lined up, pressing hard against the muscle. “Please.”

“Yes,” Paul hissed. He searched for and found Max’s hands to grip in his own and thrust, pushing past resistance until Max gasped and his body gave way, letting Paul all the way inside on a smooth, long stroke.

He opened his eyes, then, and Paul met them, blue to brown. He saw so many things there, some of which he’d thought lost to him forever. Passion. Need. Hope. Humor. Mischief.

*Love.*

“Welcome home,” Paul said without meaning to.

“Yeah,” Max whispered, staring at Paul as if he could never see enough. He released a hand to stroke Paul’s cheek. “You, too. Welcome home.”

 THE END 

## Willa Okati

Although a relative newcomer to the field of e-publishing, Willa Okati has been writing since before she was old enough to pick up a pen. She thinks she knows where those dictated stories are hidden, but she'll never tell.

Willa is also very interested in the paranormal: magery, Wicca, New Age philosophy, transgender studies, and of course, writing. You can drag her away from the computer if you really fight, but you'd better be prepared for a battle.

Just so she doesn't sound entirely dull, Willa has her fun: she is a practicing member of the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism) and is involved in her community. She is owned by far too many cats, all of which have serious attitudes, and addicted to anything made out of chocolate or involving coffee. She is quiet, but has a very wicked sense of humor that springs out when you least expect it.

A secretary for eight years, she now writes full-time -- and wouldn't trade it for the world.

She loves to hear from readers, and always responds. You can contact her at [willsheokati@gmail.com](mailto:willsheokati@gmail.com), or feel free to visit her website to check out her work at [www.willaokati.com](http://www.willaokati.com).