



BAKER'S DOZEN

BITES OF MAGIC

DALLAS COLEMAN

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Baker's Dozen: Bites of Magic
SCREWDRIVER

An imprint of Torquere Press Publishers
PO Box 2545

Round Rock, TX 78680

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Cover illustration by S. Squires

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ISBN: 978-1-60370-588-2, 1-60370-588-0

www.torquerepress.com

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First Torquere Press Printing: December 2008

Printed in the USA

Prologue

"James. James, I need the heavy cream." Bryan grabbed the hand of ginger from the granite countertop, grating it... gingerly...

Gingerly.

Now, that was funny.

Not that he'd crack a smile over it or anything, but still...

Quite funny.

"Yes, boss. Anything else while I'm in the walk-in?"

Bryan pondered that, while adding lime zest to his mixture. Lime -- so fresh, so tart. Almost wicked, really. Enough to pucker his lips into something more than a kiss and less than a smirk. Luscious. "Sesame seeds, please, and we'll need more butter."

Bright blue eyes looked across the kitchen at him, curious and oddly large in the thin, angular face. "What's the special today, boss? Anything I can help with?"

Help. Nonsense. He didn't need help with the daily specials. "Are you finished dipping the cherries?"

"Yes, boss."

"The berries?"

"Yes, boss."

His lips quirked; he had always had an apprentice, someone learning his craft. For sixty years he had owned the Baker's Dozen. Sixty years he'd been working his particular brand of magic into the confectionary, living for that moment when one ingredient called for another, a concoction waiting to come together to be sold to exactly the right man.

Sixty years and he had never, never had an apprentice as maddening as James.

"The cream, James."

"Yes, boss." The boy was beautiful -- blond and bright-eyed, built like an Adonis and simply... infatigable.

Honestly.

Bryan smiled, bent down over the mixture, the wooden spoon sliding so carefully along the side of the mixing bowl, slowly adding a touch of honey as the scents of citrus and cocoa butter mingled in his nose. Mmm. Yes. Tart and sharp, yet sweet. Rich, but light, with a fresh color that begged to be tasted.

"It's lovely." James' hand slid up along his arm, the touch making him flinch. No one touched him; no one had since Alan had died, some thirty years ago now.

"It's quite tart, really. Much more punch than it appears."

The blond head dipped closer, looking and Bryan forced himself not to lean in, to misconstrue a touch that could not mean what his elderly body wanted it to mean. "Is someone coming for it? Someone special?" James asked.

He found himself nodding, a vision of a small, dark-haired man painted on the inside of his eyelids. Smart. Small. Caught in a series of lies that he told himself over and over. Eyes the color of overripe limes. "He'll ask for a box of cherries. He needs these instead." The man had enough sweetness in his life, the tart would add a delicious contrast.

"He'll take them. They always do."

"Not always." No, Alan hadn't. Alan hadn't taken what he'd made and had died. Left him here to make sweets for years. Beautiful bastard.

Bryan still wasn't sure whether he loved or hated the son of a bitch. Maybe both.

James' eyes dropped, the hand falling away, slapping on the counter, sesame seeds scattering like birdseed. "You're thinking of him again."

The doors of his mind slammed down, slapping James away. Impertinent child. "As I should. I'm not in my dotage quite yet."

Young cur. As if he could believe, even for a second, that James wanted an old man like him. That James *could* want an old man like him.

Those long-fingered hands fluttered up, the sudden motion reminding him of a pair of startled birds, lifting up out of a pond into a sky. White birds lifting into the sun, the shadows burned into his eyes.

Odd.

"Bryan, I think..." That snapped him out of the unexpected vision and Bryan waved his hand, the smell of lime oil from the creases in his hands heady.

"Quiet. I don't pay you to think."

"You hardly pay me at all."

"You." He opened his mouth to scream, to rail against that impertinent bastard, when he saw the challenging glint in James' eyes. Oh. Oh, that was why he kept the man. No one dared challenge him, dared to make him laugh. Dared remind him how to be happy when it was too late to take advantage of it. "The cream, James."

"It's waiting right here for you, boss, along with the sesame seeds."

"Sesame?" Oh. Right. Bird seed. Had he asked for sesame?

"Yes, it goes well as a garnish. Gives things a nice crunch. Isn't that what you told me?"

"Was it?"

James smiled, eyes dancing happily. "If it wasn't what you *said*, it is what you meant. Isn't that the same?"

"Probably." Honestly, youngsters these days, with their metaphysics and lack of respect. "Out into the shop now, James. And watch who you give those cherries to today. They smelled rich."

"They are."

He watched the pert little backside move side to side, framed by the long strings of James' apron as his apprentice headed out into the store to open them up as they did six mornings a week, just as regular as the huge town clock, looming at them from across the square. The sign was turned from closed to open, the orange and green neon light switched on before James began to move the inventory, the racks of truffles and fudges and dipped fruits slowly filling the cabinets.

He thought today would be a short day. People needed what they were selling today. The clock began to chime as James unlocked the front door. Yes, it would be a short day.

Bryan molded a truffle into a perfect circle with his fingers, the cool marble chilling the confection whenever the heat from his hands threatened to melt it. He listened to James' whistling, the tuneless nonsense relaxing and familiar. He made a dozen truffles -- picking up one, then another, dipping them carefully in the white chocolate coating before touching the very top into the scattered sesame seeds.

The twelfth candy was a touch heavier than the other eleven, electric in his fingers. He dipped the sweet into the bath of pale candy, enrobing the medicine before sprinkling it with the last of the sesame seeds.

Freckles. They looked like freckles. How very clever.

Chapter One

Fucker.

Asshole.

Just walking out on him like that, walking out on him for a muscle-bound Neanderthal whose knuckles were still dragging the fucking ground.

Bastard.

Prick.

Nathan loved the jackass so much it hurt, still, and no amount of sitting and watching the smarmy fuckhead work and flitter and giggle made it easier.

Rule number forty three -- never, never, NEVER fall for someone who works in the same studio as you. Ever.

Even if the guy was beautiful and talented and just too fucking fine for words.

He'd taken the afternoon off, after the flowers came and the queening started and the sharp-edged little looks kept getting shot over at him and his bruises and his crutches. Damn it. Yeah, he was short. Yeah, he was dark. Yeah, he was just a copywriter in an advertising agency filled with the cream of the crop, but he'd been good to Rich.

He really had.

Just because he hadn't come from good money like he'd let Rich believe. Just because he was Arkansas trailer trash made good, come over to West Harling. He had the job, the apartment, the credit cards bills, the car.

Well, he'd had the car.

Now the pretty little yellow 'Maro was sitting in the junkyard, after he'd seen Rich and Mr. Caveman fucking on the balcony -- no, *his* balcony, goddamn it -- right in public like the biggest pair of whores on Earth. Now he was limping around on a seriously broken leg and he was heading for the loneliest fucking perfect empty apartment on earth after a rather terrifying second expedition on the fucking city bus. And Rich was living the high life with Mr. Muscles and getting fucking *flowers* sent to him, congratulating him on his return to work after his little "episode".

Episode his ass.

Sometimes he just wanted to go back to hauling logs like his dad and all his brothers.

Sometimes.

Okay, not that often -- he fucking hated the way it made his hands ache and the scent of pine sap was just brutal. Not only that, but the gay bars in southwest Arkansas were like the professionals and the people with full sets of teeth -- few and fucking far between.

Oh, that was funny.

No.

Really.

He started laughing and had to stop, leaning against a little brick building so he could catch his breath. Oh. Oh, man. He so needed to get home and sit a minute.

Or he could just rest a second, because god *damn*, smell that. It was like heaven and childhood and sex, all mooshed up together. Chocolate and berries and cake. Pure sugar rush.

Nathan looked in the window, the little neon sign blinking and buzzing. Oh, dude. The Baker's Dozen. He and Rich'd looked into the window a hundred times, but the hours were deeply cracked -- ten to four, Monday through Friday -- no working man could ever manage to get in during those times.

Still, he was on sick-leave, wasn't he?

Hell, yes, he was.

Chocolate-ho!

He settled the crutches back down under his sore-sore armpits and crutched in, working the door open and propping it with one crutch before scooting over the threshold. Little jingle bells went off, making him grin as a guy in white heading out from the back, nodded. "Hey."

"Hello, there. Welcome to the Baker's Dozen."

There were racks and racks of the most beautiful things -- fruits and candies, things that looked like jewels, things that looked like heaven drenched in chocolate.

Oh, man. He wanted one of everything.

No. Really.

Maybe two.

"Man, it looks great. How long have you been here?"

"Oh, more than thirty years. The Baker's Dozen is well-known in many circles. Is this your first time in?" The man had the biggest eyes, so serious.

So bright.

"It is. I had the afternoon off, thought I'd stop by on my way home." The thought of that empty apartment, pale squares on the dark blue walls where Rich's pictures had hung made his smile fade, made the pure sensual joy of the chocolate shatter.

"Oh, well, welcome. We have a remarkable return rate. Once our customers find us, they find that no one is like us, anywhere."

"Yeah? I'd think it would be difficult to get rid of so much inventory. It's already one."

"Oh, it will sell." That was a knowing tone -- in that way that people used it in old novels -- *knowing*, like it was more sexual and a little bit intimidating, somehow. It was exciting. "What are you interested in?"

"I. Uh." He looked around, each sweet looking a little different from the other, until his eyes landed on the chocolate covered cherries. Perfect. "I'll take a few of those."

"Do you like cherries? I always find them too sweet." The man seemed to glide over, pulling a couple little dark candies out by the stem. "I much prefer today's special."

"There's a special?" That always boded well; of course, the guy might just be ordered to upsell, really. Although the counter guy sure didn't *look* like someone somebody'd order around.

"Yes, sir. Key lime truffles. They're quite exquisite, delicate and tart, not too sweet and definitely one that will keep your attention." Long fingers lifted up a little box filled with a half dozen pale truffles that almost glowed in the crimson paper that surrounded them.

"I don't know..."

"They're half off. Six is enough to share."

"Oh, I don't think I'll have need to share." There wasn't anyone at home to share with.

"You never know. Shall I wrap them up for you?"

Wait. What? He wasn't even sure if he liked lime candy. He wasn't into... Oh, what the hell. If he hated them, he'd take them to the girls at work, tell them not to share with Rich at all.

"Can you bag them up? I'm a little hindered." He waved the crutch a bit, then dug for his wallet.

"Of course." The bags were dark plastic, weirdly decadent looking. Like fabric.

Money changed hands, the clerk's fingers making his tingle.

Dude. Static electricity.

He headed out, crutches clicking and clacking on the concrete, the only thing sweet in his life the bag in his hand, which sucked.

Big hairy rocks.

Life, she was good.

It was Friday afternoon, the sun was shining, the world was his motherfucking oyster.

Well, the world might not be, but he was on a call and that meant bill-money.

Dom grabbed his toolbox, heading for the Grover building. The super there was a stone, cold bitch, but she paid good and once Opal liked your work, you were in.

He'd been her HVAC guy for three years now. Hell, it'd been ten months since she snarled at him and last time he came over?

Cookies, dude.

Big, chewy, chocolate chip cookies.

Score.

He punched the intercom at the door, bouncing at the music pouring in his earphone. Come on, Opal. Come on now. He just needed in, up to 337B, check the Freon levels and the core and he was golden.

"What?"

"It's Dom, Miss Opal. Here for 337B." Only twelve minutes after she paged his happy ass, too.

"Good time, honey. Real good. Come down after for your check and a drink." The door buzzed and he bebopped in. Fucking A.

Three flights of stairs later he was knocking, waiting for someone to let him in. It wouldn't take long and this check would pay the electric bill and get him a case of beer.

Life didn't get any better than this.

He wasn't expecting the face that he got -- a fine little dark-skinned guy with the greenest eyes *ever*. Fuck. Pretty.

Pretty and on crutches.

Pretty and on crutches and shirtless with the teeniest tiniest pair of workout shorts he'd ever seen.

Pretty and on crutches and shirtless with the teeniest tiniest pair of workout shorts he'd ever seen and in an apartment that had to be ninety five degrees. Damn.

"I'm the HVAC man." He held out one hand. "Dom."

"Hey. Opal said you were coming." His hand was taken, the fingers just a little sticky, a lot sweaty. "I'm Nathan. Help?"

"Sure, man. I'll get you fixed up. You best sit, you look damn tired." Tired and all drawn and shit. Still, sexy. He could eat the little guy up.

"It's been a shitty week. I had a doctor's appointment this morning and came home after lunch to this oven." The little guy plopped down, sighed, sprawling out just as pretty as you please on a cushy-looking leather couch that the poor thing was so gonna stick to.

"Dude. Sounds rough. The unit in the hall?" Dom got a nod and he headed into the hallway. Somebody'd just moved in or out. The paint needed retouching where the artwork had been pulled down.

"The doctor says everything looks good. I'm back on my feet in two weeks."

"Yeah? Fucking A." He couldn't be off his feet even that long. "What happened to your leg? Something with a cool story, maybe?"

He got the door open, caught a broom and mop as they tried to fall and bash his head in.

"Like what?"

"Alligator mauling? Skiing accident in the Alps? Runaway midget ninja monkey?" He was easy. Dude, this guy so needed to clean his filter. He pulled the old one out, grabbed the new one that was sitting there beside the unit, still wrapped in plastic.

"Oh, I wish. No. No, I got pissed off because my steady was fucking another man on the balcony and drove my car into a wall trying to run the fucker down."

Now that? Was a cool story. "The fucker being the ex or the one the ex was doing?"

"The one the ex was doing. The ex was up here having a fit and packing his bag."

"Ah. Nothing like getting dry fucked, is there, man?"

He heard a wry chuckle as he pulled out his monitor. "Nope. Best part? He's a designer at the office. I have to sit two desks down and try to write jingles for oven cleaner."

"Oh, dude. That's like breaking up with the general contractor when you're putting in the HVAC system for an apartment complex." Talk about hell. He was *still* collecting on that job.

"You sound like you know what I'm going through."

He cleaned the vent, got the Freon refilled. "Honey, I'm the king of being fucked over. I'm so tired of being screwed over by the perfect, pansy-assed, manicured guy that I can't tell you. Shit, I just want a man that likes the periodic booty call and wants to shoot a game of pool in a real bar." Oh, dude. Diarrhea of the mouth much? The pretty son of a bitch was going to think he was bitter or something.

That got him a strangled chuckle, a gasp. "Tell me how you really feel, man."

"Yeah. Yeah, well. I'm not the most subtle fucker on Earth." He turned the thermostat back on, the AC unit making a "oh, I'm way happier" sort of sound.

Better.

Much better.

"Okay, dude. You should be able to breathe again." Dom packed up, whistling under his breath, grabbing a little trashbag out of his kit to wrap up the old filter. "You really need to replace your filter every thirty days. It's important."

"Sure. I can handle that. So, what do I owe you?"

"Game of pool? A beer?" It was worth a try. Even a rebound blowjob was better than a solo handjob.

"You weren't lying, were you?"

"Nope. I don't have much patience with bullshit." He let his legs part, let Nathan see what the man obviously wanted to see. "Life's short, let's have fun, no games. Blah blah blah."

"No flowers to the office?"

He rolled his eyes. Flowers. "If I wanted to deal with flowers and shit, I'd fuck boobies."

Nathan hooted, clapped and suddenly that little classy metrosexual man was just another redneck, just like him. It was a hot look. "That's what the ex wanted."

"Someone to treat him like he had tits?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"You sucked at that, huh?"

"You know it."

"Can I have a drink of water, honey? I'm dry as a bone."

"Oh, oh, right. Sure. There's bottled water in the fridge. I'll get it."

"No. No, I'm not helpless. You sit." The fridge gave him hope -- beer, take out, hot dogs. Thank God.

By the time he got back to the front room, small, dark and pretty was sprawled out, lazy and hard. Nathan caught him admiring and the man chuckled and leaned back, lounging, nibbling on something small and white and tart-smelling. Look at that mouth.

Look. At. That. Mouth.

"You want a bite, Mr. Not the Most Subtle?" Oh, God. Yes, please. The box was held out, four little white chocolate dealies inside, two gone.

"What are they?"

"Lime truffles. It's like key lime pie, but in chocolate form."

"White chocolate isn't really chocolate." He took one, though, didn't he? Hell, yes. "It's cold."

"I'd been saving them. Keeping them in the fridge, you know? I forgot about them until today. Today I was craving them."

"They're something else. All fancy." Nathan nodded and he bit, the cold air coming from the vents didn't have anything on sinking his teeth into a chilled candy.

Oh.

Oh, dude.

The flavor just exploded -- way less sweet than tart, the candy melted on his tongue, just made his mouth draw up. It was like pie, but not. Like the *smell* of pie, the cold leaving his tongue stunned, the bite just melting. His balls ached, his moan sudden, unexpected.

"Good, aren't they?" Nathan's cock looked like it was enjoying them, a wet spot on those little gray shorts.

Dom hummed, nodded, ate the second bite, the rush repeating itself. They tasted like heaven and the insides where the same fucking color as Nathan's eyes.

Weird, yet incredibly cool.

Damn.

"Has anyone ever told you that you look like you're coming when you eat?" Dom blinked down, staring at Nathan. Perfect haircut, perfect apartment, perfect leather couch that his sweaty ass was going to stick to. Maybe he wasn't the only non-subtle man left.

"Where are you from, man?"

"Arkansas. Deliverance country. Trees and toothless people. You have a problem with that?" Oh, short man syndrome with the poochy-out stubborn jaw. Cute.

Especially with that little bit of white chocolate on it. Dom took a chance, leaned down on the arm of the sofa and licked the bit off, staring into those unreal green eyes. He could see himself, red shock of hair, freckles -- looking like the Mick he was. "I don't. I'm from Louisiana, bayou country. I used to hunt gator. Now I'm from about three blocks away and I don't fuck around."

"That's a shame, because you're the first real man I've met in months and I..." Those dark cheeks went pink, one hand just barely nudging his cock. "I could so be convinced."

Oh. Oh, now. This might be worth getting his check from Opal a few hours late. "Well, maybe we ought to share another chocolate, talk about it."

He let his hand slide up Nathan's leg, toward the bare inner thigh. Testing. Feeling. Petting some.

"We could talk, or we could just..." Those green eyes looked him up and down, the admiration like a physical touch.

"Share?" Yes, please.

Nathan nodded. "Yeah. Share."

One sweet, white candy was held up, then set carefully in between Nathan's teeth, offered right up to him.

Oh.

Excellent.

Most excellent.

Perhaps even worth missing Opal's cookies for.

The bell over the door rang, soft, husky laughter on the air.

"James, we have a customer."

Bryan looked over at the tall, thin redhead, one hand on his lover. One man had eyes like lime leaves; the other was quite freckled, from head to toe. They both smiled in that way of two men with a secret. A very private secret. How very lovely.

Lovely and some of their most regular customers.

He very much approved.

"What do they need, boss?" Impertinent brat. Beautiful, dear impertinent brat.

"You know full well what they need." Honestly, he needed to work on his tone. He was losing his edge.

"I know what you need..."

He snorted, pointed to the front, swatting that perfect little ass. "Indeed, I need you to work. Go, support your endless appetite. I'm surprised I can afford to feed you."

"My..."

"Now, James. Lime for them."

"Yes, boss. As you wish."

Lime.

Tart.

Not too sweet.

Just what those two needed to cut to the chase. Just what they continued to crave.

Something -- no, someone -- hovered at the edge of his consciousness. Black, laughing eyes. Intensity. Hunger.

Bryan chuckled, headed for the spice drawer, the image of a pyramid in his mind. Paprika, he thought. Yes, paprika with a hint of chile...

Chapter Two

"Boss?"

Bryan waved his hand, shushing James. He knew. He knew that things were building. Three months he'd been making pyramid chocolates. Three months and the ones he was making them for hadn't come.

Not unheard of, but certainly draining.

The chile-infused sweets were garnering a following, though. James had been making dozens of them, all for public consumption. His energies were spent on three.

Three every day.

Three perfect pyramids with a kick of chile powder and paprika, soothed with cream.

Three truffles. Nine sides.

"Boss, what if they don't come? You'll exhaust yourself."

"Nonsense. I'm not as old as that."

"Boss..."

He growled, shook his head. "I'm sure you have work to do, lad. I have one left for today."

One left.

Three sides.

The doorbell rang, a desperate looking man with haunted eyes and waist-length hair heading in.

There.

One of three.

Three months since the accident.

Three months and he was heading outside and facing the sunshine for the first time.

Marco pulled the brim of his hat down as the nurse wheeled him out of the sliding glass doors. "Honey, do you have someone to come pick you up?"

He shook his head, careful of the scars in his face that pulled and tugged, kept his motions so careful. "No. No, I'll call a cab."

Walk.

Limp.

Something.

"Oh. Oh, okay Mr. Marin. I'll go call you..."

A huge black pickup blotted out the sun for a second, then a pair of familiar snake-skin boots hit the concrete, the silver-tipped pointed toes looking a lot like weapons. "You ain't gotta call nothing for this vato, eh? He's coming with us."

Eazy's voice was just as booming and rough as he'd remembered from the last time he'd heard it telling him that they had to go for a few weeks, had to get back out on the rig and make some money. Make up what he'd lost them all.

Make up for him fucking up.

Again.

"I thought you were out on the road." Honestly, he'd thought they'd left-left. He couldn't blame them if they had. He'd not heard from Eazy in nearly a month, hadn't heard from or seen Angel in damn near ten weeks. Not once in the ten weeks since Andy'd given it up, body following where the soul had gone when the motorcycle had lost control on the slick patch of oil, Andy's head hitting the asphalt with a thud and a crack that sounded like a hammer hitting a melon. All those months on the road and this happened while they were at home. Home where it was supposed to be safe.

Angel had howled when Marco told him, howled like an animal caught in a trap, long, fine hands tearing at the long hair. He'd reached out with his phantom right hand and Angel had jerked away, staring at him with haunted eyes. Called him a murderer.

A thief.

A puta.

Eazy tipped back the bent, pale goat-roper hat, toothpick wagging in between thin lips, clacking on the man's teeth. "We got back. Come on, vato. In."

"I..." He wasn't sure he could face them. Face Angel. Face the truth.

Murderer.

Thief.

You stole Andy from us. Andy was the best part of us all and you killed him.

Killed him.

"Mr. Marin?"

Eazy knelt down, those black-black eyes surrounded by the longest, blackest eyelashes he'd ever seen. Ever. "Marco, come on. We got business, the three of us."

The words chilled him, but he nodded. They did. He owed them. He owed all of them for destroying what they had.

"Okay. Vamanos." Eazy's hand reached out to him and he almost didn't take it, afraid that it would hurt him, push into his chest and tug out his still-beating heart like one of those scary psychic surgeons his 'uelito went to when the cancer got him. He did take it, though, with the hand he still had, and let Eazy help him up.

"Easy, now. He's very unstable, still, on that right side." Unstable. Right. He'd lost all the damned muscle on the outside of his leg, his arm below the elbow, his face was shredded. He was all about unstable.

"We got him." That voice was Angel's, low and soft, the waist-length hair all pulled back in a tail. "We got him now."

Eazy nodded and got Marco moving, got him up into the truck next to Angel in the back. He barely heard the thud of his bag in the bed. Angel leaned over him, waved, reached for the door and nodded to the nurse who still looked a little concerned. Confused. "Thanks, ma'am. See you."

He knew all about confused.

"How did you know I was getting out today?"

Angel shrugged. "That little night nurse liked me. I asked."

He asked.

Asked.

Didn't call, didn't talk to *him*, but they could call the little night nurse. Marco could imagine the conversation. "Oy, chica. Me and Eazy, we got to kill the guy in Room 332. You know when he's getting out?"

Eazy slid into the truck, locked the doors. "Come on."

Nobody said anything, they just drove, headed out of town, past the shops and the hotels and the warehouses. They just drove without a word, drove and drove, not even the radio on.

Marco could see Andy's blond hair in his mind's eye, spattered red and gray.

His eyes closed as if that would make it go away, not make it sharper, harder-edged. More.

Jesus fucking Christ.

The truck pulled off the road and onto gravel, the wheels jittering and spitting rocks.

When he opened his eyes, they were at a little cemetery with white tombstones like teeth. "What?"

"'s where Andy is, Querido. We thought you'd want to see. Say goodbye proper with us." Angel's eyes were wet, shimmering and Marco swallowed hard.

"You mean... I thought."

"Thinking, Marco, was never your strong suit." Eazy slid out of the truck and came around. "Come on, now. We came this morning with flowers. We didn't want you to have to search."

He may have sobbed as Eazy's hands wrapped around him, supported him. Those dark eyes never looked away from him, never flinched from the scars. "Does he have a stone?"

"Not yet. His family has one coming. His mamma's a good one." Andy'd been from here, had met them here. Had taken them into his home, made them all...

"You. I don't know if I. What happens..."

"Shh." Angel took a bag from the truck, slid under his stump as Eazy took the other side. "We got to do right for him."

"He may not want me."

"Bullshit." Eazy shook his head. "Andy always wanted you."

The ground was uneven, unsteady and all those graves stared at him, blaming him. It had been wet. He'd gone too fast.

Andy.

The ground was still upturned, still bare and raw with a pile of rainbow-colored carnations scattered on the ground. Jesus. Jesus. Andy was there, under the ground. Rotting.

Jesus.

"Andy."

Marco stumbled, Eazy catching him in the center of the chest, steadying him. "Breathe, Querido. I have you."

"I killed him."

"No. No, it was an accident, Querido." Eazy held his eyes, fingers holding his face, familiar calluses on his cheek. "You didn't kill anyone. Andy died."

"I'm so sorry."

Angel made a broken noise, tears streaking the lean face. "We are all sorry, Marco. It was his time. You. You are still here."

He closed his eyes, his missing hand feeling just like it was clenching, squeezing, even though it was gone. Most of him. Big parts of him were gone.

Lost.

"Come. Come, Querido. We will sit. Celebrate him." Eazy helped him down onto the ground, onto the old quilt that lived in the sleeper. The sun beat down on them, obscenely bright, horribly cheerful in this place.

Angel brought out a beer, a few bags, settling them all around. "We brought you some clothes. You must hate the hospital ones."

Marco shrugged. "They make it easier, almost. Like this isn't real. None of it seems real."

Angel's eyes passed over Andy's grave. "It's real, Marco."

That sharp pain hit him again, like a blow from a fist. They had all been together, all working and laughing and loving together, but he had known that Andy was meant for Angel, had loved Angel.

Had flown for Angel.

"I know. I'm sorry." What else could he say?

"Stop apologizing." The tears were right there, making Angel's dark eyes look as if they were swimming. Right there.

"What else can I do?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Bring him back. Bring him back to us!"

"I would have. I would have let it be me."

"As if that would be better! As if you would be easier to lose!" Angel stared, hand still wrapped around his sensitive stump, squeezing, making him whimper.

"Angel!"

"Angel." Eazy's voice was softer than his, more gentle. Eazy's hand left his shoulder, gathering Angel close, rocking the sobbing man as the sun moved through the sky.

It would have been easier had they killed him.

"Marco." Angel looked at him, hand reaching out for him over Eazy's shoulder. "Marco, come *here*."

He shook his head, eyes closing. "I need to tell him goodbye."

It was Eazy that answered him. "We all do. Together. Put out the plates, Angel."

Four plates. Four bottles of Bud. Four apples. Four little boxes of candy. Four pieces of carne asada. Four pieces of cheese.

They sat together, looked at all of it, then Eazy sighed. "We ain't got all day, now. We gotta eat, then we gotta get on the road."

"On the road? Y'all... y'all are headed right back out?"

Eazy nodded. "North, yeah? Then across to New England. Six week run."

His heart sank. Where was he going to go? Andy's place? The man's ghost was probably waiting on him to show up. Waiting to growl and hate him.

"Don't look so sad, Marco. Six weeks isn't so long." Angel opened the bottles, handing them around, the scent of yeast and beer strong, heady. "To Andy, may he be happy and watch over us, eh? Pray for us traveling types."

Eazy's bottle lifted. "To Andy. I'll miss you, hermano."

His hand shook so hard the beer fizzed, bubbles raining down on his fingers. "T...to Andy. I'm... I'm sorry, man. I didn't. I never would have hurt you, you know that. The road was so slick, though..." His breath hitched, but no one stopped him. "It was slick and I couldn't adjust, I tried. I tried so hard, but you just kept falling. I'll never sleep again without seeing that. Seeing you falling."

His skin was covered in goose bumps, as if the day wasn't warm, as if the sun wasn't up.

He took a deep drink so hide his sobs.

Angel shook his head and grabbed the fourth bottle, pouring it over Andy's grave. "He loved us."

"He loved you."

"He loved us all." Angel's eyes were on him again. "He loved life. He loved that fucking Harley. He loved the risks. He wanted to die spectacularly."

Eazy nodded, swallowing hard. "He did. He's gone. We're still here. That's what's important now. Eat your food, now. It may rain."

"There aren't any clouds, Eazy." Not a one and Marco didn't want to hurry, not at all. He didn't know where to go.

"Shut up, Querido. Eat."

He choked down the meat, the cheese, the fruit. They didn't say a word, not any of them. Not even when Angel buried the tiny pieces of the food in there with Andy. Marco wondered if they'd come here to Andy's funeral, if there'd been a fancy casket. If they'd buried the man in a suit, or in his favorite jeans. Was a minister here? Andy's folks? Did the other long-haulers that were passing through stop? What about Ricky Martinez, the little manager from Dos Chiles, the one with all the gold teeth and the wolfy smile? How had it been? Did it matter? He reached for the little box, surprised to see a little triangle of chocolate there. Andy hated chocolate.

Angel shrugged. "My mama said this was food of the gods. I wanted to. Andy's is them sour cherry ones. The candy guy only had three of these ones on sale."

Marco picked up the chocolate, the sweet soft, sliding just a little on his fingers. It smelled odd, a little like he remembered his 'uelita. Just a little spicy, almost smoky. Musty, if musty wasn't such a terrible word for food.

Eazy had one, so did Angel. Angel buried the little red balls and then they ate. Chiles. There were chiles in the chocolate -- not enough to burn, but enough to warm his bones, his belly.

They sat there, altogether, the sun all butter-yellow and dipping below the trees. The whole world just sorta felt stopped.

Still.

Then Eazy reached out and touched his empty sleeve. "I need to see it."

"What?"

"I need to see you, Querido. I need to see the arm. I need to see."

"I thought..." He'd thought that they were... He was... It all was over.

"No thinking. Please." The sleeve was tugged again.

"Right here?"

He got a grin, quick and tickled, Eazy's eyes warm on him. "What? You think Andy'd care?"

Even Angel laughed at that, and two pair of hands reached for him, smoothed the tie-on shirt open and off. The urge to reach for his stump was awful, irresistible, but Angel twined their fingers together and held on. "No. No, Marco. Please. Let him see."

He didn't look -- he'd seen it. Red. Raw. The sac of skin that hung off the bone felt empty, saggy. Weird. Eazy's fingers explored it, sliding over each scar, lifting it to touch underneath, tug a little at the hairs under his arms. "Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes. It's sensitive." His brain told him the hand was still there. That it was burning. Tingling. Awake. Aware.

"It's not as ugly as I thought it would be. You always see them on TV and they're bad. This is just you." Eazy's fingers slid down his side, hard enough to not tickle. Hard enough to feel. "You need to eat more. See the sun."

Angel nodded, fingers on his belly. "Hospitals are for sick people. You're getting better now, yeah?"

Yeah. Better. Right. "I want to be."

"You will. You paid, huh? You *paid*." Eazy's lips were on his shoulder, moving just a little bit. "Now you're with us, where you belong."

"I am." He could just scream, just sob and bash his hand against the ground. Every time the energy built up to do it, Angel kissed him, Eazy petted him, eased him down.

They spread him out on the quilt, not arousing as much as touching, feeling bumps and bruises, scars and stitches. Eazy's fingers tickled over his bellybutton, combing through the hairs there, smoothing them out as Angel touched his face. The scar on his cheek was healing, the one above his eyebrow almost gone. The worst one was his chin, the stitches had gone all the way up

through his lip. Angel's finger dipped inside his bottom lip, tracing the edge of his teeth first, before dipping in to feel the rough jagged scar there.

Angel tasted of chiles and sugar and cinnamon.

Love.

He heard the word, whispered on the wind, and his eyes went wide, staring into Angel's. "Did you..."

"Shh." Angel's finger pressed against his lips, head shaking. No thinking.

He could hear that laughter again, just barely on the air. *No thinking.*

No thinking. No thinking about the years they'd driven together, about the way eight legs could tangle in a big bed, about the way they'd fight over who had to sit next to Eazy because Eazy was left handed and now he was left handed too, but there wasn't four, not anymore, now there were only three and he could just sit by himself and be all alone and...

"Querido."

He could feel Eazy's fingers on his waistband and he shook his head, groaned softly. "No..."

Not here. They couldn't.

The barest kiss brushed across his belly. "You're okay. The sun's going. It'll be nothing. I just gotta see, 'kay?"

Angel nodded. "We're just having one more look, all of us together, then we'll drive, yeah?"

Yeah. Sure, okay. Drive. He closed his eyes against the fading light and let Eazy bare his legs. There were pieces of him missing.

Huge pieces torn away by asphalt and steel and chain and gravel. They said his leathers saved his leg.

They said he was lucky.

Lucky.

Behind his eyes he could almost see Andy laughing in the center of a storm, the lightning flashing around him. He could feel arms squeezing him tight as the wind blew around them, made Andy's hair stand up like some evil scientist.

Faster.

He shook his head, even as his shoulder burned, the quick bite there hard enough to leave a mark.

Faster, Marco Polo. Please, I want to fly. I want to play. Faster.

It's wet, Andy. Slick. Dark. He should have said it, should have said no and pulled Andy into bed with Eazy and Angel, should have wrapped them all up in the sheets and touched and licked and kissed until the sun came up.

He should have. He didn't.

He hadn't.

He'd given in, given his asshole lover what Andy wanted.

What he'd wanted.

He'd left Eazy and Angel curled together around a beer, watching some shitty movie with aliens and goo and screaming putas with huge boobies. Left that apartment and headed into the darkness.

Please, Marco. I need this. I need.

He hadn't. He never had refused those eyes. None of them had. None of them. The three amigos and their blond beauty -- their light. Their lover.

He shook his head, over and over, deep sounds leaving him as his lovers touched him, stroked his legs, his hips, his ankles. They touched him like he wasn't broken. Like they weren't on a quilt in a graveyard next to Andy's grave.

Like their hands would heal him.

"I need."

"Shh. Marco. Peace. You need peace." Angel kissed him, tasting of tears. "He loved you."

"I know." He did know. He remembered.

Good.

What? "Andy."

"He's here with us, between us. Part of us. Always." Angel turned him, four hands landing on his back, his ass, his thigh.

"We thought we'd lost both of you, Querido. When the police came, when we saw. We thought you were gone." Eazy's kisses landed on his shoulder, the base of his skull. Kisses falling like tears, like rain. "I could not lose half of my soul, all at once, si? I cannot."

"It should have been me." It would have been easier, if it had been him.

"It would have been hell, no matter who it was." Angel bit him, right on his upper arm, the mass of scars aching. "You're here now. With us."

With them. He sat up, pushing into Eazy's arms, holding tight. Angel was at his back, warm and sure, pressing against him as he let his lovers rock him. Forgive him.

"Tell him goodbye, Marco, and we'll go. We have a long night ahead of us. A drive."

"All of us?" Oh, please.

"Si. Si, Querido. All of us. Then we'll go." Eazy sounded so sure. So incredibly solid and real and...

"I want to go, too. I want to come with you." There. He'd said it. Out loud. Don't leave without him. Please.

"Of course you go, too." Angel laughed, the sound sad and almost aching. "We've lost one; you think we can give you up, Marco? We go together, the three of us."

"It used to be four."

Eazy sobbed once against his shoulder, the sound so unusual he barely recognized it. "Used to be. One day it will be again."

Angel's hair brushed against his shoulder, his stump, soft and slick. "Si. Si. One day, all of us together, whole. Until then, we have this. You, me, Eazy, the road. Us, si?"

Whole. His heart throbbed again, the ache seeming to just swell impossibly before a single, phantom touch to the center of his chest eased it, the ash leaves shaking with a still-familiar laughter as long, thin fingers squeezed his missing hand. *One day, Marco Polo. One day we'll ride. One day we'll play. I'm waiting, right here, for my three amigos.*

He nodded and took a deep breath, held it in as long as he could, even with the tears streaming down his cheeks, a smile on his crooked lips. One day.

One day they'd all play again.

This had been the longest month in the history of the Earth.

James locked the door of the Dozen, head down, eyes on the concrete. His fingers ached from dipping and rolling and sprinkling. The inside of his nose smelled of sugar and his skin was sticky -- every inch of it. His boss was still inside, whispering incantations over some coffee beans.

Coffee beans.

He couldn't imagine the work that Bryan was creating inside the shiny, hard little things.

Well, he could imagine.

At least the pyramids were gone, finally gone, the wishes whispered into the little spicy triangles after so many days. Bryan's pain rested on the air like smoke, threatening to smother him. So many years, so much loss, and still the man refused to heal. It was a lost cause, to wait for the man to heal, to move beyond the crypt of sorrow Bryan had so carefully created for...

A shiny black pick up truck headed down the street, the scent of chiles and cocoa and paprika and something he couldn't recognize sudden and sharp on the air, pricking at his attention like a flag waved in front of a bull. The three. The three that survived.

The three that would heal.

James smiled, leaned against the brick wall, just outside the ring of yellow light from the street lamp, watching the truck pull into a fenced parking lot where a semi truck waited like a promise as he avoided the odd cricket that bounced off his clogs. He watched as they loaded in, leaning on one another, balancing themselves around a memory and around something else.

Something James could scent, his nose trained to pick the slightest aroma from the air, the most basic hint that could be used for them to follow their calling. What was it -- sweet and deep, almost dark, yet effervescent and bright...

It hit him, suddenly. Surely. That thing he'd forgotten.

Hope. That scent was hope.

Chapter Three

"Candied roses are passe."

Bryan stared down his nose at his incorrigible asshole of an apprentice. "Excuse me?"

"Passe." James smiled. "People are over roses. You should try mums."

Bryan looked at the piles of perfect, pale rose petals, preserved and protected by tiny sparkling sugar crystals, each one catching the light. They weren't red, because red was for youth and fiery passion, for a romance that was burning and out of control. No, these roses were from his own collection, cared for daily, studied for hours, gathered in the light of the full moon and washed with rain water, soft whispered thanks hanging on the heavy scented air. Each petal was cleaned, the heavy, waxen flesh adored and blessed. These roses were white.

Bryan chose the most pristine one, placing it atop one perfect, dark truffle, the curled edges cradling the sweet. "Nonsense. Mums are too spicy for champagne."

Although they would be beautiful cradling tea-flavored treats, some flavor that would encourage the addition of a hint of black pepper, a breath of cardamom hovering in the cream like the whisper of a woman draped in a sari, jewels caught in her dark hair, dangling on chains about her face. Spider mums used as containers, their orange-red spikes almost like bars around the confection. Yes, yes, he quite approved.

"Champagne? Boss? Are we celebrating?" James leaned over Bryan's shoulder, body pressed close against his back, hands on his hips as if they belonged there. The heat eased an ache in his lower back that he'd long stopped paying attention to. Those hands moved, finding the spot unerringly, pushing deep until his old knees threatened to buckle, his fingers stuttering over the remaining rose petals, shattering one.

Oh, honestly, he was going to beat the boy. In fact, he swatted James' hand, just enough to sting. "No. We're not. Someone is."

Someone wonderful.

"Who?"

Bryan looked up, smiled. "A pair of very good friends."

Two beautiful, blond-haired men who had loved one another so long that it was near impossible to tell one from the other. Two men who had brought light into his life in the form of a laughing man. Very good friends from a time before he knew sorrow.

James' hands fell from him, the lad stepping away with a soft sigh. "Keir and Sion?"

Bryan nodded, arranging the half-dozen truffles in a silver box lined with satin. "Yes, lad. It's their anniversary."

"Do you want me to deliver the box?" Even James knew that the pair hadn't left their home in months, the reclusive couple leaving more and more rarely as time passed by them.

He chuckled and shut the lid, fingers stroking over the top, the roses and violets and feathers embossed in the metal. The box was warm to the touch, nearly alive, tingling.

"I don't think that will be necessary, dear boy." He lifted the lid, the sweets gone, delivered into the hands of those they were meant for. "In fact, I don't think it will be necessary at all."

He lit the candles, whistling as he moved through their apartment, listening to his own heartbeat in his ears, the thrum and pound just a hair offset with the music that trickled in from the kitchen. He could almost see the sound, sliding over the slick wood of their table, bouncing off the smooth flower vase that sat in the center and then tumbling down the short wall to pour into the great room and cuddle into the leather sofa, the winged backed chair, the little ottoman with the tufted cushion that was the perfect height to sit upon and rest his chin upon Keir's knee, listen to the low, soft voice read to him from the newspaper or some wickedly decadent novel that his lover had found them in some store, the scent of age and thousands of fingers redolent whenever a page was turned.

Sion knew where each column of wax was, from the long, thin tapers on the bar to the thick, heavy three-wicked candles that were on the mantle. There was a collection of tiny little tea lights in a bowl on the coffee table, a series of handmade, knobby candles half-buried in a wide, shallow container of sand collected from an island beach.

Slowly the scent began to flood the room -- hazelnut and coffee, vanilla and beeswax. The scents were heady, crashing around Sion as he wandered, fascinated by the strength of one, then the other. Somewhere there was a hint of cinnamon; in another, the breath of chocolate, sweet and rich and luscious enough that he imagined he could taste it.

Add to that the bright scent of the soap on his soft, cotton robe and Sion imagined he could dance with the sheer pleasure of it.

Soft laughter filled the room, bouncing over the top of the music and tickling the roof of his mouth as he breathed it in. "Sensualist."

Sion nodded, his smile pulling at his cheeks with the intensity of it. "Did I miss any?"

"You never do." Kier's feet clapped on the marble, china rattling and clinking with each step. "Shall we eat in the dining room or in here, love?"

"Oh, in here. There can be a fire and music." He inhaled -- vanilla, butter, something rich like cream. "Are we having tea?"

"I thought it would suit."

Yes. Yes, he agreed. Sion could remember their first meeting: a long, leisurely tea upon a steamer ship sliding across the ocean, the wind blowing his hair about, threatening to steal his hat away. Kier had come to sit with him, so sure that he would welcome company.

He had been.

He had been caught before Kier had spoken a single word, their souls entwining and twisting together, caught like two spider webs in a windstorm -- only the strong strands left whole, tethered. Joined.

What a life they had created for themselves.

"I remember the raspberries on the little cakes. They were like explosions." Bright, tart explosions that had surprised him, made him laugh aloud, the water and wind slapping the sound back to his ears.

"Yes, and the cucumber sandwiches. You quite liked those, with the soft bread." Mmm. Yes. So soft and so delicate, yet suddenly firm and crisp, the feel of the wet flesh on his teeth fascinating, the sound of chewing like far-off marching soldiers inside his own head.

"They weren't the only things I quite liked." He followed as Kier headed toward the low table, his toes finding the edge of the heavy, square floor pillow that waited for him, all velvet and tassled and worn, just a bit, at the edged.

"No, they weren't the only things." That soft, fond laughter came again as he settled, Kier's hand on his back, strong and sure, fingers carding through his hair and pushing it back from his face. "You liked the dancing, love. I remember that -- how frightened you were that someone would see."

Yes. He'd been terrified, clinging to Kier's arms, those long, lean muscles moving beneath his fingers. Still, it had been perfect, Kier's heat leading him in slow circles at first, teasing him to move one foot and then the other, even as the ship rocked beneath them. Oh, how Kier had laughed, head thrown back, jacket slick and smooth under his fingertips. Kier had stolen their first kiss that night, quick and nearly chaste, simply a press of lips as both of their bodies spun faster and faster, feet stamping upon the deck.

"You were most insistent -- one could believe you knew the path you were taking."

"You are not the only one of us that carries gifts, my dear. I was meant to find you." Sion smiled at Kier's words -- how many years had they replayed this act? How many more would they recreate it?

"You were. You made time stop, then, and it has not found us often."

"No. Not so long as we remember our place, yes?"

Indeed. All gifts -- even one as great as they shared -- came with a price. They hid from the world, from the slide and growl of time. Every moment they wasted in the stream of time, though, every second cost them dearly, the universe demanding its due.

Of course, he had no reason to complain; he was loved often and loved well. There was so many others left alone, bereft. He had his lantern to burn away the darkness.

No reason to complain at all. "Tell me, love, what dainties have you discovered for me?" he asked Kier.

"Ah, there are finger sandwiches and tarts, stuffed tomatoes and scones."

"Finger sandwiches. Did you know that when I was a child, I thought them cruel? Something an ogre baker created in his oven from bad children like a fairy story?" His laughter bounced against Kier's, splashing all around them. Of course Kier knew. Kier knew each and every one of his stories.

"Did you know that I thought tomatoes poisonous?" Kier always answered the same way; it was as comforting as the fingers sliding over his lips, bright with the flavor of oranges and lemons, cheese and olives.

"Mmm. And I..." He stopped a moment, humming as the scent of Greece echoed somewhere within him, the crash of sea against stone, the leaves of lemon trees crushed beneath his feet. "I know that you crush them in your fingers to make sauce, now. You whisper spells for lovemaking and life and joy."

"I do. Just like I squeeze the lemons for your lemon curd tarts and promise that bright joy follows you always." Oh, those would be sweet and bright and almost enough to make his nose burn.

"I don't smell those. You've hidden them from me." His fingers explored the edges of the plates - - this one scalloped and round, the next sharp edged and square. No fair, those were his favorites.

"Indeed. You must wait for dessert. For now, the tarts we have are of the goat cheese variety." Soft laughter brushed his mouth moments before Kier's lips met his, as familiar and dear as anything had ever been.

This kiss echoed a thousand before and a thousand before that. His fingers slid to cup a jaw line more familiar than his own, fingers discovering at once nothing at all and everything anew.

The slightest hint of stubble told him that Kier had shaved just before noon, and the slightest bit of grit on Kier's palm meant cornmeal on the bottom of the goat cheese tarts.

Then there was a breath of...

"Bryan remembered us."

Chocolate. Chocolate and bubbles and sugared roses mixed with tears and laughter and, oh, their dear, dear friend.

"He did. I think he's a bit worried about us, love, but I fear I worry more about him. Still, he brought us champagne sweets. Those will be our special treat later, hmm?"

"Yes. Our celebration." Bryan's annual gift to them for untold years. A moment when he and Kier were at one, when his sight was clear and he could see those blue eyes again, for as long as the magic lingered upon their tongues.

"Only for us." They shared another kiss before Kier drew him closer, almost joining him on his cushion. "I did make something new. I had the baby artichokes delivered. I read about how they make them in Rome."

"Tell me." A delicate cup was pressed into his fingers, the heat seeming to curl up along his bones. Oh. Lemon. Honey.

"They flatten them between bricks and then fry them. I had those two bricks we used to make sandwiches, do you remember?" That could have been days or decades ago, but he remembered flaky bread and delicate, thin meat and cheese and the smell of burning tin foil.

"I do. They made a slap like nothing else -- like stone hands clapping."

"Luckily we still had them, so I tried it. Taste." The tiny leaf slipped between his lips easily, tender, tasting of melted herb butter and earthy olive oil.

So luscious, for such a tiny bite. "Another, love. I have never tasted anything quite like that."

"No?" Kier fed him another, letting him lick the tiny bit of sauce off those long fingers. "Should I try them?"

"You haven't?" He leaned forward until their foreheads touched, breath shared. "You are trying to poison me with untried food..."

They laughed together again, Kier's fingers leading his to the right plate, to the tiny leaves so that he might feed his lover.

"I tasted the sauce. I always do." They feasted, on each other and the food, for a long while, Kier feeding him tidbit after tiny bite.

"Do you remember the first time you touched me?" It was his favorite story -- Kier came to him, never one to wait for him to make up his mind, slid beneath his sheets and drew him close.

"I do. I felt very bold, sneaking in like a thief in the night and holding you to me." Leaning against him, Kier sighed, the sound contented, deeply loving.

"My bed sheets smelled of you in the morning. I wrapped myself in them, breathed you into me."

"Just like I breathe you in every morning." Oh, yes. They shared their cocoon every morning, lying together and murmuring nonsense until they decided to get up and start their day.

One would think they would be bored, so many years of waking together, fingers sliding, sharing their dreams -- good and bad. They should be, but they simply were not.

"Shall we have dessert, love? We have the tarts, the truffles..." He could hear the deep tremor of anticipation in Kier's voice now, waiting for those champagne treats.

"I would see you, beloved." He ached for it, for his moment of clarity, his moment away from the darkness.

"Then we'll start with one of the truffles." They saved them, sometimes for days, meting them out one at a time, savoring the time it gave Sion to look on his lover's face.

He heard the box open, heard the click and snick of the knife as it slid through the sweet. He could almost smell the bubbles, the bright, light crispness. He could feel himself start to shudder, anticipation driving his heart.

"Now, where did I leave those, hmm?" Oh, such a tease. He knew full well that Kier had put them somewhere close at hand. He received a kiss before the air changed around him, Kier moving away for a moment.

He twined his fingers together, thumbs rubbing together in slow circles as he tried to relax into the anticipation, the nervousness.

"My patient one." The weight of his lover settled against him again, the velvet soft robe Kier wore brushing his exposed ankle. "They're so beautiful, perfectly shaped, the roses just resting."

"His work is perfection." Bryan's magic was unlike anyone else's, anywhere, filled with a perfection and a need that no one else attained. If only the broken heart could heal.

"Someday, love. He will find a way for himself. Are you ready?" Pressing a smooth, rounded truffle to his lips, Kier breathed with him, their chests rising and falling in perfect unison.

His eyes were squeezed shut and it took all that he was to remember to open them, to not dissolve into a dew as the curtain of nothing crashed down. "Kier."

Kier.

His own Kier.

The man was a study in pales and darks, eyes shining at him, so much brighter than the rest of the familiar face.

The hand that pressed against his lips slid to his cheek, cupping it. The smile might have blinded him, if that were possible. "Hello, love."

"Kier." He moaned, eyes moving furiously so that he might not miss a single detail, not miss one alteration in that eternally smooth face.

There were very few changes, but he knew enough to see that the slightest of lines had appeared next to Kier's mouth, that Kier had changed the tiniest detail of his haircut.

He reached out and touched, fascinated as always by the sight of his hand on Kier's skin, by the way he could see what he felt.

"Oh, love." Nuzzling into his touch, Kier rubbed back and forth, and he could see the slight stubble now, just as he'd felt it earlier.

Sion simply nodded, the chocolate melting upon his tongue, trapping all the wonder and awe and words inside him and leaving him quite undone. This gift was fleeting; it could not last - not in this time, not in another - but it was near the finest he could be offered.

When the last of the flavor faded away, so did his vision of Kier. He could still feel the warmth of his lover's skin, could feel the tiny slide of moisture there when he moved his fingers.

His breath caught in his chest, hands searching that beloved face -- the long, thin nose, the bow of his beloved's upper lip, the cleft in the strong chin.

"Oh, love." Smiling now, Kier pressed another kiss to his hand. He could feel the way the corners of the sensitive mouth turned up. "Why not take one more to bed with us?"

"One more." He nodded, then gave into the urge that would not be denied, and threw himself against Kier, full-body, demanding that his lover touch him, love him here and now. Falling back, Kier held him close, kissing his cheeks and chin, hands splayed against his back. They rolled off the cushions, the harder texture of the thin rug and wood floor assaulting his knees.

"Please." He tore at Kier's clothes, needing something now, something that no magic could give him. Something that only Kier could offer.

"Yes. Yes, love." His robe disappeared like smoke dissipating under Kier's hands, and then all he had was heat. Kier touched him like he was the most precious thing imaginable, but not like he

would break. Those hands were familiar, deeper than his bones, than his soul itself. His body reached for them, rejoicing, his nerves singing. Warm skin pressed against him, all along his body, and Kier swept both hands down his back, fingers massaging his spine, his hips, the very top of his buttocks. The hardness of Kier's need pressed against his belly, already damp for him, smooth and slick.

"I saw you." And his eyes, as always, answered what his fingers knew. His lover was beautiful.

"You always do, even without your vision, love. Now you must taste..." Kissing him deeply, Kier made him forget anything but the slow glide of lips and tongues, the soft sucking sound as they moved to deepen the contact. Salt and musk tantalized him, hidden under the lushness of the chocolate. He kissed hard, searching for more and more of the flavor he craved, that hint of passion that drove them both.

A low moan added to the sensation, vibrating against his tongue. They rolled, Kier pressing down on him, pushing against him in a rhythmic dance he knew and loved, one his body answered instinctively. The floor was a delicious contrast - cool and smooth, unyielding and hard where Kier was a flame, hot and licking against his skin, setting him alight.

Kissing, licking, Kier moved down his throat, leaving a trail of sucking kisses that stung enough to make him gasp. The tiny hairs on Kier's thighs caught against his legs, the small scratch almost unbearable. One of the plates rattled, then Kier's fingers trailed over his nipple, leaving it wet and cold. "Kier?"

Those fingers pushed into his mouth, filling him with a tart sweetness. Oh. Berries. The cold, crisp taste contrasted sharply with the heat of Kier's lips, wrapping around his nipple and sucking strongly. His own suction echoed Kier's, and he pulled the flavors off his lover's fingers, tongue searching and licking over smooth skin and little creases where the knuckles were. The circle of pleasure widened to include his belly, his hips, and his shaft, Kier's other hand touching him everywhere, but never in one place long enough to lull him out of the surprised pleasure.

"Love." He gasped with his need, fingers thrumming upon the floor, his music adding to Kier's moans, the slap and slide of their skin together.

"Yes. I love your skin. I love how your breath speeds when I touch you here." Sweet fingers slid over his balls, then behind, pressing against the secret, tiny bit of skin there, so sensitive that the touch made a groan push out of him. Even after so long, he had no choice but to spread and offer himself over, to beg for those sweet, secret touches. Humming, Kier slipped farther back, circling his entrance, the scrape against his nerves exquisite. His lover kissed his throat, licking at him as if he were the feast.

All of his magic, all of his words slid away from him, leaving him breathless and near silly, a victim of pure joy as his Kier adored him. One finger slipped inside his body, taking him as only Kier could, the need burning him from the inside out. Caught between hands and mouth, he hung suspended in pleasure.

"Love." His hands smoothed down Kier's arms, fingers wrapping around like vines, holding them together.

"What would you like, Sion?" Kier asked, mouth against the pulse that beat in his throat. "I want to taste you everywhere, touch you everywhere."

Two fingers pushed inside him now, slick with something he hadn't smelled or even heard opening, easing the way for Kier to push deep.

"Everything." He could remember the first time they did this, the last time, just as if they were the same. Timeless.

"We'll start with this." Sliding down his body like a fall of warm water, Kier sucked at his hardness, pulling it deep into that hungry mouth. Adoring him. Loving him.

He arched up, drawn as tight as a bow, heels thrumming upon the floor. Pleasure coalesced in the base of his spine, drawn through him by the tug and pull of his lover's tongue. It bloomed throughout him and a cry left him, bouncing through the room as his heat was taken in, his love drawing him forth and feeding from him.

It left him weak, panting, and Kier gathered him up, held him close as happy moans slipped from him, the sounds raw edged and needy.

Nothing so perfect could be held inside, it had to escape.

"To bed, now. Let our love continue..." Kier nuzzled his cheek, smiled. "Let us feast."

Somewhere nearby, a man sat, staring into the fading sun, a single tear trailing down a sugar-dusted cheek. When it fell, it caught the sun for a single second, sending a prism dancing upon the table before it splashed.

Chapter Four

Their laughter rang through the bakery, the crack and smash of hulls echoing in between.

"Do we honestly have to crack all these ourselves, boss?" Bryan laughed as James ducked a flying shard.

"Of course we do! How else would we know they were fresh?" Oh, he did enjoy this time of year -- there was a crispness in the air, the lights were beginning to appear on eaves, in windowsills. They hadn't tugged down the bakery's decorations yet, it was much too early, but they were discussing it. James arguing for bright purples and oranges and him pushing for the traditional reds and greens.

"I don't see you out in a barn, milking a cow for cream, Bryan."

No, and Heaven help him, he never would again. Those days had passed him by, long ago. He didn't honor James with a response; instead he simply tossed a nut over, pegging James in the head.

"Ow! If I criticize your lack of cocoa bean roasting, will you throw one of those at me?"

"I make my own vanilla extract."

"That doesn't count."

"Why not?" Sure, it did. He shook and measured, scraped the beans and... Bryan scowled over at his apprentice, who was all smiles, pretty eyes twinkling. "You evil thing!"

"Evil? Boss? Never say so!" James chuckled, winked. "I'm here, aren't I? Mashing pecans like a master."

He picked up a broken half. "Not exactly a master..."

"Oh. Oh, is that a challenge? You don't think I can't make praline truffles with the best of them?"

"In Louisiana, they say prah-leen, not pray-leen."

James' eyebrow arched. "We're not in Louisiana, boss."

"No." He grinned, the sound of tires on asphalt sharp and somehow sweet. "But the truffles will be."

"Ooooo! Cheries! Joyeux Noel! I bring presents, me. I got us some goodies from that there candy store by the ocean that Grandmere talked about, and I bring us some good wine!" Dixon came swinging into the big old house, whistling for Momma, for Antha, for wee Janelle. Hell, he'd even take them hound dogs for a greeting. Damn near Christmas and he was ready for his time at home. Ready for his vacation away from the track and the oil and the sounds of the engines always going, going.

Ready for...

"Dix."

Well, shit-fire and light matches, he wasn't ready for that.

Dixon stared up (and up and up and up -- lord, lord, somebody sneaked the Jolly Green Giant into that boy's momma's bed when her knees was spread wide and planted them a tall-ass Cajun into the cabbage patch) into bright green eyes that looked damn near sad. Looked into that face that he'd seen every day for twenty years before the bottom fell out of his earth. Lord have mercy, he'd hunted that man for most his life, before he went to driving stock and Justin headed off to Detroit or somewhere to learn doctoring. "Justin Robichaux. What you doin' at my momma's house?"

"Doc. Trimble called me. Antha said you were coming home today." Well, what did that have to do with anything?

"I thought you'd moved north." Out of Saint Bernard Parish, out of Louisiana, out of the South.

"I moved my practice to Town after the storm. They needed help." Well, la-di-da. Fancy-pants doctor coming to aid the locals.

"Nice. What you doin' at my momma's house?" Not that he wasn't glad to see the motherfucker or nothing; it was just that the last time they'd come together there was too much beer and too much smoke and a kiss that lasted forever and a punch to his face that lasted even longer.

Some things a man didn't forget, no mater how drunk he'd been.

Momma and them'd been getting ready for Christmas; he could tell. There was tinsel and garlands and a couple of them shiny ball things that Antha liked so damn much. There wasn't a tree yet, though. Wasn't the big sparkly wreath on the door or boxes of lights down, either, waiting on him to come home and string 'em, make the front yard look like a raceway.

"I came to see your momma. She fell three weeks ago, Dix. Broke her hip but good. I came to the house to..."

"Three *weeks* ago?" He slammed down his bags, threw back his head and hollered, voice just ringing out like church bells. "Antha Lee Babin! You get your ass down here NOW!"

Justin stepped back and Dixon's hand shot out, grabbing the doc's coat sleeve. Oh, he didn't think so.

He heard little Janelle start crying about two shakes before Antha's footsteps sounded on the stairs, his baby sister sounding like a herd of elephants on the wood for all she was stick-thin and feather-light, just like him. She had the baby -- who, good night, was a little girl now, almost big enough to have the Babin-blue-black curls and shit -- patting the pink-clad back as she hurried down. "Dixon! Don't you holler at me! You woke your niece. You didn't tell me when you were getting in."

"Woman! You get your ass down here and start talking! Why ain't I got me a phone call? Why'm I comin' home *now* to hear 'bout dis?" He was shaking with a raw fury that was fueled by fear.

Momma. His momma.

Good lord.

"This? Hello, Doctor Robichaux. How's she doing?"

"She's..." It was all he could do not to smack that look off Justin's face.

"Don't you 'Doctor Robichaux' his ass, goddamn it. He's nothing more than Ol' Tahyo, just like when we was kids."

"Oh, Dix, I have missed you. I haven't been called a dog in ages." Oh, pretty airs.

"Shut *up*, now. Why didn't no one call me, Sissy? I have a phone, me." Hell, he'd've been home quicker than a dog blinked, if she'd let him know.

"Momma said no, Be'Be'. She said she din' want you worrying when the races were going so good for you."

"I don't care. God *damn* it! How bad is it? Where the fuck is she? What is *going* on!"

Baby Janelle started sobbing and Antha stamped one little foot. "Watch your mouth, now. There's babies here."

Dixon closed his eyes, counted to twelve. "Okay. Okay, I'm sorry. 'mere, petite. I'll hold on."

He opened his arms, baby Janelle pushing over to cuddle. He did love that wee girl. "Now, someone. Tell me Momma's okay."

"Miz Babin is going to be just fine, Dix. Swear to God. She'll be on a walker for a few months, but she's resting easy. She's home. She got her hair done this morning." Justin looked damn near 'fronted.

Antha nodded, tight little lines around her mouth saying to him that it ain't been too easy, it ain't all been right. "She's ornery as a gator in a drained swamp. She's done cussed me, Auntie Chou, and Miz Liza."

"And I cussed her back, me. I ain't ascairt of dem gators." The voice that floated on down to him was old as powdered dust, his old nurse smiling down with them big, old fake chompers. Liza Mecha hadn't aged a single day in twenty years; Dixon'd swear she was born as old as the hills. "Lord, lord, Be'Be', I thought you'd never come home."

"Nanna." He grinned up to the landing, baby Janelle grinning, too, waving madly. That old woman had raised him up, while Momma was busy being... busy. "Lord, lady. You're looking a spring chicken, you are. How's Momma?"

"Bitchy." Nanna winked, her laugh just ringing out. "She'll be right as rain now that she knows you're home, Be'Be'. I swear. She misses you like a lost tooth, jes' like that dere baby girl does."

"This baby is like her momma. She knows which side her bread's buttered on, oui? I'm going up to see her. You." He juggled baby Janelle onto his hip and pointed at Tahyo with a scowl. "Don't you be leaving, asshole. I mean it. We got to talk."

"I..."

"Don't, now. I ain't got time to beat you to death right now."

"Dix."

"You stay. I mean it. I'll be back down. You don't go."

He handed baby Janelle back to Antha and headed for the stairs, smiling up at Liza. "Nanny, make sure the Grande Dame is decent. I'm home and I'm gonna ride her ass but good."

Lord, welcome home, Be'Be'. Welcome home.

He drank one cup of chicory, then another, listening to Antha Babin jabber on like a monkey in a zoo. Good lord that girl could talk.

All those years away and all the life he'd lived and here he was, sitting in the Babin family parlor, eating stale cookies and listening to Antha talk while he waited for Dix.

Again.

"Justin Robichaux, are you listening to me?"

"Nope. I was sitting here thinking it was about time to go. That brother of yours can just find me when he gets the chance." He put his cup down, the china clattering in the saucer. Who the hell served coffee in a tea cup?

"You know Momma's talking his ear off and crying about how you and me abused her and made her lie about falling." Antha pushed her dark curls off her shoulders, leaning forward to try and show off the girls. Like he was interested.

Of course, Antha didn't know that.

Neither did Dix.

Jeez Louise, he could remember it -- that kiss. That goddamn kiss that was all-capitalized in his head like in some Gen-X short story.

That Kiss.

Dix had taken his lips like the man took the race track. No prisoners. No quarter. Just I need and I want and you're mine.

He'd come in his pants, called Dix a fucking queer and bolted.

This was God's punishment. It had to be.

"Momma's sleeping, as a matter of fact, Antha. And she had nothing but nice to say about you, so drop it." Dix was dragging his bags, looking like he was three-quarters exhausted. Those pretty blue-black curls were cut short-short, the blue eyes like lasers and damn, he was still hooked through the balls. The short little fuck settled on one of Miz Babin's chairs, bags thumping to the ground. "Those cookies any good?"

"Sure, they are."

"No. They're hard and stale and nasty and I really have to drive back home today, Dix. What did you want to talk about?"

"I got some of these candies..." Dix's voice trailed off, those blue eyes staring into him. "Momma looked pretty good. She said you took good care of her. I guess I don't have to kill you."

Well, that was comforting, especially since he'd come all the way from Town to operate on her. "Thanks, Be'Be'. I appreciate not dying."

"She's sleeping now, but she says she's thinking she'll be well enough to come downstairs by the weekend. Antha."

He wasn't sure about that. Of course, Miz Babin was almost -- almost, mind you -- as stubborn as her only goddamn son. The woman should have run when that crazy Babin Cajun came courting her. "Y'all will just have to watch her."

"Yeah. I'll watch her, now that I know she needs watching." Listen to that man growl. "I got a lot to talk to you about, asshole. Antha, don't you got stuff to do? Christmas cookies or shopping or laundry or something?"

"I do not."

"Then find something. This don't affect you." Dixon always did just cut to the chase, didn't he?

"I." Her mouth opened and Dix glared and poof. She was gone. Damn, he was going to have to learn that -- the Babin stare.

"You said you had something besides these stale cookies?" See him. See him appeal to Dix's Southern side. Feed your company before all else.

"I do. I got these fancy-assed candies from a little shop in the last place I raced. They's truffles, but they got praline in them." Dix dug in his bag, plopped the box on the table. "The place I got 'em's 'sposed to be something special."

"Your mamma's going to be fine. I did the surgery myself." He might be a piece of shit man, but he was one hell of a surgeon. He popped the top off the candy box, the smell of pecans and cocoa and caramel just slamming against his nose and making his mouth water. "Damn."

"Yeah. You shoulda seen the place -- it was like a Willy Wonka movie or something." Dix leaned back, stared him down. "Why'd you come here, Tahyo?"

"Your mamma needed surgery."

"Bullshit. There's old folks breaking bones all over this parish and them docs just patch 'em up. You came from Town for her. What's up?"

"I can't take an interest in an old friend? I been friends with this family since I was in diapers. Your mamma..."

"Don't." Dix held up one hand. "Nanny, sure. She loved on us all. Antha hunted your ass. But Momma just barely knew your name and you know it. Hell, I'm not completely sure she remembers mine."

"What do you want, Dix? I came, I did my job, I'm going home." He took one of the candies, bit into the dense, creamy blob of chocolaty goodness before his damn fool mouth opened up and said what it wanted to.

That he was trying to make up.

That he'd been stupid.

That he wanted Dixon to think of him sometimes with something other than hate.

Oh. Oh, damn, those tasted good.

He moaned, closed his eyes as the whole endorphin rush hit him, the electricity sudden, sharp and absolutely goddamn amazing.

"Jesus. Those must be good..." Dix's voice was rough, raw, sandpaper against his nerves and he just jerked with it.

His eyes popped open and he nodded, swallowed, intending to say "yes" or "you know it" or "the rest are mine, 'kay?". What came out was, "I miss you, Dix."

The blow that rocked his head back surprised the hell out of him. Knocked him out of his chair, too.

When he blinked up, Dix was eating one of the truffles, just sitting there, calm as can be.

"Do you feel better now?"

Those blue eyes landed on him. "Yup. You deserved that, Tahyo."

Well, now. He couldn't argue with that, could he? "You surprised me. You're always doing that."

"It ain't my fault, asshole, that you're slow as molasses." Dix licked his lips, nibbling at the truffle, so delicate, so fine. "Man, these are fine. Get up off the floor, Tahyo, you'll ruin your high-dollar britches."

"Well, Dix, honey, you knocked me down here." He drawled it out, as offensively as he could.

"Yup." One scarred up hand was held down to him, that arm still as skinny as all get out, damn near girly. The strength behind it, though, that wasn't girly at all. Hell, he almost ended up in Dix's lap.

"Are we gonna fight some more?" He wanted to make sure, because he really couldn't afford to mess up his hands in a fist fight. He could bash the little fucker with the centerpiece, though.

"Nah. I said my piece. Have another chocolate."

He sat down, proud of himself for not checking out his jaw, not feeling if there was a raising bruise. Christ, he hadn't been hit since he and Dix had that fight with the Bossier City boys down on his Uncle Poot's farm.

It was still kind of a rush.

He took another chocolate, his fingers brushing against Dix's in the box. It was all he could do to not jerk away, the jolt of electricity shooting straight up his arm. Goddamn.

Justin heard Dixon's little gasp -- heard it all the way down to his cock, which bounced up, waving in his slacks, trying to get Dixon's attention.

It had been years. Years since that kiss. That single fucking kiss that dislodged everything -- fucked him up, lost him his best friend, made him doubt...

"You know what your fucking problem is, Tahyo? You think too fucking much." Dix pulled the candy out of his fingers, pressed it up to his lips. "You always have."

Yeah, and Dix never thought at all. He just went with it, just flew by the seat of his racesuit.

Of course, when he opened his mouth to say that, Dix pushed that candy right in, fingertips on his lips.

Oh.

Oh, yes.

He chewed the candy, daring to kiss the skin against his mouth, the salt of Dix making the pecans in the chocolate just pop.

"You're gonna have a bruise. What you gonna tell your friends?"

Those damp fingers slid down, tracing the spot where knuckles met jaw, the skin there aching a bit.

He swallowed, tongue searching out each and every bit of sweet before he answered. "That my best friend and I worked shit out, finally. That I had it coming."

"You did." Those pretty eyes just pegged him. "I been waiting to do that a long, long time, Tahyo. It's a hell of a Christmas present."

"You're welcome then, I guess." Justin sat a second, thinking. "There's something I've been waiting for. I suppose I ought to, now."

"Okay, but I'll warn you. You hit me, I'm taking your ass down."

"Fair enough." He leaned forward, holding Dix's eyes the whole way. This was either the dumbest thing he'd ever done or the bravest.

Maybe both.

Either way, when his lips met Dix's, he didn't hold back a bit. He pushed all the wanting, all the needing, all the fear and the worry and the hunger that he'd been thinking and dreaming on for years and years into that kiss, laughing deep down at the shock on Dix's face.

He took advantage of that shock, to explore Dixon's mouth. His tongue slid over a crooked tooth in the front, the hints of chocolate and caramel right there, and hidden underneath that was the taste of Dix.

Goddamn.

Better than he remembered.

Better than the chocolate.

Better than damn near anything.

At least until Dix's arm landed with a slap around his shoulder, tugging him closer and kissing him back, good and hard.

Praise the lord and pass the taters, Justin was the finest, big old son of a bitch on earth.

Dixon scooted close, taking that kiss and running with it, just because he could. It'd been good, whacking Tahyo good and hard, but this was better.

Shit. This was way better.

The man had thick hair and wide shoulders and, fuck yeah, knew how to kiss a lot better than he had way back when. Damn.

A smarter man would ask his whys and what's ups and all, but he wasn't smart. That was Tahyo's goddamn job. He just went with it, 'cause God knew all the kissing he'd done since hadn't wiped that one out of his mind.

Their lips parted, both of them staring at each other like idiots, both breathing hard.

"Well, that was better than last time." Tahyo's grin was just about as shit-eating as it could be, damn fool man making goober faces at him.

"Must've been the chocolate."

"Could be, Dix. Don't care. We could do it again..."

"Maybe. Maybe it ain't a good idea." That wild hair of his just kept growing and twisting around, poking his good side.

"Bullshit. If you're not hard as Chinese algebra right now, I'm a monkey."

"Ooo-ooo-eee-eee." You couldn't scratch his dick with glass or diamonds.

"Yeah, yeah. Cheetah." He got this grin -- half shy, half eager. "I want to do it again, Dix. I want to do... things."

Dixon tilted his head, stared over. "You gonna run crying into the night in the morning?" He wasn't into deflowering virgins and shit. No. Really.

Well, not most virgins. Justin? He'd be another story, him.

"I don't cry, Dix. I'm not a kid any more, scared of losing my daddy's money."

Well, well. There's was a truth known and now said. "Well, then. I reckon we ought to find a place more quiet. I'd hate to be waist-deep in wooing and have baby Janelle pop up in between us."

Tahyo stared. "That's just nasty, Dix."

"You know it. Come on. I got to dump my stuff in the bedroom." He stood, looked over, grinning as Tahyo's green eyes fastened on his cock. "Bring the chocolates, huh??"

"You got it, Be'Be'."

Dixon grabbed his bags, shook his head. "I ain't your Be'Be', Tahyo."

"Stud work?"

"Yeah, honey. Yeah. I'll be your stud."

They headed up the back stairs, the scent of pralines following.

James locked the bakery up, the scent of magic and cinnamon and ginger filling his nose, his hands tired, sore, from the work they'd done today.

The store got busier and busier, but he'd heard Bryan laugh, over and over in the last weeks.

It filled him with pleasure, with joy.

With hope.

He looked at his hand, with the key still in, a grayed-out memory of the same scene floating in his head for a moment, leaving him filled with energy, with pleasure.

Soon.

Soon.

Chapter Five

"What's your problem with eggnog?"

"I don't have an issue with it, son."

"Of course you do, otherwise you wouldn't have had such a fit about my truffles."

"That's because we needed to make peppermint."

"No, boss. Peppermint has been done. Over and over. Eggnog is different. Classy."

Bryan looked over at James, tilting only a bit over his rather... large cup of eggnog. "What on *earth* is wrong with peppermint. Lovers need... spice."

"Nutmeg is a spice. Peppermint is an herb. You never hear 'lovers need herbs'."

"Only because no one's thought of it before." He squinted, trying to focus. "What did you put in this concoction of yours?"

"It's a secret." James laughed, the sound seeming to bounce on the air. "You like it."

"Of course I like it. I like things that taste good. That has nothing to do with anything." Impudent boy.

"You like peppermint." Those eyes shone for him.

For him.

Stop it.

"Of course I do. It's the holiday season. Have you lost your mind?"

James' head tilted, eyes glinting. "Shall we make a wager, boss? Eggnog or peppermint? Most successful wins high tea at Kerias."

He pondered that, then nodded. "You're on, lad. You're on."

His head was killing him. Throbbing, aching, pounding, beating, spiking -- all those words that he'd use in a campaign for any over-the-counter, gee-spend-your-money-on-us analgesic? Those were the ones he was experiencing.

Tom grabbed a glass and the decanter of Jack and poured himself two fingers to wash down the four Tylenol in his hand. Jesus Christ, he fucking hated Christmas. Lights, music, noise, traffic, bullshit bell ringers -- the whole thing made his teeth itch. Of course, in his business, Christmas campaigns started in May and the copy and concepts were in production by August, at the latest. He was working on summer campaigns now -- swimsuits and fireworks to sell beer and cars.

At least there was still football.

He settled back in his chair and finished his drink, eyes half-closed. One more day of work, then he had five off to hide out in the house, watch the ball games and eat pizza. It wasn't the greatest plan on Earth, but it didn't suck either.

There was a pile of mail in his box that he needed to sort through or get to Jen to file or shred, but it was damn near eight o'clock and really, what he wanted was a nice massage or hell, a nice hand job from some sweet, random twink that wasn't looking for more than a decent tip, and then a long nap.

He could so do with a nap.

Christ, he was getting whiny in his old age. Thirty-eight and at the top of his game -- money, business, security, a hard body and a full head of hair, damn it. He had no reason to bitch.

None.

It didn't take ten minutes to sort his mail, all the letters slashed opened and sorted, leaving him with two packages. One yielded his order of calendars for the staff -- all embossed with Taylor and Strait Advertising, Inc.

Just like he'd poked the asshole, his phone rang, Jim Strait's name coming up on the line. "Hey, man. How's it going?"

"It's going. How's the office?" There was a long, slow wheeze breaking up the words, making Tom wince. Fucking cancer. Fucking lungs. Jim deserved better. So did Nancy and the kids.

"Slow. I'm working on the Chevy campaign for July. Everybody's bugging out early this time of year."

"Not you, though." Wheeze. Gasp.

"Nope. I'm married to the job."

"It's not healthy. You coming for Christmas dinner, man?" Gasp. Gurgle.

Oh, please God, no. There wasn't anything he wanted less, than to see the man who'd been his mentor, his friend, his touchstone, turned from a strong, burly, loud bastard to this frail old man -

- bald and shaking and dying, right in front of them all. "I'll see what I can do, Jim. You know I'm not much for the whole ho-ho-ho thing."

"I miss your party, though. I thought you and Alan did it up better than anyone."

"Yeah, well. Alan's birthday was Christmas Eve. It made things different." Not that it mattered now. Hell, Alan was old, old news.

Ancient.

Long gone.

Asshole.

He chuckled under his breath a little, shook his head. Old ghosts.

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess. Nancy wants to say hi, Tommy. I'll see you for supper, Christmas day. Be here."

Had he mentioned that his head hurt?

"Tommy?" Oh, Christ, she was crying.

"Hey, Nance. How're you holding up?" He should send her flowers, something.

"I'm surviving. You're coming Thursday, right? It's all he's talked about. He won't... there won't be another Christmas dinner, Tom. You know that."

Dude, she was good at that guilt thing. "I know, honey. I'll be there. Okay? I will."

"I'll make a turkey."

"What should I bring him?"

Her chuckle was raw, soft. "You just come and spend time with him, huh? Talk about the office and about how the holiday commercials suck and how you could have done it better. Just come and let him pretend for a few hours. He misses you."

"I know, Nance. I know. I'll bring him something goofy and I'll bring you the good booze, huh? You sound like you could use it."

"That sounds perfect." He could hear Jim in the background, coughing and gagging. Goddamn it. "Are you still at the office, Tom Taylor?"

"You know it."

"You work too hard. Go get a drink and a burger, take a walk. See the lights."

"Is that an order, lady?"

"You know it. Go. Enjoy the sparkles for me."

"I will. See you Thursday, honey. With bells on."

When the phone clicked off, the fucking office sounded so fucking *quiet*. Like a tomb.

One box left to open -- hand-delivered, by the looks of it -- then he was out of there.

Damn, his head hurt.

Alan gathered up the last of the odds and ends from the kids -- a dozen apple-shaped knick-knacks, a dozen more hand-made ornaments, a couple of gift cards and a shitload of Christmas cookies. Lord have mercy.

Thank God they'd let out at noon -- one more hour of over-excited, over-sugared, over-worked first graders and he might have gone bald. Oh, wait.

Alan ran his hand over the top of his head, grinning like an idiot. Too late.

He grabbed his Diet Coke, took a couple of Tylenol, and went through his classroom, making sure no one had left behind coats or lunch boxes or mittens. He closed a window in the back, threw away a pile of tinsel and checked Billy Robin's desk to make sure that little shit hadn't left the pet frog in there for the holiday.

They'd all heard about the commotion Susan Robin made when she'd discovered Hopper in the bathtub over Thanksgiving.

Alan chuckled and shook his head. Lord help him, he did love his job. Especially during the summer and Christmas holidays.

He grabbed his jacket and his ball cap, making sure everything was locked up tight and right before heading out into the silent hallways, the scent of peppermint and chocolate just barely on the air from all the holiday parties that had happened this morning -- with or without the administration's go-ahead.

"Alan! Happy early birthday, man! I'm glad I caught you!" Hannah ran down the hall -- okay, waddled more than ran -- ponytail bouncing, eyes lit up, belly so swollen she looked like she was going to explode, the artist's smock covered in purple and yellow finger-paint. "There was a bunch of stuff for you in your mailbox, sweetie, so I grabbed it. So, tell the truth, does it suck to have a birthday on Christmas Eve?"

"Why? Are you intending to pop on Wednesday?" He took the sack of random stuff, kissed her cheek.

"No, they're still saying New Year's Day, but I'm not holding my breath." She patted her belly. "Ronnie called at the crack of dawn this morning, though. He sounds good. He says he'll be home in February, says he's not re-upping."

"Oh, good for him!" He gave her an extra squeeze for that. "You sure you're not waiting for him to get back to have the baby? Just cross your legs and tell that little girl her daddy's pounding sand and she has to wait."

"Ri-i-i-ight." Hannah chuckled. "You have plans for Christmas, sweetie? You could always come over and drink my wine."

"We'll see. I'm still deciding whether I'll be hung over, come Christmas proper. You know I'm turning thirty-five, huh?"

"Yep. You'll be an old man."

"Bitch."

"Mr. Howe!"

They both laughed, heading out to the parking lot. There were only a few cars left -- her pickup and his POS Chevy and the van that was Coach McBride's.

He helped Hannah get her load in the truck, then kissed her cheek. "If you need me, honey, I have my phone. Just call."

Between him and Lisa and Becky, they were taking care until the Sarge got home.

"I'll do it. Consider coming over Christmas. We'll eat pizza and play Scrabble."

"Sounds good, lady. We'll see."

He got his own packages in the Nova, one falling out onto the pavement, the lid popping open. Chocolates. Fancy-schmancy chocolates that smelled so much like mint that he could tell what it was before he bent down, looked at the little note.

"Happy birthday, El."

El.

Jesus.

No one called him El. No one but Tommy. No one ever had.

"Meet me at Greggo's. 8 p.m. Christmas eve. Please. I miss you. El."

What the *fuck*?

Tom stared at the note, at the three little candies in the box, covered with white chocolate and dusted with nutmeg.

Eggnog truffles.

Jesus.

What was Alan thinking?

He sighed, fingers moving the mouse so the screen saver wouldn't come on. Alan Howe, Crockett Elementary, first grade. Shit, the man'd finally stopped trying to save his hair. Still, those green eyes still looked like something out of a fucking Emerald Isle commercial, shining and clear and laughing. He looked at the jpeg, just staring at the way the white button down shirt hung on Alan's shoulders, how the man'd bulked up a little, how those unhappy lines beside the smiling mouth had disappeared.

El looked good, didn't he? Healthy. Happy. Way happier than the last time they'd seen each other.

"It's over, Tommy."

He stared at the cream swirling in his coffee cup, waiting for the hurting part to happen. Six years together and it was ended by three words. One sentence. Twelve letters. The least Alan could have done was avoid the contraction and made it four words. "Okay."

"I'm sorry. I can't do this anymore. I got a teaching position on the East side. I found an apartment. I'm tired of living like a paid whore here in your house, waiting for you to finish partying and working and shit."

Well. Maybe three words wasn't so fucking bad. "I never asked you not to work."

Hell, did El think he *liked* working those hours?

"I know. I know, but... I want a real life, Tommy. I want someone who's there for more than a sound bite and a bit of copy and a hand job. I want a full time lover."

Tom looked at his watch. He had a flight in three hours. "Leave the key in the mail slot when you've finished taking your things."

Whatever he wanted that Alan took, he could replace.

Alan was staring at him, eyes sparkling in the light. "You're not even going to fight me?"

"Why would I? You want out, you've made plans. Best of luck to you." He stood up, rinsed his mug out, his fraternity ring shimmering a little bit. He probably needed to polish it. "See you around, El. Enjoy the job."

He grabbed his suitcase and his passport. Jim had a car waiting.

"El. Greggo's. Eight p.m. Your birthday. Please."

Please.

Alan stared at the heavy white card, the handwriting so strong, so male.

So familiar.

Shit.

He straightened his tie, looked at himself in the mirror. God, he looked old. He wasn't buff, he wasn't perfect, he sure as hell wasn't well-dressed. He knew what Tommy looked like. Hell, who didn't? The man was considered one of the most eligible bachelors in the scene. Rich, successful, beautiful, powerful -- all those things that were important and...

Hell, he'd walked away from it. Just turned around and walked into a quiet little life with his kids and his friends and the occasional long, sad night remembering what might have been.

So, what was he doing? What the hell was he thinking -- getting dressed up in his one good suit, shaving close and heading out into the traffic on his birthday to meet with the one who didn't care enough to notice he'd left?

"I can't do this anymore." He'd tried that, talking to the back of Tommy's suit coat before the man had headed out to New York.

"I need a life." That one had been on the phone, Tommy on the train into the city, while he'd been finishing up his teaching certification.

He'd graduated alone. He spent Easter alone. New Years was at Jim's house, with all the beautiful people from the agency -- sparkling like a zillion fucking diamonds.

Then there he was.

Alan sat on the edge of the bed, looking at the boxes that were piled up -- his clothes, his books, his movies. None of the furniture was his. None of the art was his. He'd wrapped up his kettle, his plates, his coffee mugs.

All but the one that was still in the sink waiting for Tommy to come home and notice.

Maybe notice and call him, beg him to come home.

"Do you have a reservation, sir?" Cool eyes looked past him, then focused. "Oh! Mr. Taylor! We haven't seen you in too long! I'm sorry, sir, I was distracted. How is Mr. Strait?"

"Comfortable, thanks, Cam." He shook the maitre'd's hand, finding a smile. God, he used to be in here twice a week, minimum -- either with Jim or El. "I'll need a table for two, please, unless there's a reservation under Alan Howe."

"Let me see... Ah. Yes. He hasn't arrived yet, sir. Shall I seat you, or would you prefer to wait at the bar?"

"The bar is fine, thank you."

They took his coat and hat and he headed in, ordered himself a vodka and tonic, nodding to the few people he recognized. Jesus, this place never changed -- still dark and warm, still smelling of coffee and spices and decades of Sunday roasts.

"Tommy." A warm hand landed on his shoulder, rubbing just a little through his jacket.

"El." He stood, looking into bottle-green eyes. "Happy birthday."

Oh.

Oh, God.

Oh, God... Look at him.

Alan smiled, caught in those warm, smiling, near-black eyes. "Tommy."

There was silver now in the thick hair, just a little. And laugh lines. And a little bit of stubble and oh.

Oh, God.

"Would you like a drink?"

"I. Yes. Yes, a martini, please." Alan forced himself to move, to take a seat in the chairs that hadn't changed in five years. They still felt like heaven.

Of course, they could have been upholstered in tacks and he wouldn't have noticed, he was so busy watching the way Tommy's backside looked, swaying in those slacks.

"Our table will be ready soon." Tommy sat down across from him, eyes sharp and searching. "You look good, El. Happy."

"Thank you." Something scared and hard in him shifted, melted a little. Tom was a lot of things, but the man wasn't a liar. "You're... Well, you know how good you look, huh?"

"Yeah, but it's nice to hear. How's your holiday been?"

"I'm on break. It'll be quiet." Unless Hannah went into labor, of course. "Yours?"

"I'm going to Jim and Nancy's tomorrow. You... you heard he was sick, yeah?" There was an honest pain in those dark eyes, a real, true sorrow.

"Sick? No. What's wrong?"

"Lung cancer. He... it won't be long. He signed the agency over to me six months ago, after he sent his youngest to college."

"Damn, Tommy. Damn..." His eyes filled with tears, sudden and hot. Jim had never been his friend, but the man had been good to Tommy, had been important.

"Yeah." They stared at each other for a minute, just unblinking. "I..."

He reached out, took Tommy's hand and squeezed, not even thinking about it too hard. Not thinking about how Tommy might not want this, might pull away.

When Tommy squeezed back, Alan just held on.

Alan ordered roast and Tommy ordered the salmon and they both had another drink.

Tommy couldn't fucking believe this.

His El -- his Christmas Eve baby Elf -- was right across from him. Staring at him. Smiling.

Smiling.

"So... You didn't have any other plans for your birthday?"

"Nothing I wanted more than this. This was... A great present."

Well, now. That was. Yeah. That bastard made him speechless. "It was. Is. Whatever."

Tommy's cheeks went red hot and fiery and he looked down, not sure what the hell to do, to say. Fuck. He wasn't used to being fucking tongue tied.

"Yeah. So, business is going good for you? You're enjoying it?"

"Always. I don't travel like I used to; I have vice-presidents to do it. It's nice, being able to make my own schedule, to be home. I had the house painted this summer -- you'd like it. It's white with a navy blue trim."

"You haven't upgraded? I'm surprised."

"Why? I love that house. I always have, from the first time we saw it. It's home." It wasn't huge, but it was old and interesting and he had a view of the valley with all the lights from his little office. It was just what Tommy had wanted.

What they had wanted.

El looked at him, a bittersweet smile on those thin lips and he shocked himself with the desire to reach over, trace that grin, see if it was warm. "Is the secret room still there?"

Tom nodded grinned. "Filled with wine, now."

"Oh? I'd like to see that."

"You know where the house is, El."

"Yeah, yeah, I guess I do." That smile went from bittersweet to blinding and Tom felt his body tighten.

The food came and they dug in, the act surprisingly easy.

Dessert was decadent -- they shared a sachertorte, moaning over the apricot, the dark, rich chocolate just melting as soon as it touched the tongue. Alan was a little drunk with the whole

experience -- the wine, the food, the way Tom laughed for him, told him little stories and listened -- *listened* -- to his yarns about his kids, his job. It was pure magic.

"Oh, Tommy. This is perfect. Thank you."

Those dark eyes blinked at him. "I should thank you, El."

"Oh." He went pink; he could feel his cheeks heat. "It's been amazing. I don't... I don't suppose you'd like to go somewhere, have coffee, talk some more?"

"Everything's closing, El. It's Christmas Eve. You could come to the house, though. I have coffee, wood for the fireplace."

"I'd like that." He reached out, fingers just barely brushing the crease on Tommy's pants. "I really would."

It would be a perfect and completely unexpected birthday present.

Magical.

"Well, then. Let's go."

They dealt with the bill -- Tommy letting him put money in without argument -- and headed out, the streets quiet and the snow coming down.

They had almost made it to Tommy's sleek sports car when his phone rang, Hannah's name coming up. "I need to get this, Tommy. It's that friend of mine."

"No sweat, El. I..." Tom's phone tinkled and he chuckled. "I'll grab mine."

He laughed and answered. "Hey, honey."

"Alan? My water broke. I'm going to Mercy. Can you come?"

Oh, God. No. Not *now*. "Sure I can, lady. I'll head over. Do you need someone to drive you?"

"No. No, Becky's here, but she can't stay with me. She's got to play Santa to her three..."

"Okay. No problem." He hung up, sighed and looked up at Tommy, ready to apologize. The sight of tears streaking down the man's face stopped him short. Oh, God. No. "Tommy?"

"It was Nancy. I'm sorry, El. I have to head to Mercy. Jim's... I need to... I have to go say goodbye while I can." There was a quiet loss in those eyes and Tommy didn't hide it a bit.

"Oh, shit." He nodded, reached out for Tommy and hugged him, offered the solid, strong body all the comfort he had, rejoicing a little when Tom accepted it. "Mine was Hannah. I have to go

hold her hand until her mom gets into town. I don't... I don't suppose we could ride together? I don't want you to be alone tonight."

He got a long, slow look, then Tom nodded, just once.

"I'd like that, El." The car door was opened, the scents of nutmeg and cinnamon welcoming him. "Let's go."

To say hello and goodbye and maybe Merry Christmas again.

The tea cups clinked on the saucers, the room buzzing with soft laughter, quiet chatter. James took another sandwich, nibbling, enjoying the crisp explosion of cucumber in his mouth.

Bryan was leaning back in the upholstered chair, dapper in a suit jacket, silver hair pulled back. The man looked happy. Warm.

Sated.

It was a delicious sight.

"So, boss."

"Yes, lad?"

"I tried the peppermints. They were amazing."

Bryan nodded, offering him an arched eyebrow. "Of course they were."

He blinked over. "It didn't escape my notice that three of the eggnog ones disappeared when you left last night."

"Then it also shouldn't escape your notice that I asked you to tea."

"No." Warmth flooded him, the best gift he could have received. "No, it didn't escape me at all."

Chapter Six

James watched the man wander through the store, Blackberry open, making notes on this sweet and that goodie.

He didn't like the guy on sight.

"Don't be so closed-minded, boy. Sometimes things aren't exactly what they seem."

He looked at Bryan, eyebrow lifting. "He's got money, attitude, and he likes who he is. He's not looking for anything but immediate gratification. Am I reading it wrong?"

"No, not at all." Bryan's smile was almost wicked and tugged at his lower belly, his cock. James had the sudden desire to kneel down, beg that Bryan see him, open those magical eyes and look at him.

Want him.

Need him.

Love him.

Anything.

"Are you paying attention to me?" The wooden spoon rapped hard on the counter, just missing his fingers.

"Of course!" Damn it.

"What did I say then?" The wooden spoon swung again and he jerked away.

"Okay. Okay, I was woolgathering. I'm sorry. What did you say?" He hated apologizing. He hated Bryan's aggravation if he didn't, worse.

Bryan stared at him, lips quirking, eyes awake and alive.

Damn it. "Well?"

"Take the whiskey truffles out. Make sure he takes them."

"But I made those for..."

"It wasn't a request, James. Take them out. Make sure he takes them."

"You aren't serious."

"James. I am always serious. Do as you're told. They were made for him." How could he argue with that sure, serious voice.

How could he ever?

James sighed, picked up the fat, shiny chocolates, a simple white swirl decorating the top of each one. He arranged them carefully on a china plate and then headed out into the store.

"Sir, would you like to see today's specialty?"

Bryan had better be right.

"He was a good man."

"He was an utter bastard, Rick. A liar, a cheat, a jackass and a complete piece of shit."

"Yeah, I'm gonna miss him, too."

Mark looked over the top of his Crown and Coke and nodded, fingers loosening the knot of his fucking tie. Hell, if someone had told him a week ago he'd be wearing his best black suit at a pricey hotel bar in fucking California drinking with Rick Blackwell, he'd have laughed in their face. "Yeah."

Blackwell -- the skinny asshole still looked as young as they'd actually been ten years ago, the only change a couple of lines around muddy green eyes and a heavy blond mustache -- tipped up his longneck, throat working as he swallowed. The redneck didn't even manage to wear a fucking suit to Danny's funeral. Jeans. *Jeans* for fuck's sake. This wasn't fucking Dallas. God knew what Danny's girlfriend probably thought, not that the little bleached blonde bimbo deserved worrying over. She did cry exceptionally well, though. Damn. Those anti-gravity tits must have cost Danny a fortune, too.

"Did you see Sammy and Paul? Sammy's gone bald and Paul's wife is fixin' to have babies; hell, he was just a freshman when I moved out. I hadn't heard from them in a dog's age."

Bald. He. Yeah. One hand trailed over the top of his shaved head before he even thought about it. Better none than sparsely populated, he thought. Besides, some guys thought it was sexy. Rick watched his hand, that too-wide mouth grinning as the empty was set aside. Bastard. No man with a full head of hair ought to look at him like that.

"A dog's age? Christ, Rick. You did *go* to grad school, didn't you?" You'd think that all those years of education would show up somewhere.

What the hell were they playing on the jukebox? It sounded like a cat in heat.

"That's what they tell me. However, they don't surgically implant a stick up your ass in veterinary school. I hear tell law school's different, especially up East." Rick ordered another round, somehow managing to flip him off in the same motion. "If you don't remember, I wasn't the one all fired up to remake myself in another man's image, pretend that I wasn't from Texas and put on airs. I don't suffer from shame, jackass."

"I wasn't ashamed. I'm still not. Shit, I just don't want to sound like a fucking cracker."

One blond eyebrow rose, tanned cheeks flushing dark, the heat sudden and surprising and still, apparently, right under the surface. "Pardon me, you wannabe Yankee asshole?"

"Do you prefer hayseed? Redneck?" Really, this was more fun than he'd expected it to be. He and Rick hadn't been party buddies at USC, not at all, but they'd been the Lamba's token Texans and had managed to fight at every given opportunity for four and a half years. Hell, Rick was the last man he'd ever had a fist fight with. Last man he'd ever hit.

Lord.

"Redneck works fine. I'm no cracker. You ought to know that." Rick sighed and let it go, which he wouldn't have done ten years ago, picked a peanut out of the bowl. "So, tell me shit about yourself. Where are you living now? Where did you land?"

"Portland. I'm a partner in a personal injury law firm there." It was still new enough that it squeaked, that it could make him smile with a sudden, sharp pride. Thirty and a full-partner. A secretary. A parking space. Respect.

It felt good.

"No shit? Good on you, man. We always said you were a barracuda at heart."

"Fuck off, cowboy. It's a good place." The little barmaid brought them each another and he nodded his thanks. "I like it there. I bought a loft in the city. If you're ever in town, you should stop in."

Right, like that would happen.

"Oh, I don't travel much. I have a practice, you know? Me and three other folks, and it's ungodly busy." There was a little pride in Rick's face, too.

"Are you in Dallas still?"

"Fort Worth. I specialize in livestock, rodeo and all, so the work's better." That sounded like Rick, yeah.

"Livestock?" God help him. Cows. Goddamned cows. "Did Danny know?"

"Yeah. Danny came to the Stock Show last year. Took it as a business expense, he said. Seemed to have a ball."

"Really? I didn't. I didn't know you two were close." He and Danny got together once or twice a year, emailed a few times a month, caught ballgames when traveling close enough on business. Hockey. Normal shit. Guy stuff. Beer and burgers and too much sun and not enough sleep. Hangovers. Laughing too loud.

Rick, though? Not really Danny's type. All hick and temper and country-fried horseshit. Danny was a surfer boy, through and through.

"We were friends. He made me laugh."

"Sorry, man. I didn't know."

"Know what? That I was smart enough to hold a conversation with something without hooves or that he was stupid enough to make friends with a vet?"

Okay, ow. Probably deserved, but ow. Mark took another sip, letting the burn keep his tongue from saying things he would undoubtedly regret later. "No one said you were stupid, Blackwell."

"No, the look on your face did that well enough. Poor old Rick -- had the chance to get the Hell out of Dodge and didn't have the good sense to take it. Good lord, you would think you were raised somewhere else."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Rick. I grew up in Houston. Houston. You know, full-fledged city? NASA? Smog? Traffic?" Hell, he'd been fighting that stereotype as long as he'd been fighting his accent. Rick was *from* the goddamned state. "I have never seen a cow up close and personal on purpose."

"Well, maybe you ought to. It might improve your disposition." Rick grinned suddenly. "Hey, I know some buckin' bulls with your fancy-assed name all over them."

"*Buckin'* bulls? Jesus." He slammed back his beer, throat working. "You know that those animals are abused, right? Hell, I represent a couple of guys suing the PRCA for dangerous working conditions and animal cruelty." Let Rick put that in his pipe and smoke it.

"Are you out of your motherfucking mind?" Rick looked at him like he was crazy. "I want to come back in my next life as a bull. Those critters are treated like gods."

"Jesus save me from crazy Texans."

"Yeah. Fuck you, Mark." Rick wiped his mustache and stood, tossing a fifty on the bar. "That ought to cover your trouble."

Then the man just turned and walked away.

Walked away like he wasn't worth fighting with anymore.

Asshole.

Mark surged up and followed, teeth bared, a dull fury coursing through him. Ten years ago they'd have tied it up in the parking lot, ended up laughing and leaning into each other, telling bullshit stories and buying another beer. At least until someone else they'd liked better showed up. "Don't you fucking walk out on me, asshole!"

Rick didn't stop, didn't even turn around, just pushed the stained glass doors open and headed out.

He caught up with the lanky asshole at the elevator, the up button all lit up. Jesus, Rick could afford to stay *here*?

"Leave me alone, Mark. I'm going to bed."

"When did you stop fighting?" When did you get to be an old fucking quitter?

"When beating the shit out of a lily-white pansy-assed Yankee would get me sued." The elevator doors open and Rick stepped in, turned to face him, cheeks bright, deep red. "Quit pushing, man. I'm about at the end of my rope, and I buried a good friend today."

The doors closed and Mark watched the numbers go up. Fourteen. Okay then.

Mark held the six-pack of beer and the little box of whiskey truffles in one hand, knocked on the door of room 1455, waiting for Rick to open up. It'd taken more than twenty minutes and a hundred bucks to get Rick's room number. Man, that girl was tight, but he'd told her what was basically the truth -- he'd been an asshole to an old friend after a funeral and needed to make it right before it was too late.

Sometimes the truth was the right thing, weird as it might be.

The door opened suddenly, a red-eyed, fucked-up looking face appearing like magic -- Jesus, Rick looked like shit. "What the *fuck* do you want, man?"

He held up the beer, the candy. "I wanted to apologize."

"Why?"

Well, hell. What was the right answer to that? "Because I'm sorry? Because I was pushing? Because I don't have any reason to bite at you."

"Look, we ain't friends. We ain't lovers. We ain't nothing. We never were, no matter what I did. Jus' go 'way."

Wait. What? "Huh?"

Rick swayed, the door creaking just a little.

"Man, you're drunk. Really drunk. Let me in before you hurt yourself."

It looked like Rick was going to argue, but the tall bastard stepped back, let him in. "I don't want to fight no more, man. I don't. My head's fixin' to bust open."

"No more fighting. Just let's sit, okay? Have a candy." He got one hand around Rick's arm, led them both over to the bed.

"Candy? What kind?"

"Fancy-schmancy ones. I got them on the way in. I was wandering, thinking about things and just... You know how that is, you find yourself in a store, smelling chocolate and pecans and caramel and you're buying a hundred dollars worth of crap."

Rick chuckled. "Well..."

"Don't tell me, you never buy chocolate, it's too girly, right?" Jesus.

"No. I fucking think chocolate rocks." Rick gave him this goofy-assed grin, still swaying. "And why the fuck would you worry about whether or not candy was girly?"

He opened his mouth to answer and then stopped. Why would he worry? Hell, why was he so invested in pushing all of Rick's buttons? Why was Rick letting him? "Here, have one. They smell like heaven."

"You believe in Heaven, man?" Rick fumbled around got one of the round chocolates out of their little box.

"What?"

"Heaven. Do you believe in Heaven?"

"Jesus, tell me you're not a preacher or something." He didn't need to be drinking with a holy roller.

"Me? Mark? I'm a vet. A drunk, queer vet from Texas. I don't think they'll ordain me down at the First Baptist."

Queer? Mark blinked, and then the laughter hit him, made him bowl over with it. Jesus, how could he have forgotten that Rick was *funny*?

They both rolled with it, the scent of beer and whiskey and chocolate in the air. Rick ended up flat on his back, feet on the floor like he was afraid if he picked them up he'd float away or something. "This chocolate ain't half bad, man. Thanks."

"Hey, I wanted to apologize. I know how to do it."

"Yeah." Rick finished the truffle, red-eyes staring up at the ceiling. "I can't believe he's gone. I mean, he was so fucking young."

"We're not that young, Rick, and it was quick. Hell, by all accounts he'd been burning the candle at both ends." Danny'd been a wild one -- fast cars, beautiful women, wild parties. Everything, in fact, that he imagined Rick wasn't. "Did you and Danny hang out a lot?"

"Some. He came when Dex passed away, spent a couple of weeks helping me sort shit out."

"Dex?"

"My lover. He was killed in an accident a few years ago. Danny dealt with the money stuff for me. Dex was a businessman, had investments and shit."

"You know a lot of suits, for a hayseed." He dug out another chocolate, offered it over. Damn, he'd had a lot of fuckbuddies. Hell, he had a standing offer with this fine little underwear model with the tightest ass on the West coast, but nothing that he'd call a partnership or a marriage or anything.

Nothing where finances were involved.

"I like men who know what they want. Hell, most suits like me." Rick took the candy, ate it. "You're not really a suit, I've decided. You're a... lost Texan."

"Fuck you. I don't dislike you."

"Sure you do. That's cool. You always have."

No. He'd always...

Well, okay. Maybe he had, but there was something now. A weird vulnerability. A maturity. Hell, maybe it was just nice believing that Rick wasn't the icy-cool cowboy that he'd always thought.

Or maybe he was just fucked up from the funeral and interested in the hot drunk guy in the bed next to him.

That was probably more likely.

"Mark, man. That's your clue to lie and say, 'I haven't either'. Keep up."

He looked at Rick and grinned. "I'm too tired to lie. I never liked you much. You were too fucking good old boy for me. Wish I'd known you were gay, though. We could've kept each other in hand jobs."

"Dude, I wasn't that desperate." Their laughter rang out again, both of them cackling.

"Wait. Wait. Did you know I was gay back then?"

"Shit, honey. *Everybody* knew. You were fucking Wally. Wally had a little black book with ratings."

"No. No, dude. You're not serious."

"As a heart attack. Don't worry; you rated pretty well." Rick winked. "For a Texan."

Oh, asshole. "How did you rank?"

"Oh, man. I wouldn't fuck Wally with somebody else's dick. I was dating someone else."

"Oh? Who?" Come to think of it, they didn't see Rick with girls *or* guys. In fact, Rick took a lot of shit for it; for being the hillbilly, the redneck, for not being able to seduce a whore with a thousand dollars.

"There was a band, they were called Empire?" At his nod, Rick went on. "Man, they had a bass guitar player named Adam Green -- long hair, big green eyes, amazing ink. He and I had a serious, serious thing for all our sophomore and junior years and most of our senior year."

"I remember them." He schooled his face not to change. "They got signed by a label before we graduated."

They got signed and made a shitload of money and then hired a young, up-and-coming lawyer to manage their band for a couple of years. It hadn't been long, but it'd been fun.

"Yep. He was traveling, I was heading for my specialty work in Dallas. It wasn't going to work, but *man*, it was hot while it lasted. I have all their albums, up until they broke up." Rick was actually blushing. Damn.

"You ever see him now, man?"

"Me? Fuck. I'm a vet in Texas. He wouldn't remember me."

Mark wasn't sure about that. He remembered Rick and he'd never fucked the man. "Still, you don't ever get the urge to look him up? Just drop him an email?"

"No. No, I mean..." Rick shrugged. "How odd would that be? Hey, Adam. Do you remember me? We had hot passionate sex on a gravestone on Halloween night. Oh, and you blew me at Monterey Pop Festival, do you remember?"

"Well, I'd probably use a little more class, asshole." Damn redneck.

"Yeah, well..." Rick chuckled, stole another candy. "You'd charge me three hundred dollars to write the letter and he definitely wouldn't remember me then. Damn, these are good."

"Five hundred."

"What?"

"I don't work for a dime under five. I'm no small town shyster, asshole." Of course, he had a laptop down in his room, a wireless connection.

Other connections.

Rick grinned, blinking slow, head on the pillow. "Nope. You're a big-time crook."

Fucker. "Shark."

"Bastard."

"Queer."

Their laughter rang out and Mark shook his head. "Eat another fucking chocolate, man. We have to be at the cemetery tomorrow at five."

"I don't sleep that late."

"Yeah, well. When was the last time you were drunk this late. Early. Whatever."

Rick chuckled, the sound weird -- a little sad, a lot sleepy. "Probably when Danny came to see me about Dex, honestly. He let me drink myself sober. Thought I was fixin' to die."

"Yeah, he was one hell of a friend."

Rick nodded, eyes closed. "You know it, man. The best."

Yeah. The best.

Fucking rain.

How was it that they were in sunny California (and not the northwest) and it was pouring?

Mark shifted from one foot to the other, watching little Miss Fake Boobs sob and wail as they lowered Danny into the ground, the water pouring off the casket, melting the little girl's perfectly curled hair, the heavy black mascara around her eyes.

Jesus.

Rick stood there outside the little tarp, hat on, looking like the fucking Marlboro man in a long, black duster, the water draining off him in rivulets. Christ, no one looked so out of place.

Of course, no one looked so good, either.

Jesus, he was tired. Bone-deep. He'd left Rick about four a.m. and hadn't found his bed for longer than that.

When he had slept, it was confusing, rough-edged, his dreams wild and filled with music.

The minister said his piece, muttering about Heaven and forgiveness and sin and eternal life and shit. They were all getting older, all of them. Shit, when they'd been twenty-two, he'd thought this shit was going to last forever.

Now he just wanted to know that it was going to be around long enough to spend a little bit of his money.

Danny's mom threw a handful of dirt into the casket and walked away, not acknowledging Danny's girlfriend or the preacher or anything. The crowd started dispersing, people sorta disappearing into the mist. The girlfriend -- and why the fuck couldn't he remember her fucking name -- clung to Rick a little bit before she was taken by a gaggle of girls with tissues and umbrellas and perfectly highlighted hair.

Rick stood, even after Mark stepped away, pulling his suit jacket around him as he headed for the copse of trees around the cemetery. The rain wasn't as heavy there, but he could still see.

Rick looked down at the grave for a long time, only moving away when the backhoe started up. Matt chewed his bottom lip, watching, worrying that his careful arrangements hadn't worked. The idea that they wouldn't were surprisingly disappointing, almost painful.

He actually turned to go when he saw the movement -- another tall, thin man in a long, black coat heading through the rain. The black hair was plastered all around the long face, all the tattoos hidden from sight. The man walked right up to Rick, hand landing on one shoulder.

Rick stopped, jerked and the men stood, staring at each other. Then Mark barely heard "Adam!" ring across the cemetery.

When Adam Green took Rick into his arms, Mark knew he'd done the right thing -- taken the right risks.

Even rednecks deserved a chance at happily ever after, if they could get it.

Mark took an envelope out of his pocket, looked it over before putting it back. He'd leave it at the hotel for Rick. The contents were simple -- an invoice from his firm.

One letter. Five hundred dollars.

He watched the two men come in together -- both tall and thin, both laughing and wearing long coats in the rain.

Besides that, there wasn't a single thing similar about them.

One was short-haired, mustached, and wearing this huge dark cowboy hat. The other had hair done to his waist, tattoos crawling up his neck and a lip piercing.

James couldn't have stopped his grin if he'd tried, which he didn't. "Can I help you, sirs?"

"I hope so." Cowboy hat smiled at him and his heart hiccupped a little bit. That smile was... Damn. A box was held up with Baker's Dozen scrolled across the top. "I need to buy a dozen of the whiskey truffles for a friend. He shared his with me and I thought... Well, he earned them."

"I'm sorry, sir. Those are only made via special order. We don't have any left." Oh. Oh, damn. Bryan was going to make him *miserable* with teasing.

Speak of the devil himself, Bryan came bustling out, hands filled with Earl Grey truffles. "What don't we have left, boy?"

"Whiskey truffles, sir." He was going to scream.

"Well, then. Take the man's money and an address, and then go make some. Business is business, after all."

Oh, bastard. "Of course. Sir?"

"Oh, y'all don't have to worry. It was just a thought." The cowboy grinned, pinked a little.

"Oh, man. If you could, it would rock. He deserves them, baby. He so does." Long, dark and terrifying just made that cowboy shiver. If the pheromones in the air got any worse, he was going to have to take the afternoon off.

An envelope was handed over, the cowboy nodded. "If you'll just send the candies and this to the address on the front? I'm happy to pay extra."

"Not a problem. James will be happy to." Smug bastard.

"Yes. Yes, I will be happy to."

Beautiful, always right, smug bastard.

Chapter Seven

His hands hurt.

His feet hurt.

His *teeth* hurt from the sugar in the air, the endless truffles and dipped fruits and filled chocolates and...

"Tell me that March will come, Bryan." Please.

Bryan's eyes met his across the kitchen, the look surprisingly warm. "As I've told you for four years, young man, March will come."

Four years. Four years of only having a month to recover from Christmas before sinking into their busiest time of the year. This wasn't a time for special -- which bothered him every year. Wasn't Valentine's supposed to be romance and magic and love? Wasn't it supposed to be memorable?

Hell, right now he couldn't remember his own name. Why he was here, working so hard, doing this?

Warm, strong hands landed on his shoulders, fingers digging in, rolling in circles, forcing his muscles to relax, to ease, forcing the tension away and leaving a sweet, rich syrupy pleasure in its place. "March will come, James."

Oh. Oh, he took a deep breath, his exhaustion sliding away, his faith renewed with that simple touch, with that breath touching his jaw.

His fingers tightened around the raspberry truffles that he held, and the chocolate shell shattered, cracked, the soft inside staining his fingers. He inhaled, the scent sharp and sweet, almost as sweet as Bryan's laughter.

"The bell is ringing." He thought he felt the hint of hardness against his thigh before he was left with a broken candy and a glimmer of hope.

"I fucking hate Valentine's day." Ben grabbed hold of the last bunch of roses in the shop, fingers hunting for the baby's breath. If the supplier didn't come in the morning, he was going to blow a vein. "I just need a fucking vacation."

Cozumel or Cabo San Lucas or just a room in a building that didn't smell of flowers.

"Benny. Valentine's day keeps us in boxer briefs and condoms."

He looked over at Gordon, who was gathering up pink and red and white carnations, tying them together with floods of ribbons. The man looked fucking tickled. It was nauseating.

"What do we need with condoms?" They'd been going bareback for years. Hell, they didn't have sex enough to warrant condoms. They hadn't had sex in weeks, and even then he ended up frustrated and snarling, eating cappuccino ice cream and watching *Mythbusters* reruns on television. Old fucking married queer boys running a fucking stinky florist shop smashed between an ancient pizzeria and a pet store that sold nothing but snakes, lizards and feeder fish. Between the smell of garlic and the geckos that escaped and hid in the dieffenbachia, it was pure heaven.

No. Really.

"Well, Benny. Once upon a time there were two men that met on a beach in Pacific Grove. One was determined to get a picture of mating seals, the other was a dork who thought that the Pacific coast was going to be as warm as the Gulf and was freezing his nuts off in the water..."

Gordon's close-cropped and violently bleached hair was spiked this way and that, those long fingers tangling up in it, reminding Benny that his hair was just really coming back, the black more gray than before. "The photographer-wannabe saw this dude -- all dorky and wearing swim trunks that were two sizes too big..."

"They were not. You're just used to all those model-types in Speedos. I'm still surprised that you noticed me."

Gordon stopped, looked over at him like he'd committed a moral sin, blue eyes wide as saucers. "Have you lost your mind?"

"What?"

"Why wouldn't I have noticed you? What's *wrong* with you, Benny? I damn near fell over myself to make you notice me."

Right, like Gordon needed to fall over himself. Shit, Ben'd just stood and stared -- the blond hair, the six-pack abs, the ink covering every visible inch of skin. What idiot wouldn't have noticed?

"You were remarkable back then."

"Back then? You used to chase me around hotel rooms. Used to hunt me like a dog. Now I'm just familiar? Boring? Old?"

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"That was a long time ago. I swear to God, Gordon, if you start singing 'You Don't Bring Me Flowers', I'm going to beat you to death."

That was thirteen years ago, when he was twenty years old and excited about everything. When the world seemed... Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. He needed to stop whining.

"It seems like it sometimes; sometimes it seems like it just happened." Gordon smiled over at him, the look a little sad. "And you bring me as many flowers as we need."

"Yeah, well, if that distributor doesn't get our roses here in the morning, I won't be able to bring you anything. That Giarda account has to be filled by noon or they're going to have my head on a silver platter."

He turned back toward the inventory he had left, running numbers in his head, chewing on his bottom lip.

"Our heads."

"What?" He turned around, confused.

"Our heads. Our life. Our shop. Ours, not yours." Gordon actually looked a little pissed, a little growly. "Janet will get the order here. I spoke to her today. It's all good."

"So, I'm supposed to just relax because you told me to?" Like Gordon's word had somehow become law.

"Yes." A handful of carnations slammed down onto the counter, petals going everywhere. "Yes, you stubborn, bitchy, growly ASSHOLE! For once in your miserable, unhappy fucking life, you're supposed to trust me!"

"Why the fuck should I?" The words were out before he could stop them, raw and harsh, bitter and hurt. "You tell me why the *fuck* I'm supposed to trust you."

"I wondered when you'd start this."

"Well, what am I supposed to do?" Shit, all those years together, testicular cancer, radiation, chemo, and then, one afternoon when it was mostly over and he'd forgotten a bunch of paperwork at the house, he'd walked in on their UPS man, sucking Gordon off, lips on the cock he loved, hands tracing the ink on that belly. Gordon's head fallen back as the man moaned. Fucking brown uniform. Fucking tanned muscular bastard. Fucking cheater.

He'd felt like someone'd cut his other ball off. Just like that. Fucker.

There'd been screaming, there'd been threats, there'd been a shitload of stupid fucking excuses and tears and promises and then, when everything was said and done, there was just letting it go. UPS didn't deliver to the shop, and when the little brown truck pulled up, there was a tiny Oriental girl with a pierced lip.

After all, how could he blame the man for getting what he couldn't give? Hell, he'd been so fucking sick he hadn't wanted Gordon to touch him, hadn't wanted to be bothered.

Hadn't wanted anyone reminding him that his fucking body was betraying him.

"You're supposed to mean it when you say you forgave me, Benny. It's supposed to be more than fucking lip service."

"Lip service? Excuse the fuck out of me? Have I been riding your ass? Have I brought up the fact that you fucking CHEATED on me over and over? No. No, I fucking forgave you." Even if it fucking killed him.

"Did you? Are you sure?"

"Don't fucking push, Gordie. I don't need your shit."

"No. No, you don't. You don't need my shit. You don't need my advice, my fucking help, me in bed..."

"What? Now I drove you to it? I was fucking recovering from cancer! I lost one of my BALLS!"

"When's that excuse going to stop working?"

He stopped, hands squeezing around the rose stems, the thorns digging in as he shook, stared, so fucking mad he could scream.

God damn it.

God damn him.

Ben put the roses down, slowly, careful, hands opening with all the will he had.

He was just going to walk away.

Go home.

Not fucking going to fight.

Asshole.

Something small, hard and heavy slammed into his back. "Don't you walk away from me, asshole!"

He spun around, foot landing on something that crushed under his shoe. Oh. Ew. Candy. Raspberry fucking candy. Nasty. "What the fuck is your problem!"

"You. You are my fucking problem." Gordon came stomping over, eyes flashing, muscles tense and tight under that one-size-too-small, pretentious motherfucking turtleneck that hid all that ink from him. One long finger jabbed into the center of his chest, poking hard. "I want you to fucking fight back. I want your attention. I want to you fight with me, if you need to. I want you to fucking PRETEND that you didn't die a year ago!"

"I never said I did!"

"No. No, you just have gotten so fucking used to playing the martyr that you don't know how to stop anymore!" Gordon shoved him a little bit, his feet sliding over the candies. "You don't think I notice? You get undressed in the fucking bathroom. You wear pants to sleep. You don't let me see you, touch you. Like you think I'm going to point and laugh or some such thing."

"Oh, fuck you." Like he was supposed to fucking like it. Like being cut open, mutilated. Like having his ball gone, the skin down there all burned and raw. Like being half a man. Like being fucked up and tired and skinny and bald and broken. Like being...

"Any time, Benny. Is here good? Outside? Somewhere? Jesus Christ, yes, please." Those eyes looked damn near sad and didn't that just piss him off more?

"Don't. Don't beg. Damn you." Ben stepped forward, pushing right into Gordon's space, more candies squishing under his feet. "Jesus Christ, what did you throw at me?"

"Your Valentine's Day present, asshole."

He arched one eyebrow. "Chocolates? A little passé, isn't it?"

"Well, I figure if we're going to act like married people, we should go all the way. No fucking. No talking. Work all the goddamn time." Gordon reached for him, shook him a little. "You fucking bought me a SWEATER for Christmas, Benny. A Goddamn green and blue sweater like you were my Secret Santa at church or some such shit. I figured chocolate was innocuous and empty and perfect for us."

Oh, man, he hated this shit. "I could've gotten you a gift card."

"You could've given me a blowjob."

"Fuck you, asshole. I'm so fucking tired of playing games with you."

"You think this is a game, Benny? I want you. I miss you." Gordon just stared right into his eyes, not wavering once.

"I'm right here!" He reached out, shook Gordon good and hard. "I'm right fucking here!"

Eyes going wide, Gordon grabbed him right back and hauled his ass close, their chests smacking together. "Then fucking act like it."

"Bastard." He snarled, leaned in to yell good and loud when his lips smashed against Gordon's, just hard and rough and raw enough to draw blood.

Gordon grabbed him behind the head and held him there, kissing him like there was no tomorrow, which was just ironic as hell. It felt so damned good, though. So good.

They stumbled over the Goddamn candies, slipping and sliding a little, but the kiss never broke. He pushed his tongue into Gordon's mouth, groaning at the flavor that hit him.

Too long. It had been too long. Gordon touched him, one hand still holding him in place, the other sliding over him like he was one of the man's precious orchids.

He didn't fucking want to be precious. Or fragile.

He wanted to be touched like he was a god damned man. Ben growled, pushed into that hand hard enough that it might leave a mark. Gordon scraped along his side, short nails digging at him through his clothes, making him feel it.

"Fuck." His cock jerked in his jeans, surprising him, and he stepped closer, just wanting to rub against his lover.

"Benny..." Gordon bit at his lower lip, grabbing his ass and squeezing, pulling him so close they could be in the same skin.

They stumbled, hitting the tables, flowers and foam spilling everywhere and, fuck, but he didn't care. Let them fucking sit there a little while. He got his hands wrapped around Gordon's arms, fingers sliding toward the shoulders, that fucking turtleneck catching on his fingers.

"Hold on, baby." The words sounded like a growl against his mouth, and Gordon lifted him, his ass landing with a slap on an arranging table, his legs wrapping around Gordon's hips.

"Yes. Please." He could feel Gordon -- hot and hard and pushing close, fucking unafraid of him. Touching him.

Another kiss took him, Gordon's mouth like fire, tongue pushing deep. They rocked together, grunting, as hot as they'd been when they were twenty.

That heavy cock was nudging his crotch, rubbing against him and making his toes curl. He wanted. He wanted Gordie to touch him, fuck him, make him scream with it and scream for him.

"God." Gordon sounded just as desperate, and the sting of teeth on his skin followed every muttered word. His shirt got tugged up and off, those nails on his skin, reminding him how good it could be between them.

He reached between their bodies, got Gordon's fly opened, got his fingers around that long, hard

cock. A long, low moan came out, Gordon's head falling back just a moment, those pretty eyes closing with pleasure. Didn't take long for Gordon to look at him again, to see him.

"Want." He leaned forward, teeth scraping on Gordon's collarbone through the shirt, knowing that it would sting. "Now."

"Yeah, baby. I got what you want." That devilish little smile he hadn't seen in too long flashed and Gordon started working at the rest of his clothes, right there in the back of the shop, right there for all the world to see if they wanted to.

"Fucking pervert." He grinned back, elbows sliding in carnation petals, that acerbic smell familiar, good, almost forgettable compared to the male musk of Gordon.

"Always where you're concerned." As if to prove it, Gordon leaned in and sucked up a mark on his skin, just to the right of his Adam's apple, hands cupping his head, fingers rubbing him, touching the stiff, new hair that was growing in.

His fingers tangled in the stiff spikes of Gordon's hair, holding the fine bastard closer. Fuck, that made him proud. Made him hard as hell.

Fingers, rough and dry from dealing with water and plants, touched his nipples, twisting them a little. Then one hand moved down his belly, tugging at the tiny hairs on his stomach.

His hips bucked up, the table shifting under him as he moved. He didn't say anything, he didn't have to. Gordon knew what he was craving and those fingers unsnapped his pants, searching for his cock.

Closing around his flesh, Gordon's hand moved up and down a couple of times, stroking him roughly, reminding him what it was like to feel. Then Gordon stepped back and bent, sucking the head of his cock right in.

"Baby!" Ben's eyes flew open, feet leaving the floor as his knees bent. The table creaked, shifted, but held and he'd never been so fucking grateful in his life. Gordon looked up at him, eyes hot and hungry, even as those fingers slid down, cupped his sac and touched -- that suction not easing up at all, his lover not backing away from him.

Not from his scar or even his fear. He didn't want to be a disgusting thing. Gordon made him feel like he was perfect, like he was still hot as hell. Like he was something amazing.

He pushed down a little, sliding to the edge of the table, letting Gordon roll and push, his hips pushing his cock into that hungry, moaning mouth. Fuck him, yes. Please.

Swallowing, Gordon worked him all the way down, tongue rubbing along the underside, Gordon's fingers pressing at the skin behind his one good testicle. He stiffened, wondering if it was going to be wrong, but it wasn't. It wasn't fucking wrong at all. It was perfect.

It was Gordon.

"Love."

He groaned, swallowing hard on his cry as Gordon moaned around his prick. "Yeah. Yeah, Gordie. Honey. Love you so bad. Please. Don't stop."

Don't fucking stop. Not now.

Gordon grunted for him, not lifting his head, not stopping. So not stopping. Goddamn. No, the man made him crazy, licking, sucking so hard that those lean cheeks hollowed. Ben could feel himself drawing tight, feel the familiar, good sensation of coming, of needing, of fucking wanting.

It left him breathless, left him without words. Gordon gave him everything, just like before it all happened. Gave him heat and wet and it didn't escape him that he was *getting* the blowjob, not giving it. Finally Gordon pushed a finger inside his body, filling him, scraping his nerve endings. Oh, fuck yes. That was a promise. A reminder of all those nights where he had Gordon slamming inside him, loving him, filling him up.

He shot, screaming out Gordon's name, the table rattling beneath him, the smell of sex mingling with the flowers. Fuck.

Fuck, yes.

Gordon licked him clean until it was almost too much, until he wanted to scream again. Then he got a smile, a flash of those bright eyes. "Taste good, baby."

"You blow my mind. I think there are petals stuck to my ass." He grabbed hold of Gordon and took a kiss, hard and sharp-edged and happy. He'd needed that worse than any fucking thing ever.

He'd needed to remember how good they were before he lost them.

Gordon kissed back hard and deep, moaning into his mouth. "I always said you ate sunshine and shit rose petals, baby. If it makes you feel better, I have chocolate all over my foot."

"I'm sure that could be something fabulous and kinky for the right guy. Unfortunately, I'm your right guy and the thought makes me a little nauseous. I'll just drag upstairs and dump you in the tub while I admire your fine ass."

They laughed -- both of them, looking at each other like they couldn't look away, like if they stopped, they'd lose this again and fuck, he didn't want to lose another God damn second.

"I can live with that." Even as he laughed, Gordon's cheeks went bright pink. "I'm a little messy in other places, too."

He reached out, cupped that cheek. "Yeah? I still get to you?"

"You always have. Like no one else." Moving in between his legs, Gordon hugged him tight before pulling him down off the counter. "Still do. My one and only, even if you do hate Valentine's day."

"Yeah. Well. It's an occupational hazard." He touched his nose to Gordon's. "It's easier knowing the distributor is coming on time."

Kissing him one more time, Gordon nodded, wrapping an arm around him to lead him over to lock up. "Yeah. Yeah, it is. It's gonna be okay, baby. I said so."

"Yeah." Okay, he could believe that. "Thanks for the chocolates."

Bryan watched.

He couldn't help it.

He watched and he wanted, even though he was an old man and James was beautiful and young and...

His apprentice threw back his head and laughed, the sound ringing out, happy and bright, as another box of treats were handed out. He could smell the magic in this one.

Feel the need crackling on James' skin like a live wire.

It made him proud.

It made him hard.

It made him ache with something older than memory.

Bryan turned toward the back of the store, needing to take the blocks of butter from the walk-in.

There was no fool like an old fool, but he would survive.

March was coming.

Chapter Eight

James could feel it like a touch. Bryan's gaze was on his back, on his ass, on *him* and he shivered for it.

He couldn't say a word, though, for he knew the old fool, and the barest hint that he knew would send the man running like a... well... sort of wrinkled deer.

Oh, God.

Oh, God, that was funny.

James started chuckling, imagining his boss, running through the forest on spindly little legs, whisks and mixing bowls jangling and chattering on huge, heavy antlers, an apron dangling off the little white tail.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing. Just something that crossed my mind. Are we making crème de menthe truffles for St. Patrick's day?"

"Possibly." Bryan shrugged, eyes sliding over ingredients, over liqueurs and fruits and such. "I want to make orange."

"Orange?"

He got a look, a raised eyebrow. "Yes. You've seen them before? They're fruits -- about fist-sized, citrus. Tart. Luscious bright oils in the skins."

"Uh." James tilted his head, gave Bryan his best idiot look. "What color are they again?"

"Ass."

An orange was tossed over across the kitchen and he caught it, the scent sharp and sudden. Yum.

"Zest it and the other five pounds of them. Maybe you'll remember."

"Sure, boss. Hey..." He grinned over, waggled his eyebrows. "Tell me, what do you think of white-tail deer?"

Okay, so. Damn.

He'd been temping at the history department for three weeks, four days and... forty-five minutes. He'd been checking emails, posting mail, greeting students and playing go-fer. He'd been polite, positive, and damned effective. He was a damned good temp and was humping his heinie to make sure, if the job went permanent, he was in line for it.

He was being fucking Bucky Beaver, the Go-To Kid.

It was getting fucking old, being all go-getty.

Not to mention that he was hard as hell seventy percent of the time.

Maybe eighty.

Joseph watched as Dr. Pax McDougal strode in, well in time to take his ten o'clock class -- tight jeans and tighter turtleneck, long braided blond hair, little cropped beard. Biker boots. With buckles.

Jesus.

"Good morning, Joseph. Any messages?" Bright green eyes gleamed for him and, for a second, he felt like a rabbit being stared at by a tiger.

"N... no, sir." Fuck, he was fluttery. Wait, were rabbits fluttery? Maybe he was bouncy. Twitchy.

He got that shit-eating grin that relaxed everyone from undergrads to crotchety old historical aide society broads. "Shame. I had hoped to hear from my supper date. If he calls, please email me? I'm not sure if we're on."

"Of course." He. God. Yes, please. More smiling.

One hip landed on the corner of the desk, that tight, fine ass dimpling. Oh, God. He was going to whimper. "Blind date. I hate them, but my sister insisted. I keep telling her, that's not the way to find true love, but you can't convince her. She's like a pit bull, or whatever the non-offensive term for stubborn, bullheaded pain in the ass is these days."

Joseph chuckled, tickled. He so understood that. He had six sisters -- all older, all married, all with babies. All pit bull bitches themselves. "Mine like to bombard me during family dinners over the mashed potatoes." He fluttered his hands dramatically, please. "Joseph. Joseph-love, *please*. Come sit next to Troy, the Next Great Thing. He's gay. You like gay right? Like that's the only thing I need to know about the guy."

Dr. McDougal's laugh was rich, deep, filling up the air. God, the man was sex on two (three?) legs. "Oh, now. That's almost always awkward." Then the beautiful goddamn professor leaned close. "I have to admit, once or twice it's definitely worked in my favor, knowing someone was queer, available, wanting."

Oh. Oh, man. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." One of the older professors walked in and Dr. McDougal leaned back, face cooling, eyes sliding to the side as the man's cheeks heated. "Not that those are work-appropriate stories, but you can imagine, I bet."

"I'm really good with my imagination." And not a student, either. Oh, hell yeah. He could see the flirting, the playing, the way that mouth would look as it smiled...

One heavy hand landed on the desk with a slap, jerking him out of his daydream involving Pax McDougal's mouth, his cock, the top of a cherry red Firebird. "Okay, man. You have a great day. I'm going to pretend to care about Tudor England and dream of the naughty Victorians."

"Oh, have fun. If your date calls, I'll make sure and email." Lucky date. Lucky, lucky.

"Thanks, man." A paper box landed on the desk, the outside a rich-looking cream. "You like chocolates, man?"

"Yeah..." Who didn't?

"There's only one left. I ate the rest like a ravenous beast. They're like magic -- orange truffles. Tart. Sharp, but sweet. You're welcome to it."

Baker's Dozen was scrolled across the top in gold. Neat. Fancy. "Thank you, Dr. McDougal."

"Pax."

Yeah. Dude. "Pax. Thank you."

"Anytime." Dr. McDougal -- no, Pax -- sauntered off, ass rocking side to side. Look at that. Joseph might have actually drooled. Damn. Tight, fine, fully-packed. He could so admire that up close and personal. On his knees or off them.

He watched until Sharon, the little red-headed TA of Dr. Lucbach's, cleared her throat and stared. "Dude. Joe. *Obvious*."

"God, sorry." He felt his cheeks heat and he tore his eyes away. "He's just... Damn."

"He is and he's a good guy, which makes it harder." She patted his hand, eyes sympathetic. "He doesn't date people he works with though. Rumor is he got burned something awful once -- lawsuits and press and nastiness. Just let it go and admire from afar."

"Really?" Jesus, that sucked -- in more ways than one.

"Yeah, he almost lost tenure and everything. Poor guy." She shook her head. "I don't know, I would change jobs for someone like him but..."

"He doesn't swing your way, honey."

"Nope, not only that but..." She held out one hand, waggled her finger, the big-assed diamond just shining.

"Oh. Oh, dude!" Joseph bounced up, hugging her tight. "Kenny *asked!*"

"He did. Oh, God, Joe, it was *so* cool! He took me for a walk in the park and the sun was setting and it was perfect. Just perfect." Sharon's eyes filled with tears. "He said... he said he wanted something to come home to, after his tour in Iraq."

"Oh, man." Joseph felt his cheeks get tight and he hugged her again. "Oh, man. I. Wow."

"Yeah. Wow." A couple of the tears got free and Sharon slapped them away. "Sorry. PMS, you know?"

"Ew. No. No, I don't know. Thank God." He winked, went limp-wristed and dramatic. "There's a reason I'm *queer*, honey."

That got them both laughing, eased the tension. "Okay, asshole. I'm going to grade those mid-terms. If anyone asks, office hours are tomorrow, not today, huh?"

"You got it, honey. Have fun."

"Uh-huh. Freshman trying to regurgitate bullshit their high school teachers taught them. Hooray." She sauntered off and he sat, just about getting his email open before the phone rang. "History department, how may I direct your call?"

"Dr. MacDougal, please."

"I'm sorry, he's in class. Can I take a message?"

"Yeah, this is Jackson. I just need to cancel our appointment for supper at Gianni's this evening. Eight o'clock just wasn't good for me."

Oh. Oh, man. Okay.

Okay.

"I'll be happy to give him your message, sir."

"Cool. Thanks." The line went dead and he stared at his notepad where he'd scribbled, 'Jackson. Cancel. Supper. Gianni. Eight.'

Jackson.

Cancel.

Supper.

Gianni's.

Eight.

Okay.

He pulled the note off the pad, looked at it a second, then opened up a new email, fully intending to write Dr. MacDougal -- no, Pax -- and let the man know plans had changed.

His hand knocked the box of chocolates and he opened it, the scent of citrus and deep, dark chocolate hitting him in a wave.

Oh.

Oh, man.

There was a tiny sliver of orange peel on top, the sugar crystals shining, just begging to be licked. He did that first, picking up the little bit of peel, shivering at the mixture of sweet, tart and bitter altogether.

Then he bit down and the candy exploded in his mouth.

Fuck, that was amazing. He imagined tasting these flavors in Dr. MacDougal's -- Pax's -- mouth, in licking the chocolate from the corner of Pax's lips, tongue teasing the hint of stubble, cleaning that smiling mouth off.

His cock went immediately, painfully hard. He wanted that. He wanted that so bad it hurt.

He looked at the blank email window, fingers typing fast and furious.

"Date called. Dinner is at eight at Gianni's."

It was all true.

Sort of.

Really.

Joseph took the second bite of the truffle, that amazing orange aroma tickling his nose and making him gasp.

It was true.

There'd be dinner at eight.

He hit send and swallowed.

Pax ordered another glass of Pale Ale and leaned back into the stuffed leather chairs. He'd be irritated if he wasn't early, having a few drinks to lubricate his good sense and avoiding the paperwork that he really needed to be doing.

Damn it, he really had wanted Mr. Oh-he's-so-perfect-for-you to cancel. Then he could have ordered a pizza and a six-pack and cancelled his five o'clock class on the way home.

There were only six students left in the class anyway.

No one wanted to hear about the ancient Mesopotamians these days.

He stretched out, eyes meeting a pretty little dark-haired waiter's over the back bar. Oh, now. That one looked interesting -- young enough to be enthusiastic, old enough to accept that it wouldn't ever work long-term. He didn't really think it was time for forever; he just needed someone to fuck around with.

Pax could hear his sister's voice, echoing in his head. "Pax! I love you. Goodness knows I do, but people were meant to hook up. You know, living together, loving. Finding the *one*."

He could have honestly strangled her to death -- hell, he could do it now.

Nosy bitch.

"Dr. MacDougal?" He heard his name, turned with a frown. Oh. The pretty little temp. Joseph. That guy had a fine, tight ass that he could just...

"Hey there. What's up?" He stood, held out one hand. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I didn't either. I mean. Your date called and I thought, well, I thought, since you'd be here, I'd come instead."

Huh.

Okay.

What did that mean?

"Well, thanks for letting me know. It would have pissed me off, to just sit and wait." He sat down, trying to work this whole thing out in his head. "You didn't have to come all the way over here to tell me, though. I have my phone."

Joseph -- who was a cute, young thing with a hard body and a quick, sharp sense of humor -- sat and blushed dark, hands twisted in his lap. "I know. I... I wanted to come. To ask you to dinner, since I knew you were free."

"Honestly?" Well, now. He'd been flirting, but... "I'm sorry, Joseph. I would, but I don't date people I work with." Not after Tony. Not after almost ruining his career.

Never again.

"So, it's not a date. It's dinner between colleagues." Jesus, had he ever been that earnest? That young? That bold? Well, yeah. Yeah, he had. Before he opened his mouth again, Joseph held up one hand. "Wait, hear me out. I know you don't date in the office, but I just want to talk. Get to know you. I'm not like a stalker or something, I'm not a student. Hell, I'm twenty-eight-years old. I'm only five years younger than you. I'm not asking you to pay for my food or anything."

God, that was adorable. Possibly even cute. "What do you drink?"

"I'd like a dirty martini, please." Not a kid's cocktail.

"Sure." He ordered another round for him and a drink for Joseph. "So, are you a Joseph? A Joe?"

"Joseph. Joe is my father. My grampa's Guiseppe."

"Italian, hmm?" He should have known, with that shiny black hair and the bright eyes and olive-toned skin. Delectable.

"Sicilian, but who's counting? Mom's Greek, so I was sort of doomed to be swarthy, which, let me tell you, when you're a teenager, that's just a polite way to say unnaturally greasy."

His eyes popped open and Pax laughed, completely charmed and surprised at once. The server came with the drinks and he handed over a twenty without even looking away from Joseph's face.

"I see you understand what I'm saying." Joseph took his drink and leaned back, the leather-upholstered chair seeming to hug the lean, but nowhere near skinny, body.

"I do. I don't have fond memories of being a spotty teenager, I admit. Of course, there are benefits to having skin like yours, I imagine. I don't tan worth a damn."

"Yeah, but you have the hair of glory, so it works out. So, tell me. Why history? I mean, I have a degree in, of all things, Fine Arts, so I get the studying what you love part, but why history?"

He tilted his head, pondered that a while. "I was a theology major and we were studying the Mesopotamians and I got hooked through the balls. It was..." Pax shrugged. "It was inevitable, somehow. I teach the rest because I like eating and having a roof over my head and shit, but the ancients? That gets me off."

"Oh, man. Have you been to the Middle East?"

Pax nodded and started talking and before he knew it they'd not only been seated, but they'd eaten, had coffee and dessert and paid the check. They'd talked about artwork and deserts, sand and turpentine, books and paintings and whether the Internet was a great thing or the downfall of civilization. Pax hadn't had so much fun in years.

Years.

"Would you like to go find a coffee shop somewhere?" He found himself asking before he even thought.

"Sure. There's Mojoes down the road. They have a caramel macchiato to die for." They started walking, the street quiet, a mist starting to form around the streetlights.

"Caramel, huh? I'm a fan of the latte, myself, and after that chocolate cake thing we had, I may never have sweets again."

"Oh, that would be a shame, especially after I got to taste one of those truffles you brought. The orange was like a... a... a gift or something."

"Have you been to the store? It's a tiny, fascinating place. I go in and treat myself every now and again; the stock's never the same." He grinned. He'd become addicted to the chocolate covered orange slices and then had tried the truffles. It had been almost a religious experience.

"No, I haven't been in town very long. I'm still at the point where finding the grocery store and the dry cleaners is an experience."

They headed up the walkway to the coffee shop, both ordering a straight-up cup of Joe with milk. There weren't a ton of people, and the ones that were in the place weren't students, which suited him to the ground. Artists, poets, a table of serious-faced, long-haired gamers with dice and papers rattling -- all-in-all, they seemed like a good crowd. They always did. Joseph found them a booth in the back, both of them settling easily, grinning at each other as someone put a dollar in the juke box and "Bohemian Rhapsody" started playing.

"So, do you like working at the University?" God, that was ridiculously lame.

"There are things about it I like very much." The toe of Joseph's shoe nudged his ankle, the flirt clear.

"Email access? Lunch at the Union?" He moved his foot away and then moved it back.

"The staff." Joseph grinned, winked. "He makes me stupid excited."

"Is that a good thing?" He took a sip of his coffee, chuckled.

"Well, the stupid part? Kind of sucks, especially since I had to wait until a blind date asked you out to figure out how to do it myself, but the rest?" He got a wicked little wink from button-shiny eyes. "Not sucky."

Good lord. The boy had to bring up sucking... All of the sudden he could see it in his mind's eye -- those full, warm lips around his cock, hands tanned against his white belly, pretty eyes looking up at him...

He shifted, adjusting himself a little so that the teeth of the zipper would quit biting in on him. Damn it, Pax. Focus.

"What kind of art do you do?" Good save.

"My degree is in textiles, believe it or not."

"Like cloth?" Interesting.

"Yes. I did a lot of screen-printing, silks, batiks. It's my passion." One hand was held up and Pax had to stop himself from reaching out, grabbing it. There was a line of dark blue spattered across the palm. "Before you ask, yes, I can sew. Yes, I can knit, and no. I have no interest in fashion design. I like to make cloth. I'm working on a piece now for a show in Denver."

"Do you weave?" He'd found that fascinating -- could sit and watch the process for hours. He'd had a fabulous time in Lima ten years ago, sitting at the dirty feet of a fascinating old lady with hands like claws. Her eyes had been like buttons, like bird's eyes.

"I know how, but my passion is the actual design. Silk is my favorite medium. It's a total-sensory experience."

"I can see that." Then, suddenly, with the same passion they'd found about the Middle East, they were off, talking about colors and patterns, dyes and the horror that was the third-world fabric industry. Joseph seemed as fascinated by his own art as Pax was with his studies. It left him energized and excited, half-hard and interested.

They finished their third cups of coffee, both of them laughing hard enough that the little girl with the guitar was staring with a half-smile on her face. "I will admit, Joseph, you are much more fun than I was expecting to have this evening."

"Well, that would be more impressive if I wasn't taking the place of a dreaded blind date."

He chuckled. "Dread is a strong word. I prefer... lack of enthusiasm."

Joseph's eyebrow lifted, eyes twinkling. "Would you be enthusiastic to having another date with me, Doctor Mac..."

"Pax."

"Right. Would you go out with me again, Pax?"

"That would probably not be in my best interests, but yes. Yes, I would."

"Good." The music started up again, louder this time, and Joseph's nose wrinkled. "You about ready to get out of here?"

"Yeah. I'm all coffeed out. Where to? Or are you ready to call it a night?" Would you like to come to my house and get well-fucked?

"Whatever you'd like."

"What I'd like is to take you home, make some coffee, see where this goes." Wait. What was he saying? What was he *doing*? He didn't take home University employees. Not after what had happened.

"I'd like that." Joseph's hand bumped against his. "Pax, man? I'm a temp. I'm only filling in until Judy gets back from maternity leave, remember? This..." Joseph's fingers squeezed his. "This can be something else."

How absent-minded professor would he seem if he admitted that he didn't even remember what Judy looked like, much less when she was coming back?

Still. That opened up a fabulous, new line of thought.

He backed them into an alley, looking into hungry, bright eyes, tongue sliding over Joseph's lips. "You think so?"

"I think, even if it doesn't become something, you and I can have a ball trying it out." Joseph pushed up, turning the tease into a kiss, tongue sliding into his lips and fucking them, slow and sensual. His entire body was into it, into the way they fit together, into the way this worked.

"My house is down the road." His bed was through the door and down the hall.

From there, they'd see.

"Did you see the Meyer lemons?" Bryan frowned, looking around the kitchen. "I know I smelled them." Surely that meant he'd ordered them, right? He wasn't getting that old.

"You smell mandarins. We used them." James walked past him, hand just brushing his ass. Honestly, the boy was getting altogether too forward.

"I know the difference between Meyer lemons and mandarins. My sense of smell has not disappeared!" He managed to look affronted, or so he hoped.

"I didn't order Meyer lemons, Boss."

"Well, I did." Didn't he? Damn it. He was fairly sure he had.

James snuck another grope and he whacked the cheeky little bastard with a wooden spoon. "Don't make me beat you."

"Promises, promises."

He rolled his eyes, biting back his laughter. "Well, then. Go get some. I need them."

"Lemon truffles?"

"To add to the Earl Grey ones."

James' eyes lit up. "Oh, interesting."

"Mmmhmm." As he watched James leave, he nodded. Interesting, indeed.

Chapter Nine

James looked faded around the edges.

Bryan mixed a nougat, arm working as he looked across the kitchen, watching his friend, his student pick out perfect rings of dried pineapple. "Are you ill?"

"What?"

"Ill. Are you ill? If you're sick you should go home. Rest. Not breathe on the food." Get better. He missed James' smile.

"I'm fine, Bryan." The look he got was slow, steady, tasting somehow sweet in the back of his throat. "I'm tired. I've been practicing, you know?"

"I know." As if he couldn't tell that James' candies were strong, vibrant, alive. "You'll be leaving me soon, heading off to find another shop, your own shop." The thought settled like a fist in the center of his chest, a dull, raw ache.

"I don't believe I will, not for a long time, Boss. I have... I have things to do here. Important work."

"Students always say that, before the end."

Those lovely eyes stared him down. "Sometimes ends are simply well-disguised beginnings."

He poured the water into the teapot, watching it spin, the steam coming up and bathing his face in a perfect mixture of heat and scent. Cardamom, cinnamon, ginger all danced around him, as the star anise and vanilla waltzed around them, laughing gently with the other scents.

It reminded Ichabod of sitting at a chaiwala in Mumbai, sipping from a hand-thrown cup and feeling very young and very foreign and very, very lucky. The smells had been unlike anything he'd ever known, the sounds and press of people overwhelming and magical and...

"Bodie?" He looked over at Hannah, her pregnant belly opening the swinging door from the kitchen before her head appeared, the mass of black hair all caught back in a bandanna, cheeks pale as milk.

Oh, milk. He reached down, grabbed some from the little fridge.

"Yeah? I'm making Masala; you want some?"

"I so do. Thanks. You've got enough tart shells now to last until the baby's eighteen, I think, and the new little girl from the community college? She's going to be great. Ailene's her name. Be nice to her. Don't forget she's supposed to be here."

"I won't forget."

"Of course you will. You forget *you're* here if I don't remind you, Bodie." He watched Hannah climb onto a chair, wincing a little, looking about as uncomfortable and pale as he'd seen her since Washington's disappearance, what? Seven months ago? Six?

Damn it, Wash. You should be here. You should be watching this and holding her and asking me to make you a pot of coffee.

"You're thinking about him." Fuck, she was like some magical woodland creature, those black eyes staring right into him.

"Well, yeah. I miss him and you're about to have his baby." And he wasn't here.

"Yeah." She reached over, patted his hand. "I keep calling the Department of Defense, praying that they've heard something. Anything."

"He'll show up. He has to. I know him." Ichabod nodded, twined their fingers together.

"Goddamn stubborn bastard. I told him not to enlist, not to..."

Hannah shook her head, smiled. "Don't Bodie. Wash isn't you. You two are brothers, but there's never been anyone so different, huh? You're a lot more..."

"Esoteric? New Agey? Weird?"

"I'll go with weird. God, is this place for real? I expect gypsies to attack." The voice that filled the tea shop was low, deep, unusual, but Hannah squealed and jumped up, hands fluttering.

"Sam!"

"Hey, baby girl. I came to see if they'd found that son of a bitch you're married to, yet. See if Wash's family was treating you right." Dark eyes that matched Hannah's exactly stared over at him, button-black and hard, lips tight. Great. A visit from the Texans. *Just* what he needed.

"Of course they are. They always have." Hannah looked half stunned, half like she was going to cry. "Bodie, this is Sam Danvers, my oldest brother. What are you doing here, honey? I didn't expect you to come out?"

"I know, that's why I did. Like I was going to let you have this baby all the way out here without some sensible man to take care of you."

Hannah slapped Sam's arm, and Ichabod bit his tongue against the furious words that wanted out. No, he couldn't possibly be sensible. Not at all. Hell, he only owned his own shop, had for eight years now. Employed his sister-in-law, put the crib together, the changing table. Hosted the fucking baby shower and was the one who was there when the fucking chaplain came to tell them Wash's plane had gone down.

Not fucking sensible at all.

Why the *hell* would he be sensible?

He was just the one who had to pick up all the fucking pieces, that was all.

He poured himself his tea, poured for Hannah. He didn't offer Mr. Big Brother a cup of his own.

That might be sensible.

"So you're Icky, huh? You were the best man or the photographer?" Hannah's foot shot out, connecting with Sam's shin. Those black-black eyes looked him up and down, dragging over him like the man was searching for soft spots. Honestly. A man owned a tea house and had a fighter-pilot brother and suddenly it was all about the softness. "No, definitely the best man. You missed your speech."

"Ichabod, yes. Or Bodie. You remembered. I'm so pleased." He didn't really remember much about Sam, except that he sounded even more Texan than Hannah and that Wash had said something -- he was a hunter? A cowboy? A fisherman? Something... outdoorsy. Of course, he'd been incredibly busy with the catering assistant who did have the prettiest hazel eyes and amazing hands. They'd missed the bulk of the reception while playing down in the basement of the little meeting hall...

Sam cleared his throat, staring over, one eyebrow raised.

Oh. Wait. Focus. He shook Sam Danver's hand, pulling himself out of his little fantasy. Don't act like a big idiot, man. Classy. Mature. Strong.

Not reliving a happy fantasy from three years ago.

"Lord, honey. What's in that tea? Are you high? Look at his eyes, Sissy, they're all fuzzy."

"Eyes aren't fuzzy," Hannah snapped back and Ichabod opened his mouth to answer when Hannah swatted Sam's ass, hard. "Enough. Bodie's been an absolute angel and I won't have you being evil to him, do you understand me?"

"Damn, Sissy. That stings!" The man's hand looked huge on that tight little denim-covered ass.

"Well, you were raised better, Bubba. I know you were. Bodie's gone above and beyond and just because you didn't get a piece of ass at the wedding and Bodie *did*..."

His eyes went wide and Sam's cheeks went a deep, dark purple. "Hannah!"

"What? Jesus, you're both such *boys*." Her hands started waving. "Everything's such a contest -- who's getting laid? Who's not? Whose cock is longer? Who makes more money? Who does this? Who does that?"

She was going to blow a vein.

Like really.

Ichabod just stared at her, noting idly that Sam was doing the same. Staring at this little dark haired girl having a fit, right in the middle of the shop. Bodie worried vaguely about his teapot collection.

Sam stepped closer, leaning in. "Has she been like this long?"

"Nope. This is new."

"When's she due?"

"Next Wednesday."

"Ah." They nodded together, both tracking Hannah with their eyes. Babies were strange things. Maybe not as strange as women, but close.

"Don't." She pointed and stared, lips tight and quivering -- man, he'd thought that was a myth, like heaving bosoms and swooning. "Don't you too make fun of me like I don't have the sense to know that you're doing it. I'm pregnant, not stup... Oh." She stopped short, staring over at him, cheeks gone gray. "Bodie? Oh, God. Help me."

"Hannah!" He planted his hands on the counter and catapulted himself up and over, tea spilling over his hands. "Hannah, lovely? Are you okay?"

He managed to make it over to her before her knees gave out and get her settled down into a stuffed, soft chair, pushing her hair out of her face. "Just breathe. Does anything hurt?"

"No. No, I'm good. I'm good, Bodie. I just... The baby's going to come soon and he's... I want him back. I need him, so bad!" She burst into tears, pushing into his arms and sobbing. He held on, rocking her a little, glancing up at Sam, who had this look on his face of utter terror.

Someone wasn't used to dealing with pregnant women. Especially not crying pregnant sisters whose husband's plane went down in the Middle East.

"Hey. Hey, what did I tell you? He'll come back. I'd know if he was gone. We're different, but I know him, bone deep. He'll come back." If there was a God in Heaven, Washington'd come back for this baby. Ichabod had to believe that. "And I'm here for you, sweetie, to the end."

"Hannah. Sissy. You've got to stop this. It cain't be good for you." Finally Sam started moving, coming over to pull Hannah away from him. Jesus, did men still wear Old Spice? "You just have to stop worrying on it. Stop driving yourself crazy."

Ichabod made himself lean back, nod. "Do you need something? Water? Juice? Anti-crazy pills?"

He ducked as Hannah swatted at him. "I think I'm going to go upstairs and have a nap, Bodie. I'm all stupid and sad. You don't mind, huh?"

"Of course not, you dork. Go on, my sheets are clean and the bed's made. Drink a bottle of water before you crash and make sure the phone's on the cradle, in case you need to call down."

Sam helped her up and Hannah led him to the stairs to his little place. "I'll come back, help you clean up."

Ichabod just nodded. Sure, whatever.

He grabbed a towel and some cleaner in a spray bottle, sighing.

Come on, Washington. Please. Come home. Find a way.

This is killing her. Killing us all.

"Jesus, honey. You scared me down there. Why won't you come home?" Sam got his baby sister settled on the big bed, her belly gigantic and swollen, kind of perverse. "You know that I'd love to have you, so would Daddy and the rest of us."

Her snort made him smile. "Shit, Sammy. You're here because David and Terry and those bitches they married make you crazy. Don't lie to me."

God, she did know him best. "It's a madhouse at the ranch, Sissy. I fucking hate it."

"So, you stay here with me a while, Bubba. I'd like that. Well, not here; this is Bodie's house. I'm two blocks over."

"Man, he's something. He's being good to you?" The house was a lot like the shop downstairs -- painfully clean, but a little persnickety. Lots of geegaws and fancy little shit. Shit, dusting this place must make the thin little fucker busy on Sundays and Mondays.

"He is. God, he's lost the last bit of his family, he's had to help me do everything. He even went to Lamaze classes with me and he hasn't lost faith that Wash is coming home. He's a good man, Sammy. He's a little New Agey and a little lonely, but solid as hell." She held onto him, fingers petting the back of his hand. "He hasn't even been dating, since Wash's plane went down. He's just been working for me."

Yeah, yeah. Super-Icky. Christ. Sam was fucking tired of hearing about the perfect Berber brothers. "I'm glad, honey. Icky seems like a good guy."

"He hates being called Icky."

Sam grinned. "I know. Wash told me. Wash told me a lot about him."

She got all teary again, squeezing his hand. "Tell me he's coming home."

"Oh, Sissy. I pray to God he does." He wasn't going to fucking lie to her.

"You're supposed to tell me he's coming back."

"I'm not Icky. I don't know that."

"So just *tell* me, asshole."

He shook his head, leaned down and kissed her forehead, fingers itching to smooth away the lines. This was supposed to be the good time for her. This was supposed to be fucking exciting. "I'm going to go wandering so I don't disturb your brother-in-law. He looks bitchy. You want anything?" Pickles? Ice cream? Whiskey? Could you feed pregnant sisters whiskey?

"Oranges. Get some chocolates for Bodie. He'd love that." Her eyelids were starting to droop, breath slowing. He could fucking see the baby moving, under her shirt, under her skin.

Chocolates. Damn. "Not beer?"

"He likes beer, too, but there's this chocolate shop down the street. He..." She yawned, tugged the blanket over her stomach. "It's a girl, you know? We're going to name her Harmony. Washington loved that name. Harmony Christina Berber. I hope she looks like him."

He shook his head, watching as Hannah drifted off. He didn't. He sort of felt the same way he reckoned Wash would.

He wanted the baby to look just like her.

Business had been slow all afternoon, up until twenty minutes to closing, of course. It was *always* that way -- dead, dead, dead, almost time to lock up and everyone wanted a quarter pound

of Darjeeling and enough chamomile to make it through flu season and something minty and warm to help them sleep and couldn't they have a cup before they headed into traffic and weren't there any scones left from this morning?

Bodie sighed, still smiling a little bit, because customers meant sales and sales meant another month, another quarter, another little bit until Christmas, where he made most of his annual monies.

There were three people lined up at the cash register and another four at the tea counter. He was about to call up to Hannah and beg for help when a deep voice caught his attention.

"You need some help, Icky?"

"Do you know how to run a cash register?" The damned things weren't simple anymore.

"Believe it or not, I'm smarter than I look." He got a glare, which just made him chuckle.

"Well thank the universe for that... If you'll run the cash, I'll make tea orders. I'd appreciate it."

"Anything for family, Icky."

His teeth set on edge, but he just smiled through and accepted the help. He needed it right now and, from what he could see, people were paying and getting boxed up and leaving with smiles on their faces. For that, he could have edgy teeth.

Really.

He made four chais, a raspberry iced, and a mint with a shot of vanilla syrup that smelled so sickly sweet his stomach churned. It was probably good that Hannah wasn't down here. That might have gotten ugly.

Finally -- finally -- everyone trundled out, leaving him and Sam staring at each other, grinning just a bit.

"If you turn the sign around and lock the door, I'll pour us both a beer."

"No shit? Not tea beer or herbal beer or weird-assed new agey beer?"

"Bud Lite is my beer of choice, man, but I can float a tea bag in there if it would make you more comfortable..." Insufferable ass. Good thing the man was funny. It went a long way to tolerating the bullshit.

"That's okay. I wouldn't want you to like, strain yourself or your teabags."

The pun tickled him and he laughed all the way back to the storeroom with its fridge and little sink and convection oven. There was a new six-pack waiting for him, along with a cheese tray that one of the private parties had ordered and then left behind.

He was stuck paying for it anyway, he might as well enjoy it. He grabbed a little pack of crackers too and headed out. Sam was sprawled on one of the old sofas, boot heels dug into the big rug, wrinkling it a little. It was a good look, really -- sort of Old West meets Mae West meets Victorian drawing room.

However it worked, he approved.

"Has Hannah woken up?" Sam took the beer from him, smiled at him.

"No. I ran up about an hour ago and she was snoring." He put the cheese tray down, sat. "She's just getting close, I think."

"Have you heard anything about Washington?"

"Not a fucking thing." He shook his head, twisted the top off his beer. "We keep calling and they keep putting us off. They haven't found his body, though. That they'd tell us. I think he's a prisoner somewhere. I really do. I keep praying someone tells her." Of course, if it was bad... If it was bad he didn't know if he wanted to know.

He didn't know if he wanted Hannah to know.

"Well, I'm here for the duration, until she doesn't need help." Sam looked serious, looked a little wiggled out.

"You can just up and leave Texas like that? It's not a problem?"

"Shit, man. I got brothers to work the ranch with Daddy; Hannah needs family and I need... Well, let's just say I can use the space, the chance to just be somewhere new."

"Ah." Okay. Well, he could get that.

They sat together, staring at each a little, the cheese starting to come to room temperature and smell, well, cheesy. Sam finished his beer, leaned back, then jerked and reached behind him, tugging out a couple of little paper sacks. "I bought some chocolates for you from that store down the road. Hannah said you liked them."

"Did you get her orange sticks?"

"Yes!" Sam offered him this wicked, goofy assed grin. "The little dude there? He *knew* her; I guess we look alike because he asked after the baby and after you and I told him I hoped Wash came home and shit." A little silver box was handed over to him, all tied with a mesh bow. "I bought orange sticks and chocolate covered pineapple slices and those truffles there for you."

Bodie opened the box, the scent hitting him immediately, making his head spin. "Chai."

"Yep. Thought you'd like it."

"It smells fucking amazing." He blinked up, fingers held to his lips. "Pardon my language."

"Oh, because I've never fucking said fucking. Eat your candy." Sam rolled his eyes. "Jesus, you're still so stuck up. You were at the wedding, you know? Man, I couldn't believe that you hooked up and got busy after being so... formal."

"He was hot." Like he was going to explain himself. He pulled out a chocolate, let it melt on his tongue. Oh. Oh, India and sex and pleasure and. Yeah.

"So were you." Sam looked over, not the slightest bit embarrassed.

"Oh, please."

"What? You have a nice ass for a freak show, New Agey tightwad." Bastard. Motherfucker.

He almost growled, then he saw the light in Sam's eyes. "Asshole."

"I never saw that." Sam waggled his eyebrows. "Not that you weren't showing it around. Does beer work like that or only wine?"

"Only wine. It makes me stupid." And giddy. And horny as hell.

"Damn it. Why didn't you have wine in the fridge? At least enough for you?"

He tossed the ribbon from the box at Sam, chuckling when it landed on the man's crotch like a perverse game of ring toss. "Eat your pineapple. Maybe it'll sweeten you up."

They both started laughing, the sound mixing together, bouncing through the shop.

Their laughter stopped abruptly when the door from upstairs opened, Hannah pale, holding her belly with one hand, the phone with the other. "Bodie. Bodie, they found... It's... I..."

They were both up and running as she hit the floor, the phone crashing to the ground and spinning.

Bodie saw that Sam was gathering Hannah up, cell phone to his ear as he dialed 911. Ichabod grabbed the fallen phone, the voice on the other end still jabbering.

When he got it to his ear, all he heard was, "...information about Captain Washington Berber."

"Bodie. Bodie, wake up."

He frowned, looked into eyes the same color as his. "What is it?"

Wash pushed under the covers with him, his Incredible Hulk pajamas glowing in the nightlight. He should have asked Santa for those too instead of Spider Man. Although the Spiderman ones came with a mask and a can of silly string...

"There's something in the closet."

Those words made Bodie stop, stare at his twin. "Quit trying to scare me."

Wash wasn't, though, Bodie could tell. Wash smelled like pickles and he knew what that meant. That meant scared, for real.

"There ain't monsters, Wash. Momma said so."

"There's boogeymans."

"No, there ain't." He could feel the air on his bare feet and he pulled his legs under the covers, protecting them.

"Uh-huh. There's boogeymans and Russian commies and pre-verts that steal little boys and eat them. I heard Daddy and Uncle Walt talking about it."

"Pre-verts? For real?" Their daddy was a soldier. Their daddy was a hero. Daddy didn't tell lies. "You think we ought to go get them?"

"I ain't getting up. The closet's between the bed and the door..."

"Well, we cain't just sit here and get eat up." Right? Right. He looked at Wash, feeling every second of his eight minutes older. "You want me to turn the light on? Look?"

Wash's fingers curled around his. "What if it gets you, Bodie?"

"It ain't gonna. We're not babies no more. If there's a commie in there, I'll..." Well, what would he do? What could he do? "I'll holler and stomp on its foot real hard and Daddy and Uncle Walt will come runnin'."

He could see the way Wash's mouth set, the stubborn anger of it. "I ain't gonna let you be a hero all by yourself, now. If you're gonna go, I'm going, too."

"Well, then. Together we're sure to kick any pre-vert's ass." They both chuckled nervously, looking around to make sure no one'd heard him cuss -- not even a Russian or a boogeyman.

Wash nodded and they slipped out of bed, him on the left nearest the toy box and Wash on the side with the Luke Skywalker nightlight and the bookshelf with their Stretch Armstrong and their Matchbox cars.

He felt real brave, up to right near the closet door, right near the place where someone had to swing the door open and reach in and tug the long string to make the light come on.

A hand landed on his shoulder, jerking him up out of his dream. "Fuck!"

"Shh. Shh. You're gonna wake her up. You were muttering, man." He met familiar eyes in an unfamiliar face, blinking a little. Okay. Okay. Right. Sam. Hannah. Hospital. Baby.

"How is she?"

Sam backed off, nodding. "She's resting. They said her blood pressure's high; she needs to keep in the bed, not get stressed out."

Right. No stress. They'd found a bunch of POWs in the desert and one was...

Yeah.

"Let's get some coffee?" He stood up, head swimming a little.

"Yeah. Yeah. What were you dreaming on so hard?"

He took note of the room number -- eight seventeen -- and headed down the hall. "Oh, dear. I was dreaming about a night when we were eight -- me and Wash. He heard something in the closet and we'd gone together to turn the light on, prove there was nothing there."

"And?" Sam pushed the down button.

He felt his cheeks heating, eyes rolling in their sockets. "And, believe it or not, there was this gigantic raccoon, in the closet. The biggest thing I'd ever remembered seeing. It bit me twice and I had to get rabies shots for ten days. Wash was so mad, so upset that he had made me go first."

"Damn, honey. You got bit? For real?"

They stepped into the elevator, headed down and he held out his left hand, the scars there faded but still evident. Sam blinked, shook his head, grinned. "Man, are you trying to say you're the reason Wash has to always be the hero?"

He snorted. "You can blame that on my dad. He was all Army all the way."

"Why aren't you?"

"I wanted something different. I wanted to travel after school, so I did. India. Tibet. Europe." He grinned and headed for the cafeteria. "And then there's the whole gay thing, huh? Wash is the straightest man on Earth."

"Dude, man. You have *seen* my brothers, haven't you?" Sam grinned over at him and, all of the sudden, Ichabod could see how fucking tired Sam was, how scared.

"She's going to be okay. Both of them are going to be okay." He had faith. Hell, there was a good chance that they'd found Wash, that they were going to call any minute and say that Wash was coming home. Whole. Please.

"You think so? She looks so fucking pale, man."

"She had a terrible shock, Sam. Wash..."

"You said they only found his things."

"They're going through the casualties, the wounded. They'll find him. I'd know if he was dead." He'd know. Wash was his twin.

"You don't."

He grabbed a tuna sandwich, a cup of too-strong coffee, a Snickers bar. "Don't. I'd know."

Sam stared at him from the rack of candy bars, eyebrow cocked, hot dog and Coke in his hand. "Is that some weird New Agey twin thing? I mean, I've heard about that shit, but I don't buy it."

"Absolutely." Of course, Sam didn't buy it. No one did. Not that it mattered. He didn't have to be believed for it to be true.

He paid for both of them, heading for the little group of tables.

"So... if you're so close, how come he's straight?"

"I haven't the foggiest. He's allergic to strawberries; I'm not. I love music; he couldn't care less. We're close; we're twins, but we're two different men." Thank God. Ichabod chuckled, thinking of the thousands of arguments -- religious and political that they'd gotten into over the years.

"I guess that works out okay for Hannah."

"Yep." He stared at the tuna and just shook his head. He wasn't hungry. He really wasn't. He was sitting in a hospital waiting for something to break.

"Hey." A warm hand wrapped around his wrist, the fingers soothing, warm. "It's cool. You're good."

He watched those tanned, callused fingers on his skin and couldn't help but wonder how they'd feel elsewhere on his body and an image of Sam's skin, his own fingers dipped in cinnamon and ginger, trailing along that flat belly and drawing circles -- one over the curls that would crown the man's cock, one around the man's navel...

"Damn, you just... You don't even know how fucking hot you are, do you?"

His head snapped up, their eyes meeting. "What?"

"You, with the way you look at me, the way you feel. You're sex on a stick and I'm tired of coming on and you never seeing it, Icky."

"Don't call me Icky." His brain was spinning, mouth opening and closing like a goldfish spilled from its bowl. Him? Hot? Did those words just come from Mr. Stereotypically Hot Gay Cowboy across the table?

"I'll call you whatever you want, baby." Bodie blinked again as Sam shifted, leaned closer. "Just tell me that I'm not fucking invisible."

"Invisible? What?" He shook his head, maybe he was still asleep somehow. Still dreaming. "They do *have* mirrors out in the boondocks, don't they?"

It was, apparently, Sam's turn to look confused. "Uh. Yeah..."

"Never mind, man. You're something very closely approximating the average cowboy wet dream."

"Closely? I can accept that."

He grinned over, shook his head. "Eat your food, cowboy. We can't get busy in a hospital." That had to be unhygienic.

One eyebrow went up, Sam grinning back. "You wanna bet? I'm sure we could find a place."

"You cannot be serious." He hadn't gotten laid in months. He hadn't gotten a good enough offer in months.

"I can. I am." Sam stared him down a little, chin set and stubborn, challenging him. "'Unless you're just too chicken to take what you want."

"That sort of male posturing doesn't work for me. I'm enlightened, you know?" He held back his smile, knowing it was right there at the edges, hiding.

"You can't be that enlightened and want a cowboy like me."

"Yeah. Yeah, I can." He wanted. He wanted in that incredibly fierce way that you usually only found in smoky alleyways and disco ball lit dance floors.

Sam glanced around, furtive, then got up and jerked his head. "Come on, then."

As if he were just supposed to follow along.

Honestly.

He sat there a second, completely confused about what he was supposed to do, what they were up to. Then he caught sight of Sam's tight little cowboy butt and followed the urge of his cock which was insisting this was an incredibly good idea.

Wandering, seemingly completely aimless, Sam stuck his hands in his pockets and whistled. No one would know they were looking for a place to get their groove on. Wait. Did people even think that anymore?

He wasn't quite sure what to do, but hell, he'd had sex in a church. In elevators. In a Buddhist temple in Delhi... How different could a hospital be?

They finally found a room that was deserted, with a lock on the door. Looked like some kind of storage for linens. Sam seemed to think it was perfect.

"You're not serious, are you?" He locked the door behind him, though, didn't he? He locked the door and reached out, hands landing on Sam's arms.

"I am." Those hot eyes stared right into his, serious as anything. "If you don't want to, we won't. But I'm damned serious."

"I want." He could smell Sam now, male and somehow... real? Earthy. Grounded. That seemed weird, but there it was. Sam stepped close, heat pouring off his body, one hand lifting so Sam could touch Bodie's cheek. He turned his face, lips tasting the callused skin for the first time.

"Oh, that's fine, Icky. Real fine." Sam moved closer, a lot closer, pressing up against his side.

"Don't call me Icky." He reached down, hand finding Sam's crotch, that heavy cock feeling solid in his hand.

"That's not, not at all. That's damned good." Pushing into his hand, Sam moaned a little, riding the feeling.

"It is." He kept licking, lapping at Sam's wrist, Sam's palm. His fingers kept working at the man's fly -- half teasing, half playing.

"Oh, now, you can do better than that, honey." Sam reached down and grabbed Bodie's cock through his jeans, showing him exactly what kind of pressure the man wanted.

"You're braver than I expected." He pushed harder, fingers measuring every inch, from balls to tip, all trapping in the denim.

"Me? I just make up my mind what I'm gonna do... Oh. There. Then I do it." Eyes closing, Sam licked his lips, pushing with hand and hips.

"There." Who would have imagined, him with a cowboy in his hand, wanting more than he had in years?

"Uh-huh. Feel even better bare." Those long fingers started working his fly, demonstrating again.

"I can see that." Except he couldn't. See. Yet. Bodie chuckled at himself, shook his head a little and worked on button and zipper. There was something about cowboys that made him a little goofy.

"There you go. You go a little faster, you actually will see it before I blow." That smile would probably haunt his dreams for days. Weeks.

His cock throbbed, fingers wrapping around the stiff length and rubbing. The skin felt good -- soft and solid, hot and damp all at once. They both got their hands around bare flesh, and damn. Damn. It was... Sam kissed him, then, hard and deep, almost burning. One hand wrapped around the back of Sam's neck, tongue pushing in as he tasted. Better than chai. Better than chocolate.

They rocked together, each pulling at the other's cock, that kiss going on until his lack of air made his head swimmy. Sam pulled back then, smiling a little, his thumb doing something amazing.

"Oh. Oh, fuck." Bodie blushed as the word escaped him. "Do that again."

"No problem." The man touched him again, pushing, and then pulling with that thick thumb. Jesus, Sam was good at that. Bodie knew he had to look like a moron -- staring open-mouthed as Sam drove him straight skyward.

"Honey, I need more. I need..." Those lean hips were rolling, that cowboy ass rocking, like the best ride ever.

"You're beautiful," Bodie groaned the words, knowing how stupid they sounded and how incredibly true they were, all at once. His hand started moving again, thumb nudging the tip with every upstroke.

"So hot, honey. So damned hot. Gonna set me on fire." Shifting around, Sam got their pricks together, got their hands moving so the heads pressed together, making a crazy sound.

He arched, hand squeezing, eyes wide open and not seeing anything. Sam was panting. He couldn't hear it so much as feel it against his cheek, his lips. Warm and damp, Sam's mouth begged for another kiss, then another. Bodie gave himself over to the sensations, let the pressure build in the base of his spine, knowing that Sam was feeling it, too.

"Close, honey." Okay, so Sam could still talk. Go him.

"Yeah." He bucked, thumb working the tips of their cock. Close. Yes.

"Fuck!" Grunting, Sam came for him, hot and wet, sliding over his hand, his cock. It was the best damned thing he'd felt in, well, years.

Bodie went up on tip toe, hips bucking, eyes rolling around in their sockets. When he came, it was like a spring let loose.

"Oh, yeah." Low, guttural, the words sounded satisfied as all fuck, and all male.

"Mmmhmm. Tell me you're going to let me take you home and do it again."

"Fuck, yes. Again and again. Hell, we might progress to sucking and fucking, 'fore the night is over." Sam leaned on him, chuckling a little.

"I do like your focus." He grinned, and both of them started snorting, laughing.

"We ought to clean up, I guess. We can't go home yet, huh?" Sam sighed a little, reminding him why they were there.

"No. We need to check on Miss Hannah. Make sure she's settled." He grabbed a towel from the stack on a shelf. "Handy, huh?"

"Hell, yes. I'm a practical feller." Okay, he'd just come, and that wink was about to make him blush.

"Practical and clever." He cleaned up Sam's cock, himself. "Come on, let's go."

"Right behind you." Sam zipped up and followed, one hand on his ass, just to remind him that the words were dead true.

They hurried down the hall, toward the elevator. Bodie was buzzing. He knew Hannah; she saw everything. He was so busted for seducing her baby brother. Of course, he really hadn't been the one doing the seducing, had he? At least not all of it.

They rode the elevator up and nodded at the nurse at the station, heading for Hannah's room. When they got there, he could see her, lying there, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Hannah?" He stepped toward her, but Sam beat him to it.

"What is it, honey? What's wrong?"

"Wash. They. He. It was... Oh, my God." The crying started for real and his knees buckled, head shaking.

No.

No, he didn't believe it. Not his twin. He would know. He would know if Wash was gone. "No." There was no way. "I'd know. I'd know, Hannah. There has to be a mistake."

Sam grabbed Hannah's hand. "Oh. Oh, damn. Hannah, I..."

Bodie worked himself back up, scowling. "No. Hannah, who called? There has to be a mistake. He can't be dead."

"No." Hannah looked at him, those eyes huge and bloodshot. "No, Bodie. You don't understand. It was Wash. On the phone. I talked to him."

He took a step and then just sat down. Hard.

Sam made a low noise, almost pained. "Oh, thank God."

"He's coming home. He is. He said to tell you thank you, Bodie. That he knew you'd take care for him."

He just nodded; he didn't have any words left.

Sam looked back at him, eyes glinting, a smile starting to dawn. Hell, maybe he didn't need any words right now. Maybe he just needed to be thankful, kiss his sister-in-law, go home and make them a cup of tea.

He watched James move around the bakery, putting together a large package. Bryan left the kitchen, curious. "Who is that for?"

"A new mom and her daughter."

"Really." That seemed a lot of candy for one woman.

"Well, a new mom, her husband, the baby's uncles. It's going to be a party -- a welcome home everyone party. You know Ichabod?"

He thought a moment, and then nodded, smiled. "The sweet, quiet man with the tea shop."

James offered him a wide grin, eyes sparkling. "He's found himself a cowboy."

"Cowboys don't drink tea, James."

"This one does."

Bryan grinned, picking out a pair of chai truffles and a pair of champagne ones. "Add these to the mix."

"We're invited, boss, to the party."

He tilted his head, smiled. "Are we?"

James nodded. "We are. Together."

"Well, I should go clean up. I can't meet the new baby dressed in sugar."

James' smile was worth facing the crowd for.

Bryan was finding himself quite tired of the lad's... sadness.

Chapter Ten

"Chocolate and pineapple are not happy bedfellows."

James sighed, closed his eyes and counted to ten. "You have lost all your romance, boss. It's beach season. You remember the beach, right? It's at the edge of that huge body of water. The salty one?"

Honestly. He was going to tie the old man up and drag them both out of this kitchen and out into the sunshine. Out into the world of sand and sea and goofy umbrella drinks and fish tacos.

That was right. Fish tacos. Sand. Coconut oil. Good things.

"I am fully aware of what the beach is, James. However, no one in their right mind is going to..."

"They're a special order, boss. I have an order for two dozen pieces -- all tropical."

One gray eyebrow went up. "That's a sizable order. Are you doing rum?"

"Coconut. Pineapple. Mango. Lime. The theme is umbrella drinks." The whole thing amused the hell out of him, honestly. A tasting menu, so to speak, of little bites of the tropics. Little vacations.

"Are they for a party?"

"What? No. No, I don't think so, boss. These seem to be a... special order." A very special order.

He chuckled, then caught his cheeks heating as Bryan walked by, patted him on the shoulder. "Good job. Very good job. You'll have your own shop before you know it."

His skin warmed where Bryan touched him.

"I'm not..." He didn't want his own shop. He didn't want to move on. He loved where he was, what he was doing.

Who he was doing it with.

"Hush, James. Your job is to say thank you, Boss, and then move on." This time the pat was to his ass, the touch almost too fast to notice.

Asshole.

"Thank you, Boss."

"Good man. Don't forget strawberry. Strawberries are good with rum."

Right. Strawberries.

James nodded, bent back to his work, the sound of surf and sea in the back of his mind, his ass just tingling where that touch had been.

It had started on May Day.

One perfectly wrapped little box on his doorstep. One pretty little box tied in iridescent rainbow ribbon with a white tag with "Please" scrolled on it.

"Please" written in dark black ink.

The P was big, dug into the fancy-assed paper, maybe a little clumsy.

Stoney had picked that first box up, turned it over and over in his hand and then tossed it without even opening it, the damned thing landing with a thud on top of the pizza box and the beer bottles.

He wasn't fucking forgiving Lyle. Not ever. No amount of pleases was going to fix that.

Of course, by Mother's Day, after more than a dozen of those little fucking boxes, he was curious, and had brought the box in, unwrapped it, staring at the candy inside like it was a snake.

Candy.

Jesus.

No, not just candy.

Chocolates? Fancy-assed chocolate? Fucking cheating asshole. Should have known that it would be something pointless and girly. Stoney figured he deserved something better -- a still beating heart or a rattle from a timber rattler with Lyle's apology inked on it. Or a nice new wrench. There was a list of decent little tools any fucking mechanic needed. Hell, he would have taken the spare keys to the house -- which, hell, didn't *work* any more because he wasn't letting that smarmy little bastard and his pierced-so-much-that-he-was-getting-alien-signals bastard in his house. Ever again. It was his, damn it.

His.

He stormed outside, box in hand, pure fury filling him up in a wave.

"I don't want you back, Lyle! I don't want you back! I want a decent man, you FUCKHEAD!"
Dude. That echoed.

Like really echoed.

Rocking cool.

"Shut *up*, Stone Waller or I will call the police on you!" Mrs. Colter threw a coffee cup down at him, the mug shattering on the sidewalk down on the first floor. He smashed the chocolates, throwing the box on the porch and doing the Watusi all around so that Lyle -- fucking blowjob-giving, lying, cheating, big-eyed fuckwad Lyle -- could see (if the bastard was watching and not fucking somebody besides Mr. Piercings because God knew, if you'd cheat on one guy who was damned good to you and loving on you and paying your bills and thinking about shit like forever even if it did make him sound like some queen-pussy, you'd cheat on the next guy, too) before stomping down the stairs in his biker boots and hopping on his Harley, before zooming off to buy his own momma flowers and a cake and something pretty for her house and take her to dinner.

She wouldn't throw coffee cups at him.

Of course, the next day, there was another box. This time the tag said, "Not Lyle."

Not Lyle.

Huh.

If it was Lyle, why would the stupid asshole say it wasn't him?

He took this box inside, his greasy mechanics fingers smudging the pretty box.

Not Lyle.

He grabbed the Goop and washed up, eyeing the box the whole time. Not Lyle.

That was a mixture of weird and wicked, really. Maybe a little sad, too, because Stoney liked to think about Lyle wanting him back, about that little fucker not liking to do hearts and flowers tattoos because he was miserable or not being able to do cool-assed biker tats because they reminded Lyle of him.

Still, someone was sending him chocolates.

Every day for damn near a month.

Fancy-assed chocolates.

He dried his hands and opened the box, looked at the fat, little swollen chocolate covered thing. Maybe it was poisoned...

Nah, somebody wanted to poison him, they'd spike his beer at the Stagecoach. This wasn't like that. 'Sides, the boxes were damned fancy.

He grabbed his pocketknife, sliced the candy right in half. Pineapple and coconut. He could smell it. Like the beach and tanned skin all slicked and shiny.

He did love him some pineapple, even if he couldn't drink pina coladas in the club because that would get his ass kicked for being a girl and shit. Not to mention the fact that Sy couldn't do no more than pour beer or whiskey.

Stoney picked up half and popped it into his mouth, chewing happily. Oh. Oh, man. That was fine. Damn fine. Weird, but fine.

He ate the other half as he stripped off and headed for the shower, the scent of beaches on his mind.

Beaches and secret admirers and umbrella drinks.

Damn.

Ten more days he got these candies -- mango and pineapple, papaya and coconut, kiwi (which was sorta nasty, really, but he ate it anyway). He started spending his days off sunning on his balcony, hoping to get a peek at whoever was peeking at him.

It was sorta hot -- sorta weird, sure, but nobody'd ever tried to stalk him before -- and he started looking hard at everyone who passed the apartment, started dressing a little nicer when he went out, started shaving his head real smooth.

Bear from the shop started noticing, started poking a little. "You got somebody new, Stone?"

"What's up, Stone?"

"You over that little fuckhead, Stone?"

"You're getting all tanned and shit, Stone."

He grinned over at Bear, one Saturday morning, elbow deep in grease as he repacked bearings. Bear was something else -- eight inches taller than his five-ten and weighing in at three-fifty of pure, hard steel-belted stud. Long silver hair, bushy beard -- Stone and every other queer man in a fifty-mile radius lusted after the man. Didn't matter though, everybody knew there'd been an accident years ago that'd left two men dead and one Bear in the Pen and whatever the deal'd

been? Bear didn't play. Still, the man was a damn good buddy. Hell, Bear'd been the one that found him, drunk and raging, after Lyle'd pulled his shit.

"You're damned nosy, Old Bear."

"Yeah? So what if I am?" Bear chuckled, wiped his forehead with a bright red rag.

"Well, I been working on getting over that fucker, you know? Been dreaming about the beach."

"Yeah, you live right here fairly close, man." Smartass.

"I want to go to Mexico or something. A resort with a swim-up bar and daily siestas and pina colodas for breakfast. You ever been somewhere like that, Bear?"

"Once or twice, yeah. They're something."

"Well, that's what I'm thinking. It's time to... branch out some. You... you ever had a secret admirer, man?"

"Who? Me?" Bear looked shocked. "Shit, no. I ain't the type."

"No?" He hadn't thought he would be either, but he sorta seemed like he was.

"Nope. You got you one?"

"Maybe. I got something."

One bushy eyebrow lifted. "You gonna share?"

"Nope."

"So what? Someone's leaving you heavy-breathing on the phone and tacking love notes to the seat of your Harley?"

"Nope." In fact, he might kick the ass of someone that stuck anything to his Hog. Goddamn, the thought just made him itch.

"Well, are you sending notes back?"

That made him stop, ponder. Shit. Should he? He hadn't thought to, but maybe... Nah. Shit, that wasn't him. Wasn't like him at all.

"No. No, I don't think so." Stoney grinned over. "I'm kinda okay with it, just like it is. It makes me feel good, man, knowing I'm not dead in the water."

"Yeah, yeah. You're what? Twenty?"

"Twenty-eight. Old enough."

"Fucking ancient, little biker baby." Bear snorted, rolled his eyes and the man's cell phone started ringing, playing "Margaritaville." Dork. "Get to work, man. I'm taking an early lunch. I..."

"Hate crowds." They finished together.

Bear chuckled, flipped him off and Stoney let himself watch the pull and play of the old, stained Levis as Bear wandered off, chattering on the little phone that damn near disappeared in that big paw. Not bad. Not bad at all.

There was another box waiting that night, this time with no message on the tag, just a crooked smiley face.

Stoney grinned, ate the candy as he sat in the fading sunshine, wondering again who was sharing the taste of Mexico with him.

It was getting to the point where he sorta wanted a face to go with the lotion and his left hand.

Hot dogs. Chips. White bread. Can of chili. Twelve-pack of Bud Lite. Pop-Tarts.

That was good for the week.

Oh, wait. Bananas. He liked bananas with his coffee in the morning.

Stoney popped the shit in the buggy, whistling under his breath. The little mom-and-pop shop wasn't fancy or nothing, but it worked for him. They kept what he ate in stock and they knew to keep the last Whatchamacallit hidden for him every Thursday night.

Not that he'd bought one in a while. Hell, he got him a candy a day. Why would he need the cheap shit.

"...stepped on a pop top, cut my leg twice..." He sang away as he headed toward the checkout.

"Man, don't quit your day job." The low growl scraped across his nerves like sandpaper. There was a shadow that fell over him and he blinked, stopped short, then grinned.

"Bear. What're you doing on my side of town?" Bear lived in a little place about half hour east, quiet and more remote.

"Slumming." He got a chuckle, a grin. "I came over to see a friend, got a thirst and thought I'd stop for a six-pack."

The Miller was held up, the bottles clinking together.

"You..." Did he want to ask Bear up for a beer? What if Candy Man saw? What if the man didn't understand? Did that matter? Shit. He stood there, blinking a bit.

"Drink beer? I do. Not while I'm on the bike, but after. See you, kid."

Did Bear look sad? Disappointed? Fuck him. It didn't really matter though, because Bear was paying, throwing a ten on the counter and bebopping out like his ass was fire.

Damn.

He paid for his groceries and headed across the street to his place, eyes looking up the stairs where...

Yep.

A box.

It was early today. Usually the weekend boxes didn't come until late-late.

Maybe...

He headed up, stomping a little, making Mrs. Colter glare down at him, beer spilling a little from its can. "Would you and your fucking biker friends learn to walk like you weigh less than ten thousand pounds?"

"Fuck off, ma'am. I don't have friends up here, just like I promised the boss." The landlord had a hard-on about parties or visitors or shit.

Hell, when him and Lyle'd moved in, he'd just wanted somewhere comfortable to have a beer and screw and...

Biker friends?

"Hey, Mrs. Colter. You see who brought this box up?"

"No. I just heard him. You all sound like rampaging elephants!"

Rampaging bears, maybe.

Dude.

Dude, no way.

He hurried up the stairs, curious now. Surely not. Shit, if Bear wanted a piece of him. All the big guy had to do was ask. And gas was pricey, for the man to come all the way out here. And Bear was old. And...

Stoney had sure been humming Margaritaville a lot lately. And Bear knew that he'd been wanting to go to the beach.

He stood up there, the noonday sun blazing down at him, the grocery sacks just getting heavier and heavier in his hands.

Could it be Bear? For real?

Goddamn.

This time there wasn't anything on the tag again, just a scrawled palm tree. Just like they had in Mexico.

Damn.

He needed to have a beer or four and think on this a little.

Bear.

Old Bear.

Damn.

It had taken him three days of a two day bender to figure out what to do.

Stoney figured he had three options. He could just quit his job and move and become a beach bum -- which had it's definite plusses, not the least of which was the whole no-more-working thing, but then there was the bullshit coward aspect and the what-if-he-was-wrong thing. Number two was just calling Bear and asking, straight out.

"Hey, dude. Are you into chocolate?"

"Hey, man. Make the next one tequila flavored?"

"Bear? You want to fuck me?"

All of those might work, except for that whole being wrong and having Bear kick his ass Wednesday at the shop. He was well-built and all, but Bear? Shit. Bear was a fucking convict and built like a brick shit house.

Rowr.

So, Stoney figured he'd go with plan number three. He'd give a gift back. Of course, that meant he'd have to give something where it would make sense if Bear *did* get it and not get him in trouble if Bear *didn't*.

Fuck.

That explained, of course, why he was hung over, skipping work, and at Wal-Mart at two in the afternoon.

Okay. Okay. Gift.

Gift.

He wandered up and down the aisles, looking. Fishing lures. Hand weights. Stinky candles. Godzilla dubbed in Spanish.

Huh.

Damn.

He kept looking, growling a little under his breath, going past the furniture and stupid lamps, through the dog food and cat litter, then the cards and craptastic jewelry. This whole girly gift thing was harder than advertised. Hell, if Bear was a girl he could buy earrings or something, although Bear's ears were pierced and the man would be sorta terrifying as a girl and...

He blinked, chuckling as he saw a rack of stupid key chains and snow globes and shot glasses and... Dude.

A puka shell necklace with a little palm tree dangling thing. Panama Jack. That was sort of manly, right?

And it sort of meant Mexico...

And it was only a couple of bucks, so if it wasn't Bear, then he hadn't lost much, right?

Right.

Dude, they made Hannah Montana *everything*.

He left the necklace the first day, then some margarita salt the next day. Day three was four limes and then, dude. Weekend and a fifth of tequila.

They were gone every day, that same box left in his place.

It was working for him, except. Well.

Bear never said anything and Stoney was finding himself lying in his bed at night, staring up at the ceiling with his hand on his cock, Bear's face in his head. Big old Bear with the broad shoulders and square hands. Bear with the tattoos and big blue eyes and low voice.

Bear who could rebuild a carburetor blindfolded.

Bear who wore the tightest goddamn Levi's on earth.

Bear.

God.

He was obsessed.

And horny.

And...

"Stoney, goddamn it! Pay attention!" Bear spun him around, shook him a little. "You were about to cut the living shit out of your hand. You've had your motherfucking head in the clouds all day. Where *are* you?"

"Mexico."

He got another shake for his trouble, Bear staring at him like he'd lost his mind. "Look, shithead. If you're going to go on vacation, do it without tools in your hands. Are you crazy? What good is Mexico going to be if you're all torn to hell? Are you stupid, honey?"

Was that coconut on Bear's breath?

"Maybe a little, yeah."

"Well, you gotta stop. You gotta stop being stupid right now, man. Life's right HERE!" Bear looked a little pissed, really. He wasn't sure he'd seen that before. Of course, he hadn't seen lots of things before. Like the little palm tree, hanging right in the hollow of Bear's throat.

"Here?"

"Yeah, Stoney, you stupid shithead. Here."

He swore he could see chocolate stained Bear's upper lip, and before he could stop himself, Stoney was leaning up, licking that lip clean.

Oh.

Oh, damn.

Bear was going to fucking kill him.

Kill him.

One huge hand wrapped around his head, pulling him close into a kiss that was so hard and so deep that he forgot how to breathe, holding him tight against that amazing body.

Dude. He wasn't dead.

In fact, he felt really, really fucking alive.

Chapter Eleven

He spent hours focusing on the flavors -- peach, cranberry -- nothing too much, nothing too overboard. Just a push.

A nudge of tart and daring.

Just a tiny bit of magic.

"Are you daydreaming about Mexico again, child?"

James growled at Bryan, fingers stuttering over creating the swirl on top of his truffle, the graceful curl just off-center. "I'm not a child, goddamn it."

"Are you sure? You seem... testy."

He resisted the urge to toss the chocolate at Bryan. His teeth were bared, rumbling softly. "It was a special order, a present from a past customer."

"The biker?"

"No, the mechanic."

"Ah. More tropical flavors?"

"Yeah. I promise to try something else as soon as this order is over." Something simple, perhaps. Dark chocolate.

Something decadent.

Something rich and fine.

Something like that which he was beginning to need.

The bite of the lime on the lip of the bottle still made the corners of his eyes crinkle. Not like it used to at the beginning, but he couldn't stop it. Something in him would never quite get used to Coronas and Dos Equis and the constant grit of sand in his mouth. He'd been down here for going on four years total, and something in him was still rooted in Nacogdoches. Of course, in the beginning it had been sort of funny, something to make them both laugh, Nikki's soft hand on his wrist, curves pressing close as she leaned in to tease. Whisper, her blond curls tickling him something fierce.

He'd lived for her laugh back then -- the full-throated one when she watched those stupid romantic comedies, the giggle when he'd done something the country girl loved and the sophisticated woman didn't want to like, the husky one that he could tempt from her in the sheets, his rough old fingers snagging on her silky belly.

Lots of stuff had been funny then.

Cade traced the edges of his coaster with one finger, pushing the sand around the scratched old wood of the bar. He knew every line carved into this spot -- his spot, at least a few days a month. There was a heart with a G.F. and an X. There was a series of little swirls, almost little curlicues in the wood. Right before him there was a deep cut from a bar fight some twenty years ago. Jeff Johnson had told him the story, fat old trembling hands wiping down the bar one stormy night when the Cave hadn't been making enough to keep the bartenders there.

It hadn't been a special story, really. A sailor came in, made some promises to a pretty little senorita and did her wrong, left her broken and dying in the alleyway out back. Her brother came in from the shrimp boats to find his mama screaming bloody murder and all hell broke loose. Jeff said he hadn't owned the place long, just enough to be the one who had to call the cops when the sailor's hand got chopped off, the brother's machete sinking itself into the bar.

Man, women caused troubles without even trying.

No wonder he'd given them up.

Cade grabbed a couple of peanuts and chewed, the music distant, even as loud as it was. There was only so much cowboy calypso parrothead crap he could listen to before it all became the same damned song anyway.

Good thing it was early still; he worked first shift when he was out on the rig, up before dawn, in bed just after the sun set. Reckoned that made it okay to start drinking at noon on his dry land days. Didn't have to worry about watching too many couples dancing together either, least not until about an hour before he usually gave it up and stumbled home.

Home.

Right.

Well, the little room with the bright purple walls and single bed didn't have too many bugs and a little patio that looked out into the Gulf. Hell, he had a chair parked out there, a coffee can for cigarette butts and a weird little table they'd found in Puerto Penasco a few years ago to hold his beer cans. He was still surprised she hadn't taken it with her.

Guess Dr. Paul wasn't into scorpions made out of bits of broken glass. Oh well, more for him. Fuckhead bastard. He'd have bought it without the damn bug design, just to see that little girl smile and bounce. Hell, where else could a ten-spot get you a table and a grin?

"Hey, Cade. You need anything else? Want a bite of chocolate? It's good shit. Had it shipped in special..."

Cade looked up at the question, meeting dark eyes ringed with the blackest damned eyelashes on earth. Man, he could see himself in there, looking like the pure redneck he was -- red hair clipped down to a flattop, the only bits of him not permanent red the freckles and his own blue eyes. Shit, they did make some pretty fucking men in the world, didn't they? "No, Lucky, thanks. I've probably had enough."

He took a candy, though, humming as the darkness melted straight away in his mouth. Like sex. Like pure, dirty sex with a hint of fruit on the edge. "What kind of chocolate is this?"

"It's handmade. Uh." Lucky looked down, cheeks going a little pink. "Sex on the Beach."

"Hooyah!" He felt his own skin heat a little, so he fished in his pocket for a five, pushed it over. "You're getting off early tonight."

Lucky blinked over at him and chuckled, shook his head as the man tucked the bill in the pocket of his jeans. "No, not really, cowboy. You're just drinking real late. Maybe I should've cut you off already. Good thing there's no booze in the candy."

"Oh, fuck you. You need the tips, yeah?" The smile lit Lucky's face right up, made it look alive as hell, and Cade sort of blinked at himself for noticing. "Is it fixin' to be six already?"

Surely not, although it was trying to get busy in here, for a Wednesday.

"It is. Six o'clock and time for day shift bartenders to go find something decadent for dinner and watch the sunset on the beach."

Cade nodded. He heard that. "I watch every night I'm in. Got a view from my patio."

"Oh, man. That's cool. I live too far in for the view, but close enough that the walk's worth it." Lucky untied the little apron, hung it on a hook and grabbed the tip jar to cash out. That tight little ass perched on a stool across the bar from him, stacking quarters and sorting out pesos. He was wearing a little T-shirt, the edge of the short sleeve sorta tight and dark and fine against tanned muscles that looked warm and right and real.

"Well, I have a one-room deal. I'm not there enough to justify buying another big place." Real. Shit. At least with a guy you knew that shit was made from hard work. With a chick you had to guess. God knew Nikki's weren't real. Hell, that was where the little bitch had met Dr. Paul. Fifteen thousand in tits, another eight in getting the fat sucked out of her ass and into her lips and...

"...to come out and take a walk with me."

Oh, man. Had Lucky just asked him? Damn it. He tried to fake it, looking over, hoping for a

clue.

Instead he got a chuckle, dark eyes dancing. "Quit looking so panicked, Cade. I promise not to serve you warm beer if you say no. I'm queer, not desperate. You just looked like you could use a dinner that wasn't microwave popcorn or Corona."

Well, hell. At least his cheeks were already red enough the blush wouldn't show. "I haven't had a friendly supper in a month of Sundays, Lucky. You sure you want? I mean, I ain't..."

At least he hadn't been swinging that way in a long, long time. Well, in public. On the oil rig was something else. A man had fucking needs after all. Needs that another man could take care of with a quick hand or a hot mouth.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure." He got another smile, another look that sort of settled in him, all hot and shit, like nothing had since Nikki'd walked out and damn, he'd been sitting in this same spot for four days every month for damn near fifteen months watching that same cowboy pouring his Bud and crying in his beer. Why now? He wasn't looking to wake up. He wasn't looking for shit, especially not pretty little cowboy shit. "Let me go wash off some of the beer spray and grab my shit and stuff and we can head over to Lupita's. They got the best goddamn guacamole and a kick-ass little band on tonight."

"Okay, man. I'll be sitting right here." He would, too. He'd sit his ass right here until his cock went down.

Lucky turned all his singles and coins in for bills, laughing and bullshitting with the little mamacita coming on duty, with the barflies. Once that was done, Lucky headed to the stairs, giving him a nice long look at a surprisingly tight, bubble butt held in skin-tight denim. A couple of the regulars called out his name and Lucky laughed, shook it, lifting one arm to wave. That pulled that little sleeve up, giving him a glimpse of ink, black and thick and hot as hell. Jesus, look at that little package -- pure blown sex on a stick, just offered to him.

Damn.

He finished his beer, waving off the little girl who tried to sell him another one. No. No, he'd had enough of that. He didn't think he wanted to be one of them guys that said that it was the liquor. He knew himself well enough to know that if he was swinging back to the south, he wanted to be in his right mind when he did it.

He'd been looking at the bottom of a beer mug for months now, like the whole fucking world was at an end. Cade was thinking he might be looking for something else now.

Something he hadn't thought about looking for, not one bit.

Dude.

Dude.

He'd just asked the pretty cowboy out.

Lucky looked at himself in the mirror, bouncing on his toes.

The pretty, quiet, divorced, straight cowboy.

Who'd said yes.

Oh, God.

He washed his face and changed T-shirts, sucking on one of them fancy-schmancy chocolates he'd got in the mail. Yum. The indigo looked hot on him and his abs were looking particularly tight and hard today.

Hell, that wasn't the only thing that...

"Lucky, amigo. You goin' with el guapo out there? You know he likes the girls, si?" Jorge nudged his arm. "You ought to come wit' me. I will rock you world."

Oh, ew. "Thanks, man, but we're just having supper." Possibly a few drinks.

If he was lucky, a blowjob.

Normal, lighthearted stuff.

"Uh-huh. You watch them oil men. They got a mean streak in 'em."

"Yeah, yeah. They just need some company. They're alone a lot." They drank a lot. They hung out from first to last call and...

Dude. Was he talking himself out of a date and a possible blowjob?

What was *wrong* with him?

He settled his wallet in his back pocket and waved to Jorge. He'd been down here for four years now -- slinging suds and having fun at the beach -- and this little rendezvous was just another blip on the radar.

A pretty cowboy blip, but a blip just the same.

He bebopped back down to the front, his jeans so tight he could barely breathe. Cade was still sitting there, drinking iced water, staring at him. Damn.

Damn, those eyes were like lasers and he felt them, balls-deep. "Hey, man. You hungry?"

"You know it." Cade stood up, nodded. "You promised to show me a good supper and a walk, man. I'm holding you to it."

"I'm your man."

They headed out, Cade bowlegged enough he couldn't pen a hog in a ditch, shorter than Lucky remembered. The hat hid the man's eyes a little, hid Cade's nape from him. Those jeans, though, they didn't hide a thing. Damn. They found a little path right off the sand, meandering, following the ocean. The sun was hanging low and the breeze was coming in. All-in-all, it fucking worked.

"So, Lucky, how long have you been here?"

"Lord, I was actually born down here and then my mom moved us up to Louisiana where she's from. I came back after school and settled down near my dad." Hell, his sister, Lucia, was married to a crab fisherman and his baby brother was at LSU. Mexico was in his blood, though.

Mexico. The salt. The sand.

"Yeah? I know Louisiana. I'm from deep East Texas. I came down for work."

"You heading back there, after the job is over?"

He got a quick, wicked grin. "God willing, the job won't ever be over. So, I gotta know, man, is your name really Lucky?"

"Nope. Chance -- Mamma's Cajun, you know? But I've been called Lucky my whole life." Whether or not the nickname was true was completely up to interpretation.

"Chance, huh? I sorta like it. I'm just Cade, just like my daddy."

"So, you like it? Working the oil rigs? Some guys are just suited to it." Some, on the other hand, weren't.

"I used to like it more. It's fucking hard on a woman, but besides that? The money's good. The work's hard. The time off is here in fucking paradise. What's not to like?"

"I wouldn't know, man. I'm an insulin-dependent diabetic. They don't want me." Besides, he liked his work, his job. His buds.

"Dude. That's a fucking long row to hoe." They found Calle Ocho, turned down toward the restaurant. "You been that way long?"

"From the get-go. It's more an irritation than anything. I got it handled." Hell, he couldn't remember *not* being diabetic. It was just him -- like being dark-headed or dark-eyed or short.

"I'd hate that. I don't do needles and shit." Cade gave him a vaguely horrified look and he knew, just like that, that if this was ever gonna get sexy, he needed to diffuse that shit right now.

"Man, I don't *do* the needles. That's a perfectly good waste of hot sex."

Cade stopped, stock-still there in the road, staring over at him with wide eyes.

Fuck.

Fuck.

He'd blown it. Just like that. Goddamn it. And Cade was a good tipper, too.

Then Cade's laughter filled the air, deep and happy and fine, coming from deep in the belly, bouncing along all the little houses. "Oh. Oh, shit. Lucky. That was funny as fuck!"

Score!

He nodded, nudged Cade's shoulder and they headed on. The mariachi band was playing, the joint beginning to rock. He could smell the mole, the masa, and it made his mouth water.

Mariposa was at the door, looking like a little devil in her red dress as she waved them in. "Lucky! Guapo! I been looking for you."

"I've been working hard. How's 'Uelita?" He did love the little old granny with her shrunken apple cheeks and her fat, fast fingers. He'd spent hours watching her roll tortillas and tell stories about the caballeros. In return, he'd helped her set up her new-fangled margarita machine and all.

"Good. Good. She's making tamales. Come on."

He winked back at Cade, nodded. It felt good, to be walked right in when there was a line and shit.

Cade nodded, wandering in, both of them settling at the tiny, rickety table covered in a bright pink vinyl tablecloth. They always made him think of those weird health films they showed in high school about the smokers' lungs -- too pink and cracked and broken and a little bit spongy. Oh, dude. That was fucking gross. Still, true.

"Cerveza?"

"Joya for me, please."

Cade nodded. "I've had enough for the night. Manazilla, por favor."

He got his pen out, twisted on the tip and dialed up the insulin. "Will it gross you out if I do this here?"

"Huh? No, man. No. You do what you have to."

The heavy, thick chips came with the guacamole and they both settled into it, eating like they were starving. He loved the way the avocado and chiles clung to the chip, sort of grabbed onto the spikes of salt.

It fucking rocked.

They ended up ordering carne guisada, the roasted meat smelling too good as the other customers got their orders. He leaned back after they'd demolished the chips and grinned. "So, you're from the Piney Woods?"

Cade nodded, grinned. "Nacogdoches."

"Oh, yeah? I've been there. Pretty place." He loved that drive -- all big old trees and hills. His mom liked to go during the fall.

"Yeah, but there's nothing to do for work, unless you're at the college or the chicken processing plant. I tell you what, I'd rather die than work processing birds again."

"Dude." He shuddered. "My gran has us do enough of that shit when we head to Guerrero to visit and that's just one or two..." God. Talk about smell. Damn.

"Right. So you know. Just imagine that times a zillion." Cade rolled his eyes, wrinkled his nose. "I mean, damn. That ain't a life. At least not for me."

"No. No, I get that. My brother? He drives a boat and man, I love being on the water, but I don't want to do that. They keep on me about being a beach bum forever, but I like tending bar and hell, it's not a bad job."

"Nope. It keeps you in pesos, makes you happy, I don't see nothing wrong with that." Cade shrugged a little, leaning back in his chair. Lucky watched the light, catching off the bits and pieces of colored glass hung around, when it grabbed the fading sunshine and bounced it off that freckled skin. Man, he wondered if Cade's belly and butt were snow white, wondered if those muscles arms were tanned or just so freckled they looked that way.

"No. No, I don't either. I meet great folks." The guisada came and they both moaned, grinning at each other over the sound. "Dude, that smells like heaven on a plate."

"You fucking know it. I didn't even think I was hungry. I'm still having wet dreams about the goddamn chocolates."

"Good company does that for you." See him, see him remind Cade that this was not *only* because he wanted to get to know the cowboy better.

God, he was a slut.

It sort of worked for him, though.

Hopefully it worked for Cade, too.

Cade rolled his shoulders a little as they got down to the end of their meal, both of them wiping their plates clean and all. Lord, he hadn't had so much fun in a month of Sundays and he was finding himself reluctant to let it go.

"You. You want to go take a walk or something, man?" He didn't need another beer and, truth be told, he was the "bed at nine, up at four" type, so he'd start winding down here shortly, but still.

Still.

Nobody'd smiled on him like that in damn near forever.

"I'd love to take a walk." Lucky paused and grinned. "Or something."

"Or something?" He looked over. "You flirting with me, honey?"

"Been trying to all evening. I thought I was doing it right, but if you have to ask, maybe not..."

He leaned in, fingers bumping Lucky's wrist. "You're brave. You know I used to be married, huh?" He hadn't hunted a man in ages, hadn't wanted to, not really. Of course, he was beginning to believe that he had been hiding away from everything, all of it.

Lucky didn't move his hand away. "It's been mentioned." The tight purple shirt showed off all the man's muscles as he shrugged. "And if I've got the wrong end of it, I'm still good for the walk, for some company. The beach is real pretty in the evening."

"You don't. Have the wrong end, I mean. I just... It's a bit of a challenge down here, yeah?" God, he hadn't talked so much in eons.

Lucky laughed, the sound settling in his belly. "You don't have to tell *me* that."

Lucky dug into his jeans and pulled out his wallet. "Let's go get that walk and share dessert -- I still have a couple of those chocolates left. We can see if or something comes up or not and deal with it then. Que sera sera, right?"

"Works for me. I'm not usually a chocolate man, but I like those." They tasted like here -- tropical and a bit too sweet, with a hint of pure booze.

"I hear you. I've never tasted anything like them." Lucky left some bills on the table and stood. "Let's vamanos."

He added his own pesos and followed, eyes landing again on that amazing, fascinating ass.

Lucky glanced back and caught him looking, started to put a wiggle into it as he walked, soft laughter carrying back to him.

"Oh, now." He scooted forward, swatted that heinie good and hard, chuckling under his breath and moving ahead.

Lucky's chuckles turned to outright laughter. "Woo-eee! There's some places that would mean we're married now."

"God save us from that. You don't know if I fart in bed or pick my teeth." Never. Never getting married. Never again.

Bitch.

The thought of her chilled him, but just a little and only for a minute, then she was gone and all he had to worry on was Lucky's grin.

"I bet you snore and hog all the covers, too."

"I don't snore, so far as I know." The other? Guilty as charged.

"Then you can stay the night." Lucky's eyes went wide and then he ducked his head. "Damn. I didn't mean to get ahead of myself."

Cade grinned, cheeks heating, pleasure filling him right up. "Well, I'm a grown man, honey. I know how to say no."

Lucky chuckled and kicked the sand, looking out over the waves. "Not to mention we could quit beating around the bush. I'm not looking to marry you or nothing like that, Cade, but I sure would like it if we could go back to my place or yours and have a little fun with each other."

"Works for me. I have a sweet little place, just down the beach here." It would be a good walk, a sweet walk.

Lucky beamed at him like he'd just hung the moon or held the ladder for the guy who did. Lord, he didn't know about this flirting thing. "So, where'd the candies come from?"

"A friend in California. He's a bike mechanic. Came down with a friend a few months ago. Swears by 'em."

"No shit? All the way from California and you shared them with me? That's mighty cool."

"My mamma always used to say things shared was things bettered." Lucky dug a squashed box out of his front pocket. "Last two."

"You're a good guy, Lucky." The sweet was a little slick, a little slimy on his fingers, the smell of rum and coconut and pineapple sudden.

Lucky smiled good-naturedly, popping the other chocolate into his own mouth. Suddenly Lucky made the best noises, eyes rolling in his head. Cade's steps stuttered to a stop and he stared, watching Lucky's mouth. The image of those lips around his prick struck him, deep in his belly.

Lucky continued to chew and moan, tongue sliding over his lips. When he was done he gave Cade a look. "What?"

"I..." Well, shit. What the hell was he supposed to say to that?

Hey, honey, I was having a happy blow job fantasy.

Nothing, man. I just want you to suck my cock.

No worries. Wanna fuck?

He just stood there, cheeks blazing. Staring.

Lucky stared back and then he could see the light come on. "Oh." Laughing, Lucky nodded. "Let's go, man. We've had our walk."

"Yeah, I think I'm pretty walked out, man." The sun was slipping down, almost sizzling against the water.

"Then take me home."

He looped one arm in Lucky's, pointing down the beach. It wasn't far, his little place, and they ambled, following the shoreline.

"That really is a beautiful sunset. Maybe the nicest one I've seen." Lucky bumped hips with him. "Course it could be the company."

"Flattery will get you laid, man." His lips snapped shut, eyes going wide. Okay. Well, there you go.

"Have I ever told you you're hot?" Lucky's eyes twinkled at him.

"Nope. You might oughta want to start."

That set Lucky to laughing, the sound full-bodied, real.

He reached out, after looking all around, making sure they were alone enough and that it was dark enough that it didn't matter. He just needed one touch before they went to the house and did what folks did. Just a touch on that flat belly that he'd looked at for months and months and only just seen.

That sweet belly rippled beneath his fingers, Lucky making a low noise, a little like one of them sea birds, and damn if it didn't make him smile. "Careful now. I might not be able to control myself."

"I don't believe that. I don't believe that a bit." Of course, it didn't matter, right now, what he believed, not with the flavor of coconut in his mouth.

"Take me inside, Cade. What I want's not something to be done in public."

"No. No, what we gotta take care of is for closed doors, swear to God." He led Lucky on, whistling a little. Yeah, closed doors and a nice soft bed and possibly more than a few hours.

They wandered together, the heat of the sand warming their feet, his little house sitting right there. Waiting.

Lucky pulled his T-shirt over his head, smoothing it down over his belly. He looked in the mirror, making sure he looked hot. Wooooe, he did. Good enough to eat and he knew just the person he wanted doing the eating.

He headed down the stairs to the bar, eyes automatically going to Cade's spot, empty for twenty-five days now. Of course, this time there was a nasty, thin-lipped blonde sitting there, scowling, looking like...

He watched as Cade walked up and she threw herself at him, crying and clinging.

Well, shit. Lucky took a wild guess and pegged her as the ex.

He stood there, watching as Cade put those square hands on her hips, turned her away and pushed her, none too gently, toward the door.

Huh. That wasn't too friendly. Lucky slowly headed toward Cade.

The blonde snarled and threw a bottle at Cade, the glass slamming against the man's shoulder. He watched Jorge, the big bouncer start growling and he headed over, grabbing Cade's arm. "Out the back, man. Just in case."

Cade chuckled at him, nodded. "Come on, man. She's got nothing to hear that I need to say. Or, vice-versa. Whatever."

"She's a hell of a hello and welcome home." He had a welcome home of his own planned.

"She's a harpy. I missed you." One long arm settled on his waist. "Been keeping busy?"

They headed toward Cade's place. "Yep. Worked a lot of shifts. Earned myself some time off." Four days of it, in fact.

"No shit? I got three weeks. Wanna?" The sun was shining, Cade never looking back toward the bar, his ex.

"I wanna. I really do wanna." He put his arm around Cade's shoulders and they headed toward the beach.

"Good deal." Cade's hip bumped his and he got a grin. "I don't suppose you got any of those chocolates, huh?"

"Nope, but I got the address of the place from my buddy, and I got something better than chocolate."

"Damn, there's something *better*? Man, this I gotta see."

"We've gotta find you a mirror then." He hoped that wasn't too cheesy, but hell, he'd just spent twenty-five days missing this man.

"I got one; you can see it by the shower. Come on, honey. Take me home."

He chuckled at the soft demand, Cade's little house right there, Lucky's swim trunks from this morning hanging to dry.

"Welcome home, babe."

"Thanks, honey."

The house smelled like coconut oil, even after they shut the door behind them.

"James, I need..." Bryan stopped, looked over at his apprentice. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." The man was hiding something. Another private client, perhaps?

The thought left him cold, almost sick. Still it was about time; it was time for James to fly. He knew it.

He knew.

But.

Still.

There was a hole, sitting in the center of his chest, growing with every step James took from him. So long he'd waited for someone to fill the hole that...

No.

No, he was an old man, now, and James deserved more. Deserved a life.

Love.

Pleasure.

Happiness.

Everything that he couldn't possibly give.

He turned without another word, the weight of the world sitting upon his old shoulders like fading magic.

"Don't you want to know what I'm doing, Boss?" James' voice was soft, husky, more than a little sad.

He shook his head, heading for the walk-in.

"No, James. I don't believe I do."

The door closed behind him with a click, leaving him in the damp, dark cold.

Chapter Twelve

"This is your last week as apprentice."

The words echoed in the kitchen, ringing a little, making him dizzy. "What?"

"You don't need me anymore, James. You have clients, you have skills, you have the magic." Bryan was gray -- hair and skin and eyes, just a faded shell. James was afraid to reach out and touch him, fearing that his hand would simply pass through and all he would feel would be air.

"Boss, I need this place." He needed Bryan, more than Bryan could understand, more than anyone could understand.

"It's yours." A sheaf of paper was pulled out of nowhere, popping into existence. "I have a few special orders to finish, that's all."

"What?" That dizziness was back, stronger than ever. "What did you say?"

Bryan's eyes were quiet, sad, painfully kind. "I'm thinking that it's been too long since I did something simple, something traditional. Perhaps a dark truffle. I have a request from someone."

He watched as Bryan's mouth kept moving, lips making shapes and noises. It didn't make sense. It didn't make any sense at all. "Haven't I done a good job? Haven't I been good for you?"

The words stopped as he spoke, those gray eyes -- were Bryan's eyes always gray? -- suddenly sharp and sure. "You? James, you are..." Thin hands fluttered, spread like dove's wings. "Working with you has been one of the great joys in my long life."

"Then why?"

"Because it is your time, James. Because I care for you and it is your time to fly."

"Oh, bullshit. Don't do this. Don't just walk away because you think you're too old and I'm too young and because..."

"Enough." The word was heavy with something beyond a simple request, pregnant with a power that James had only seen Bryan hint at and his words dried up in his throat, squatting there like desiccated toads.

One wrinkled hand cupped his cheek. "You have learned everything I can teach you. Now, let me work."

"I hate you, you know that, right?"

Kim looked over at Greg, admiring the long, dark hair, the broad shoulders. Shit, the man even looked good going out the door, the last of a set of boxes held in the man's arms. "Yeah, I know."

"You don't even care that I'm leaving you, do you? You just don't fucking pay attention."

What was he supposed to say? After eight months of living together and three months of knowing that it wasn't going to work -- maybe four, but who was counting -- that he needed something that Greg didn't want to give him and Greg wanted something Kim wasn't, they didn't even fight about it.

He had just shrugged when Greg asked him if he wanted rent money or extra room. He hadn't cared.

He wasn't sure if he was going to start.

"I'm sorry, man." It was a lie and it sounded like one.

"Not yet, but you're going to be."

Great. Threats.

He fought not to roll his eyes and spent a few minutes trying to decide whether to keep up with the argument or just go for the killing blow now before shit got well and truly started.

"Don't, okay? It wasn't a great love affair, not for either one of us, so quit playing the wounded lover. I know about you and Tom. Hell, I wish you the best." He'd very rarely liked pussyfooting around in stuff like this.

Greg went pale, then flushed a deep, dark red.

Yeah.

The keys clattered on the floor and the door shut and that was that.

Boom.

Score one for him, he guessed. Kim sighed, plopped down on the couch. Damn. He flipped open his phone, hit "1" on speed dial.

"Is it over?" Andy's voice sounded happy, as familiar as old jeans, his best friend from school picking up before the first sounds of "Texas Fight" completed on the man's phone.

"What? No 'hi, Kim'?"

"Nope. Is he gone?" Asshole.

"Yeah. Just left with the last box. Wanna..."

"Come over? You know it. I'll bring the beer; you order the pizza. I got a couple of movies from Netflix."

The phone went dead, and he chuckled. Andy never was one for long, involved conversation. The Pie Palace was number two on his phone -- Kim guessed it said something that Greg was number five, after work and the Amazing Wok of Doom.

"So, is it over?"

"Hi, Dan." He let his voice rise into a patently false falsetto. Dude, could you have a true falsetto? Would that make it a truesetto? Where the fuck was Andy with his beer? "Welcome to the Pie Palace, home of the perfect pie. Can you help me?"

Dan snorted, and all of the sudden Kim could see the round-faced man, crossed eyes rolling. "Like I don't know what you want. One no sauce, double cheese, double pepperoni. One with Italian sausage, mushrooms and green olives for Andy. Did you finally do it?"

"Yeah. He's gone. It wasn't fun."

"Never is, man. Never is." Dan would know. The man had three ex-wives, ten kids and another girlfriend as swollen as a watermelon. There was something about the man that made women stupid.

He didn't get it.

"Can you send something sweet, too?"

"Ice cream? Chocolate? Apple pizza?"

"Chocolate anything. Andy's bringing the beer."

"You got it, friend. You want me to bring it after my shift? I'm off in two hours..."

Kim thought about that a minute, then shook his head and smiled, even though Dan couldn't see it. He loved Dan's way -- all gruff and rough -- but right now he needed someone to tell him he'd done the right thing and that he wasn't a solid-gold asshole and that things were gonna be cool. There was only one someone who was any good at that and that asshole was coming over with beer and movies. "Just send it, huh? You come out tomorrow and I'll fire up the grill."

"You got it, dude. Katy, you know, she's all hormones and swelling and shit. Fucking babies."

"Yeah, yeah. You know what causes that, Danny-boy. If you'd come over to the dark side with me..."

Dan made gagging noises and hung up, making it so he was laughing when Andy opened the door, let himself in.

"Dude, I have to tell you, you sound absolutely devastated." Two six-packs of Bud were set on the table, along with three little red DVD envelopes and a gold box. If those were rubbers, Kim was going to kill the man. "Heart-broke."

"Suck my ass, dickhead." He reached for the box.

Andy laughed and swatted his hands, bright red curls bobbing, those Heineken-bottle eyes rolling at him, just like they always did when he'd said something his mother would say was "particularly tacky, young man". "You wish, man. Where's the pizza?"

"Christ, I just called Dan. It's on the way." What's in the box?

"Jesus, didn't you tell him to hurry? I'm starving."

"You're always starving. What's in the box?" There, he asked.

"Dessert. I brought *Die Hard* and *The Matrix*. Good breakup movies."

"Dessert? I ordered something chocolate from Dan." At least it wasn't *Steel Magnolias*.

"Something chocolate could be dangerous. Besides, this'll go along with. Want a beer?" Andy reached out, grabbed two bottles and the gold box went tottering on the edge of the coffee table.

Kim made a grab for it, fingers crushing the box a little, the smell of chocolate hitting him right in the nose. Oh, man. That smelled *good*.

"Dude, don't crush the fucking things! They cost the earth!" Andy caught the box before it fell, the candy rattling inside.

"Fancy chocolates?" Now that was a little weird.

"I thought beer and chocolate was more your speed than champagne and cigars."

"Cigars are for babies. I just got rid of a hundred and eighty pounds. Gimme the candy."

"Fuck off."

"Fucker."

"Fuck you."

"You wish."

"Yeah." Andy's nod made him stop, stare.

Wait.

No way.

No.

He mentally whacked himself for being an idiot.

Andy stared him down then held the box out. "Chocolate?"

"Uh. Yeah. Okay." He took one, popped it in his mouth before he said something stupid. Something like -- who are you and what did you do with Andy?

Oh.

Oh, fuck him raw.

Chocolate.

It was dark -- almost not sweet at all, almost like bitter sex, melting on his tongue and burning all the way down, coating his throat. He forgot, for just a second, about Andy, about Dan, about pizza, and about Greg. All he knew was this sudden, hot bliss and he moaned.

When he opened his eyes he met Andy's, the full lips smudged with chocolate, tongue flicking out to clean them. "Dude. Those rock."

Andy nodded, grinned sort of like a monkey. "See? Good shit."

"Uh-huh. Good." His fucking dick was hard, it was so good.

Of course, so was Andy's. Jesus. He was going to have to reboot his brain. He didn't *look* at Andy's package, even if it was dressed in tight jeans.

"You want more?"

Kim blinked again, staring some. "Huh?"

"More. Do you want some more?" It wasn't a question. Andy was staring at him. Just staring at him.

Like really staring.

"Uh-huh." He so did.

Want more.

Andy held out one of the candies, dropped it in his hand where it made a dull thump. They were heavier than they looked, dense and rich and thick.

"Where'd you get them?"

"Place downtown."

"They're good."

Andy nodded. "Better than sex."

Kim shrugged. "Maybe. Better than any I've had in a while."

He popped the chocolate in his mouth, biting down, letting the rich, dark bitterness hit him again. Fuck, he was going to buy a case of those, keep them in his briefcase to lob at grumpy assholes on the street. Having a bad day. Have a ball of pure bliss.

"Maybe you're having sex with the wrong people."

He stared over, eyes feeling like they were going to pop out of their sockets.

"Maybe you ought to try having sex with someone who likes you."

Oh, man. He must look like one of those Pomeranian dogs.

"Maybe you ought to try having sex with, say, me."

Later, much later, like years later, he'd laugh about his reaction -- inhaling in shock, the truffle shooting to the back of his throat, the sweet coating sticking to him as he choked on the chocolate, grabbing his throat, eyes feeling like they were going to bug right out of his head and roll on the floor -- which would have sucked because he was queer, not a girl, so there hadn't been vacuuming in at least a month.

"Shit! Shit, Kim!" Andy was screaming things at him, whacking his back so hard his shoulder blades screamed, just like he would if he could. He stumbled forward and Andy grabbed him around the waist, dragged him right up close and squeezed.

Hard.

The chocolate shot out of his mouth like a bullet, squirting across the room and hitting the wall with a splat.

He hung there in Andy's arms, panting and blinking, staring at the wall and the little dark spot on it that was kind of mingling in with all the little light spots in his eyes and he did his damndest to catch his breath, let his lungs fill up with air.

Anything.

All the time, Andy held on, strong arms holding him up, belying any kind of thought of the man really being a chemist -- a fucking *chemist* who'd come out three years after graduation, followed his happy ass to the West Coast and stuck and stayed after all that time in Austin -- first in the dorms at Jester, then in a shitty little walk up apartment four blocks off the Drag. His best friend, who'd never flinched when he came out, never said a thing when things got weird with this guy or that guy. Never worried when motherboards came flinging out of the little bullshit alcove they called the Cave.

Andy, who was holding him, lips on the back of his neck, so soft, so hot, kissing him, over and over, whispering against his skin. Saying things like, "Oh, God. Baby, come on now. Breathe. Breathe, Kim. I got you. Come on. Come on now. In and out. Please, baby, don't be a dick. I got you. You can't choke to death now, you finally got rid of Greg and I'm here and there's pizza coming."

Andy who slept in ratty old Homer Simpson boxers and tube socks when it was cold outside. Andy who didn't like beets and liver and was allergic to citric acid and had a scar on his jaw from getting into a fight with a jock in Dallas at the Cotton Bowl who called Kim a chink when he wasn't even Chinese.

His Andy.

He'd finally gotten a full, deep breath in when Andy started rocking him, back and forth.

It was weird.

Weird and a little hot.

Which made it more weird.

Christ.

They ended on the sofa, his bony ass in Andy's lap, those kisses still... being kisses.

"Andy?"

"Yeah?"

"What are we doing here?"

He felt Andy smile a little, shrug. "You choked. I'm comforting you."

"Comforting me."

Andy nodded, smiled at him, cheeks heating a little bit. He knew what this part was. This was the part where Andy would pull away and they'd both be weird for a little while and he'd go get a paper towel out of the kitchen and clean up the candy. He'd tease Andy about shocking him and making him waste a perfectly good candy. Andy'd tease him back about being a lightweight, then they'd sit on opposite ends of the sofa and stare at each other and drink beer until someone showed with the pizza.

Maybe he should tell Dan to come on.

Then Andy's hand slipped down, brushed the waistband of his jeans, actually touching him, feeling him, drawing little circles in the small of his back.

"Are you sure? It feels a little like seducing me." Not that Andy ever had before, so maybe Kim was just losing his mind. Because Andy wasn't gay, and if Andy was, which he wasn't, then Andy wasn't into skinny guys like him with bad attitude and shitty relationship skills and damn, that would hurt worse than wanting Andy if Andy wasn't gay. So Andy wasn't seducing him. Not at all. Because he never had. Not once. Hell, the first time he'd made an advance, just a little one, Andy'd turn tail and run all the way to Arizona for spring break. He'd never tried again.

Never.

"Is it working?" Andy kept on holding on, kept rocking him.

"Huh?" Kim's brain skittered, wild thoughts thrown completely off balance.

"Focus, baby." Wait, when did Andy start calling him baby? Baby was something you called someone you were fucking... He got a little shake, Andy rumbling a bit. "Seducing you. Is it working? It's sort of important."

"Should it be? Working, that is? Not important. I didn't think that..."

He got another shake and then strong fingers pressed against his lips, surprising him and shutting him right up. "Just don't. Don't think for a little while. Let me do it. I'm way better at it than you are."

Andy's hand moved his chin, their eyes meeting and he stopped, stared into those too pretty for color TV eyes.

"Andy?"

"Yeah, baby. Shut up. Just for a little while. I'll help clear shit up for you."

Andy's mouth crashed down on his and Kim felt the world shift under his feet. It wasn't a big shift, but it was enough, it was vital, and he'd never wonder again, whether Andy's kiss would be sloppy or hard or rough or gentle. He'd never worry about what Andy tasted like because he knew now. He knew bone deep what chocolate and hops and almost fifteen years of waiting tasted like.

It tasted like coming home.

Kim reached up, hands wrapping around Andy's shoulders, tugging the man closer, legs sliding over Andy's thighs as he moved to straddle. He discovered many things in that simple motion -- first, that chemists who worked out a lot had big thighs. Two, when you were a little Korean guy who was way higher on the geek scale than the bad-assed Karate scale, spreading that far burned a little, especially when you discovered that the muscle-bound chemist had a good-sized, raging hard-on.

Three, that little burn was incredibly erotic.

Like desperately.

Like whimper and arch like a whore erotic.

He wasn't sure this was a particularly good idea at all. Hell, Kim wasn't sure that this wasn't a monumental mistake, but every time he opened his mouth, Andy was right there, tongue sliding against his, hands running up and down his back. Words were whispered, words that were meant for his heart, not his head, so he didn't need to hear them at all. He felt them.

Andy's eyes weren't beer-bottle green this close up. They were a mixture of a bright grassy green and a pale amber color, with the littlest flecks of blue in there and, if you had asked him later, he'd deny either paying attention or remembering or being enough of a girl to care, but at the time, no one was going to ask, so he didn't worry on it much.

In fact, by the time that the pizza guy rang the bell, he didn't have to worry on it at all.

James sat in the kitchen, staring into the darkness, keys in hand.

It wasn't supposed to end this way.

He'd seen Bryan's face as the man left. He'd seen the defeat. He'd known that he was losing; he was losing this one last chance for something he'd been desperately trying to have for so long.

He slapped the tears away from his face, only noticing them when they started to evaporate and leave cold tracks. No.

No.

It wasn't supposed to end this way.

It wasn't supposed to have an unhappy ending, damn it.

The hero of the fucking story was supposed to **win**.

He stood up, put the keys in his pocket and took off his apron, hung it on the hook.

He had to do some shopping.

He had cooking to do.

It wasn't going to end this way, no matter what that stubborn, stupid, beautiful, self-destructive, lost old man thought.

Not if he had anything to say about it.

Chapter Thirteen

Bryan stood in front of the store -- the building that used to be his life, his home, his world and now it was nothing and not nothing all at once -- the night falling around him like a blanket. Forty years he'd worked in this building alone. He and Alan had worked it years before that. The magic that had kept him young was dissipating, slipping away from him like sand between outstretched fingers. His clothes hung on him -- silk skimming his hollowed chest, only the tightened belt keeping his slacks on his hips. It was going to be over, very soon.

He was ready.

He was packed, his life sealed away and trapped inside dozens of corrugated cardboard boxes, the tan blocks waiting in a pile. Some marked "charity", some marked "store", some marked simply, "James".

He'd fully intended to simply walk away, to turn and stride away from this life, stumbling headlong into the next, but his body was weak. His heart was weaker. He'd pulled years of defenses and hexes and bits of hopes and dreams from the distant corners of the shop, leaving in place simple things -- the bond that he and James had forged, the hope for James' future.

The knowledge that this was a good place, a right place that was now in good hands.

Very good hands.

He'd fully intended to disappear like a thousand memories and a hundred lovers and...

He sighed, shook his head.

And all it had taken was a single note from his former apprentice.

"Bryan. One dinner. One. To remember. Please. J."

It was the "please" that had caught his attention, held it. That single word had torn at his heart, left him gasping with denial that he would never again hear that soft laughter.

He hadn't answered the note, but he hadn't refused.

He hadn't had the heart.

Now here he stood, staring at the window into darkness, the streetlamps making it hard to see inside, even though he knew exactly where every single bit of equipment was, every display case, each counter.

Bryan stared at his reflection, at the odd juxtaposition of seeing himself on the outside of his own home, only overlaid upon the solid truth within. For a moment, he looked almost young again, but only for a heartbeat and his age returned, his visage like a death's mask, mocking him.

Gray.

He'd gone gray.

Perhaps James had not waited for him. Perhaps he was too late.

Perhaps he was an old, old fool.

It did not escape him that men were expected to get wiser as they aged, expected to...

Bryan turned to leave.

The door opened, James standing there, smiling at him. "Are you going to wait out there forever, or are you coming in?"

"I wasn't sure you'd..."

"Nonsense. You knew I'd be here. Waiting. Come and eat. There's wine."

James held one hand out, the street light shining on the tanned skin and he met the bright blue eyes. "White or red?"

"Red, of course. There's beef and a special treat."

He let himself be drawn into the shop, the scents of chocolate heady, familiar. There was a simple table covered in a thick white table cloth, simple plates accentuated with candles.

Candles.

The candlelight seemed to fill the room with a blessed warmth, the pale pillars surrounding the room. He was surprised that he hadn't noticed them before, but he hadn't.

He hadn't noticed them at all.

"You glamoured the window."

"I did. You've taught me many lessons." James led him to the table, hand strong, sure, insistent. "Sit."

The chairs were strangely familiar as he sat, but he could not place them. It didn't matter, they cushioned his bones, surrounded him with luxury and the scent of sage and cedar and roses. Bryan relaxed into them, the candles making the so-familiar shop seem odd, a touch surreal.

"I made something simple. Beef. Wine. Onions. Potatoes." A plate was placed in front of him, the food substantial, simple, the scents perfect -- savory and rich and somehow complementing the pervasive smell of cocoa that permeated everything.

"It looks wonderful."

"Then eat." James sat, poured them both some wine. "Are you ready to move on?"

"I think so, yes." Each time he said it, it became a bit easier, more true. The beef melted in his mouth; his groan surprised him. He had forgotten the pleasure of eating in the recent past.

"That's good news."

He dropped his fork, surprised. "It is?"

James nodded, hair bouncing as he did. "It is. You've been waiting for too long. Worrying."

"Nonsense. That's what old men do. We wait. We worry." Did James want him to leave so much? His spotted hands began to tremble.

"Bullshit." The single word was sharp, vulgar, set down between them and then so-casually swept away. "Eat. Dessert is the best course."

Well, of course it would be. There was no question of that.

He picked his fork up again, the tines separating the flesh of the meat.

There was very little said during the meat course beyond "pass the wine" and "thank you". The sounds of their forks clinking on the plates was comfortable and Bryan held the experience close.

It was rare that you knew when something was going to be the last time.

Finally the meat was gone, the roasted potatoes picked over, the wine sipped away. James stood and took the plates, leaving him in the quiet room, only a distant hint of music from somewhere to disturb his thoughts.

Dessert arrived -- a single truffle for each of them, sitting upon a candied violet, a sprinkle of turbinado sugar crowning it.

He had taught his James well.

Bryan nodded once, picked the sweet up and lifted it to his nose. Anise.

"Licorice?"

One of James' eyebrows lifted and he picked up his own sweet. "To endings and beginnings."

"Indeed." He bit into the candy, the flood of herbs and magic pouring into him in a sudden rush. "James?"

"Shh." The other half of his candy was taken from his hand, pressed into his lips, intoxicating him.

The kiss that followed stunned him into complete immobility.

James' lips were soft, heated where they pressed against his own thin ones and he meant to pull away, but it was quite impossible, so he opened, moaning as a soft tongue followed the flavor of the chocolate into his mouth.

Too old. He was...

The lights of the candles seemed to grow dim for a long moment, the flames sputtering and sparkling around them. It mattered very little because that kiss stole his focus, forced him to lean closer. Fingers tangled in his hair, drawing his head back as a warm weight landed in his lap. "Bryan."

He blinked, shook his head a bit as his vision seemed to blur, then clear.

He knew that voice.

Silly man. Of course he knew the voice. It was James. His James. He would know his apprentice -- former apprentice's -- voice anywhere.

The kiss came again, this one harder, more definite, less tentative. Long fingers cupped the back of his head, tilted him so that the kiss could go deeper. The gray emptiness in him receded, pushed away by the thrust and press of James' -- Alan's -- tongue into his lips.

"Bryan." He forced his eyes open at the sound of his name, the room so dim now that he could only see the outline of the man on his lap. The silhouette seemed to shimmer, alter ever so slightly. "Bryan, please. Look at me."

"I am." Wasn't he?

"No. *See* me." These words were stronger, the weight of magic behind them and he stared into long-beloved eyes, seeing...

Seeing something...

"Alan?" Was that Alan inside there?

His Alan.

Something inside his chest cracked, the heart there flashing with a bright, overwhelming pain that disappeared once James' hands touched him.

James' -- Alan's face broke into a grin, the smile almost burning him. "It took you long enough."

"But... why didn't... Why have you..." Why had Alan let him hurt so long?

The look on his lover's face was incredibly joyful, gentle, eyes searching his face as if to memorize every line.

"For you. I came back for you. You know the price of that."

Slumber. Forgetfulness. In order to return, you sacrificed your past. He knew.

Why hadn't he known?

As if James' had picked the words from the air, Alan answered. "You didn't want to. You were very busy, wallowing in your pain. It's become a bit of an addiction, here."

"Not boss?"

"No. Not anymore. You gave that away." One hand slid down his stomach, down to settle in his lap, touching his cock, which was responding, eager. Wanton. "What else are you willing to give away?"

He gasped, shocked. No one had touched him there in... He was old.

The hand squeezed a bit. "You aren't old."

"Nonsense, I'm twice..."

Another squeeze, this time the touch was accompanied by a rush of power. "Not old."

His cock filled with a speed that astonished him, flesh leaping, pushing up into that touch that was at once new and deliciously familiar. The motion was easy, simple. Painless.

"Are you so sure?"

"Yes."

The candlelight flared and Alan leaned forward, taking his mouth with a wildness that should have ached, should have bruised, but instead renewed him, excited him unbearably. He reached out, hands pushing away the silken shirt, exposing the lean body for him, nails dragging down the well-formed torso.

So lovely.

So incredibly beautiful.

His fingers explored each newly bared bit of skin, fingertips delighting in rediscovering each sensitive spot, each bundle of nerves.

James reached out, began to unbutton his blouse and Bryan groaned, grabbed at his lover's wrists. "Alan. Love. No. I've become old while you were gone. So old."

"Idiot." The word was fond, amused. "I've been with you, all along, and you've not gotten old. Not at all."

The edges of his shirt were grabbed and Alan gave a mighty tug, buttons popping and plinking on the tile floor. He looked down, eyes landing on...

On...

His chest was full, muscled, the smattering of hair there pitch black against tanned skin. Young skin.

His skin.

"How..."

Alan chuckled. "You know how. Don't you believe in all the things you taught me?"

"Yes. Yes, of course, but..."

"But nothing. All you have to do, chere, is believe." James stood and stripped, one hand held out to him. "Believe, Bryan. Believe for us."

Belief was, at once, the most difficult and simplest thing he'd ever accomplished. After all, it was his greatest wish, his biggest fear.

"Tell me." Bryan reached up, took Alan's hand, his heavy black braid falling over his shoulder with a comforting weight as he let his lover haul him from the chair. Their chairs. From the first house they'd lived in together. He remembered. "What was in the truffle?"

"Absinthe, of course. You needed..." Those eyes laughed at him as he stepped from his slacks.

"Release."

Alan shook his head, chuckled. "To remember the sound of beating wings."

"Green fairies."

"Come with me, love. We have so much to see."

"Are you sure?" He needed to know that Alan wished this. Needed this as badly as he did.

"I am."

The candlelight flared again, one last time, and they laughed. Left.

Together.

Epilogue

David wandered down the street, rolling his shoulders. Ryan was gone. There was nothing to be done about it now. Nothing at all.

He just had to learn to cope.

So involved in his own litany of woe-is-me, he never even saw the person he slammed into, full-force. He grabbed the man before they both fell, steadying them both before letting the thin arms go. Then he bent to pick up the easel that had clattered to the ground. "God. Sorry. I was lost in my own world."

"That's okay. They know you there." A pointed, angular face stared up at him, green eyes twinkling from behind a heavy fringe of coal black bang. The smile was... breathtaking. "I was just opening my new shop."

He nodded before he really heard what the man was saying, then he stopped. Opening. Shop. Right. Pay attention. He looked at the sign -- simple and wooden, swinging on chains with a single word carved in. Bittersweet.

"Candy?" Hadn't there been a candy shop here? He thought there might have been. His ex had liked chocolate, he thought.

"Coffee. I just reopened the space. It's my first day in business."

"Yeah?"

The man nodded. "The old man who owned the place passed on. I'm family." One hand was held out. "Byron."

"David." Electricity seemed to shoot up his arm.

"It's nice to meet you, David. Would you like to be my first customer? I make a mean latte and my sister makes all the pastries from scratch. They're quite magical."

The little bell above the door rang as David led him inside.