

THE LIES WE TELL

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Original Slash Yaoi Fiction

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Valentine York kept his life safe, simple and easy to deal with. He liked it that way, liked knowing everyday would be like every other day. He had his life planned out, the woman he'd marry, they home they'd share. Until his sister and her family are killed and his fiancé dumps him and his plans fall apart.

Gavan Maddocks' life is complicated. It takes skill to balance his days between work and his boyfriend, oh and his half crazy cousin, Tristram, too. Trist is an unstable handful but the cousin's lives are entwined.

When Val stumbles across Gavan and the controlled chaos of his cousin Trist one rainy, cold night, truths will be spoken and answers will be forced from darkness into light.

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Part One

It was only fitting that the cold rain was turning into sleet and freezing onto the pavement. The thin, slick ice made the walk home treacherous but Val didn't own a car and didn't want to try to hail a cab. He pulled the collar of his coat up around his neck and hunkered down trying to stay warm. It just figured, cold, ugly, night to a cold, ugly day.

His mood was almost foul enough to carry him straight home but it was Thursday and the bar was halfway between the hospital and his apartment building. It only made sense to stop in for a pint, warm up and thaw out for a bit. He could catch the scores on the television over the bar and the beer would make the day a little easier to brush aside. His feet knew what was good for him, even if his mind didn't and when he grew closer to the Irish pub, he found himself turning down the street instead of continuing on toward his apartment.

Val had never been a drinker and had never truly hung out in a bar. He had never really been comfortable in a crowd and couldn't stand drunks and on the rare occasion in college when friends had dragged him along drinking, he'd found the bars crawling with both. It was only by chance, on a day months ago when he'd been walking around the neighborhood trying to think, that he'd turned into O'Malley's. It was dim inside, but not at all dark. The bar was paneled in wood, dark and warm. In a back room were pool tables but he never played, he stayed at the bar.

It was a lovely bar, cherry wood, polished to a high shine. A brass railing lined it, glowing with the care given to it. It stood inside the main room, dominating it. The glow from the liquor bottles sent warm tones about the patrons. There were always peanuts in bowls waiting to be eaten and comfortable stools to rest on.

The entire pub felt welcoming. It wasn't what he'd expected. There had only been a handful of

people inside, all looking like working men like himself on their way home. There were no insipid, date hungry, women clawing for attention in too tight jeans and gaudy make up. No one ever bothered him, he was just allowed to sit and drink his pint in peace. At the most he'd grunt monosyllable conversations to the occasional neighbor along the bar and he was left alone otherwise.

He'd liked the place so much he'd been making it a regular habit to stop in for a pint on Tuesday and Thursday nights. Not every Tuesday and Thursday but more often than not and never on any other day. He liked that it took time for himself, liked that no one knew he went there, liked that he had discovered it after, not before, that awful night six months before.

This Thursday night was no different then other Thursday nights except the weather had kept the normally thin crowd even thinner. That was fine with him, he shook out the damp from his coat and made his way to 'his' bar stool. It never felt the same if someone was sitting in his spot, which was totally idiotic but he tried not to think too hard over it. He pulled his coat off, dropped it on the barstool beside his and sat down.

He glanced to the young man behind the bar, a face he knew but had no name to go with it. The twenty something was good looking, in a slick, stylish way and sometimes seemed a little put out that Val hadn't ever shared his life story with him. The man had tried to get him talking, but Val came here for silence, not to share his thoughts. They exchanged nods now and the younger man produced the pint of beer without having to be asked.

Val took a sip, was suddenly glad he'd stopped as he started to warm up from the night's chill, and turned his eyes up to the TV. The basketball game was playing but it wasn't Val's team so he read the ticker below trying to spot the scores. His eyes hurt, everything felt strained and worn out.

Beside him, glass clinked together and Val glanced over. Two barstools down sat a fellow that he again knew by face but not by name. Close to thirty, dressed normally in jeans and a t-shirt or a button down, Val always had the sense that he should know the man from somewhere but he could never place it. He'd chalked it up to the fact that the man had one of those faces. Ordinary, neither ugly nor handsome, there was a dependable quality to his appearance but not one of his features truly stood out.

Only tonight he stood out, not for his looks but for how he looked. His head was resting on one of his hands, the elbow braced on the cherry wood of the bar. An expression of decided unhappiness had twisted up his face and he was toying with one of four empty shot glasses. That alone was odd enough, given he'd never seen the man drink anything more than a beer or two.

He weighed everything in his head and figured that the string of meaningless conversations they'd had over the weather, politics, sports and life in general allowed him to disturb the man.

"Hey, awful cold out tonight." Val started, nodding to the man but glancing away to check the game.

The fellow beside him grunted. "Yeah, cold."

"I don't mean to be rude, but you look like how I feel. Did your day go as well as mine?" Val cracked open a peanut shell and popped the nut into his mouth. He wasn't overly fond of peanuts but he liked the process of shelling them.

"Don't know, did your love life fall into the shitter today to?"

He took a swallow of the beer to wash the peanut down and nodded. "Sort of." He reached over offered his hand. "I'm Val."

The man looked a little surprised but accepted the hand. "I know."

"Have we met? I keep thinking that I know your face."

"Naw, we haven't met. I'm Gavan Maddocks. Don't strain yourself, I'm an OR nurse over at Harbor Mercy. I've seen you in hallways." Gavan started stacking his empty shot glasses into a pyramid.

Val nodded. "I don't get over your way much."

That earned a shrug. "So what happened to ruin your day?"

How many people had he interacted with, colleagues and the like, during the day and not one of them had bothered to notice let alone ask Val if something was wrong. There was something comforting about the bar, something that made it okay to talk and ask questions that would otherwise be far too personal.

"My fiancée called off our wedding, permanently."

That made Gavan sit up a little straighter. "Ouch, I'm sorry. Where were you going? Toronto or Boston?"

Val sipped his beer. "Her family is just across the state line so we were going to just have it here."

That made Gavan wonder if he was far drunker than he'd thought. "She? Wow, okay, so did she know? About you? Cause, I mean, trust someone that's batted for both teams, women are clever and if she didn't know about you, I can see why she might be pissed."

"I'm sorry, what?" He tried to gauge how drunk the man across from him was because he wasn't making sense.

"Did she find out you were gay?"

Val choked on his swallow of beer, grateful it hadn't been a peanut. "What? I'm not gay."

Gavan glanced around to make sure he was in the right place. "Yeah, cause so many straight men hang out in a gay bar."

"This is a gay bar?" Val knew his eyes had gone wide but he glanced around and really looked. There wasn't any women in the bar, not just missing the tarts, there wasn't any. The few men were clumped together in small groups, talking softly together.

The look on Val's face was so surprised that Gavan laughed. "Oh, you really didn't know?"

Val shook his head and hoped he didn't blush. "Should I go?"

"Are you sure you're straight?"

That wasn't a question Val was ever willing to discuss. "I've a fiancée. Or, I had one, don't know what I have now. Should I go? I mean, I'm..."

"Don't worry about it, you're going to disappoint a couple of guys but it's cool. You're not in here on weekends, I'd avoid it if I were you. You're cute enough you'll get your ass pinched." The shocked openly lost look on Val's face made Gavan wonder if he'd only made the man's day worse. "I'm sorry, I'm drunk. Look, it's fine, don't worry about it. You're comfortable here right? Well, nothing's changed."

Val rubbed his eyes and shook his head. O'Malley's was a gay bar, it was almost absurd. The first time in his life he'd found a place that he was comfortable relaxing in and it was a gay bar. God hated him, that was the only answer. The entire universe was conspiring to make his life into a massive joke with a bad punch line.

"Hey now, don't take it so hard. I'm bi and they haven't kicked me out. What happened with the would be wifey?"

Val sighed and went back to picking peanut shells apart. "I've no idea. I really don't understand that woman. I mean, I can't seem to make her happy. We were dating, she wanted to get married so I agreed. She picked the same weekend as my birthday but I agreed. When my sister was killed she made the choice to postpone the wedding and I agreed. Now, she calls me three days before we were supposed to be getting married, three days before my birthday and on the anniversary of my sister's death to tell me she thinks we should put it off indefinitely. I agree and she goes crazy. Chews me out about not caring, I've given in to everything she's wanted and that's not enough?" The words poured out. He'd only meant to say the least possible to explain the situation but once he started all of his frustration boiled up.

Gavan ordered two more shots and slid one over to Val. "I'm sorry. Was she older or younger than you?"

"Huh?"

"Your sister."

"Oh. Older, by eighteen months." He smiled softly and cherished the sharp stab of grief. "We might as well have been twins. She and her husband and their two kids were killed in a car accident six months ago today." Val spun the shot glass around in his fingers before downing half of it in a quick swallow.

"I'm sorry for your loss." Gavan whispered out.

Val closed his eyes a moment, he was mortally tired of sympathy. "Thank you."

"Well, I think it was cold and ridiculous of that girlfriend of yours to give you such a hard time. Six months is nothing and God, to get pissy because someone agrees with you?"

"She says I have no passion for her. That I've no passion for anything. I don't know what she wants. Some white knight on a horse in some stupid, poorly written story maybe, life isn't like that. No one, I mean no one, loves that way." He finished the shot.

"A cynic, careful or you'll spoil my illusions. If it's any consolation, I'm on the verge of being dumped myself."

Val took the opening to change the subject from himself to the other man. "Why?"

"Oh, he..." Gavan stopped and sighed. "No, it isn't him. My life is complicated. I'll sometimes be at work for twelve hours or more, so a lot of my time is eaten up there and I live with my cousin. He can't live alone, he's, well, he can't live alone. I'm responsible for him so he takes up a lot of my time. It doesn't leave a lot of time left over for my love life." He downed his shot and grimaced. "Eventually they demand more time than I can give and they leave. He wants to take me away for the weekend, I've off but I can't leave my cousin. He pretty much told me if I wanted our relationship to continue I'd find a way to go. Valentine's Day and all that nonsense." Gavan added up the days. "Oh my God, your birthday is on Valentine's Day!"

"Yeah, lucky me, I got stuck with the name Valentine too."

That made Gavan laugh. "Oh my God, that's the worst thing I've ever heard. Oh, you win." The laughter came harder and drew tears to his eyes.

"It's not funny." Val tried to scold but the near manic laughter of the man beside him started to infect him. "It's really not."

"Oh I know!" Gavan continued to laugh. "It's awful, simply awful! And she wanted it to be your anniversary too? Oh my God! That's so cute! I bet it would have been a cute wedding!"

"The cake was going to be white frosting and red velvet cake. It looked like the damned thing was bleeding." Val agreed, feeling a smile draw to his face at the other man's near hysterical laughing. "She was going to make the bridesmaids wear angel wings."

Gavan was laughing so hard now he was snorting. "Oh my God! I'm so," his breath hitched. "So sorry!"

Val found himself chuckling and told himself it was the whiskey.

Part Two

The simple stop at the pub for a pint and chance to warm up before making his way home grew into several hours as he and Gavan sipped dark, rich beer and slammed back whiskey shots. The game over the bar turned into a great contest and even though neither man admitted to being a fan of either team, they were soon rooting for both sides.

"God, it's late and I'm fucking drunk." Gavan mumbled at the half, glancing at his watch. It wasn't that late, almost nine, but for how long he'd been gone it was late enough. "I should get home."

"You shouldn't drive like that." Val assessed his own level of drunkenness and found himself still sober enough to manage the walk home.

"You are the most unobservant man I think I have ever met. Val, we've only been living in the same apartment building for two years. I've passed you on the street walking to and from the hospital. Where's your head at?" Gavan fumbled with his wallet and paid both their tabs.

Val struggled with the idea that he had been so disconnected. "That building, it's mostly businessmen and doctors, it's not cheap."

"No, it's not." Gavan tossed a friendly arm around Val's shoulders and felt the half drunk man tense under the contact. "I'm on the eighth floor, you're on the sixth. We've ridden the same elevator on occasion."

He shrugged off the arm to pull his coat on and as an afterthought made sure Gavan had his coat on and button closed. The night would be even colder now, and he didn't look forward to the last blocks home. "Huh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he tossed his arm back over the shoulders and leaned weight against the man. "You always look very serious, like you're constipated or stuck in very, very deep thoughts." He tried to manage to walk but the steps were staggering and he smiled a little as Val eased a helpful arm around his waist. "Come on, we'll make it home and finish the game at my place."

"I don't know."

"It's a great game and I hate watching it alone." He pulled Val along and shivered as the cold, icy

night air stole their warmth. "Brrr, coffee, going to need coffee to thaw from all of this."

The stumbled together out onto the sidewalk and Val turned them toward their apparently shared apartment building. He wasn't sold on the idea of finishing the game with Gavan, as much fun as it was to watch with another fan. The day had been long, he was now warmly drunk and in no mood to deal with someone's mentally handicapped cousin. Not after the string of mentally disturbed patients he'd had today. That had been a lesson he'd learned while still working on his master's, there was only so much a man could take before he had to take time to decompress.

"I mean, come on." Gavan was muttering. "He knew about Trist from the day we met. He knew I had obligations." The word obligations slurred its way out and Gavan didn't care. "It's not fair, it's really not. I dated him even though he's named Wally, I mean Wally, have you ever tried to scream the name Wally as you come? It's absurd."

"Can't say as I have." Val wasn't sure if he should laugh or frown and wasn't drunk or sober enough for either reaction.

"It's impossible, I'll tell you that. God, but he's so nice, so sweet. I really wanted him to stick around, I like him. I'm such a damned fool, I should have known better."

"It's not easy for people who don't have to deal with a challenging loved one to understand. If this Wally doesn't understand, you'll eventually find someone who can."

"You're such a good listener. I'm sorry, I shouldn't be whining, I knew this was going to happen, I knew it." He knew he was indulging in pity but the cold night dragged it out of him.

"It's okay, it's sort of what I do."

"Oh I'm such an ass, I totally forgot you're a shrink. I bet you get really sick of hearing everyone bitch and moan all the time." His foot landed on an icy patch and he skidded slightly.

Val balanced them out easily. "I'm not a shrink, I'm just a psychologist, not a psychiatrist. Come on, almost home." The door man nodded to them both and held the lobby door for them. "Do you have your keys?"

It took a little fishing around pockets but Gavan produced a set of keys with a smiley face key chain hanging on them. When the elevator doors opened, they piled in and Gavan noticed something was missing.

"Hey, don't you normally have a whole satchel full of work with you?" That was his image of the handsome, distant neighbor. Val standing in dress slacks, button down shirt and tie, his hair always perfectly trimmed to a short length in the back and long enough to run fingers through in the front. The soft brown wasn't an extraordinary color but it always looked glossy and shiny. Only, every time he'd seen the man, he'd had a heavy satchel over one shoulder and normally was reading some file or paperwork while the elevator carried them up or down.

Val nodded. "I've two weeks off for my wedding and honeymoon. Happy vacation to me."

"Man, that blows. I'm sorry."

"I could use the time off." The elevator dinged and the doors opened on the eighth floor that looked just like the hallway on Val's own sixth floor.

Gavan pushed himself away from the wall and managed to make it on his own power out of the elevator and down the hall. Val followed simply because it was a nice place and it wouldn't look good to have Gavan pass out in the hallway and be found the next morning in a pool of his own vomit.

They stopped in front of apartment 858 and Gavan got his keys in the lock and the door open. The space inside was larger than Val's, at least a two, no, he figured a three bedroom. The living space was large and open, the wide kitchen was finished with marble counter tops and copper pots hung from a rack on the wall. The living room had fluffy, expensive sofas and a large screen television sat in the center around expensive surround sound speakers. It wasn't the bachelor pad he'd expected from two single men.

"Nice place." Val nodded. The colors were finished in warm tones. Soft toasted tans, warm deep brick reds, it was oddly soothing like watching a sun set over the Arizona desert.

"Thanks, Trist did it, I can't match my socks to my pants most days." Gavan grinned, snatching up a remote and flipping the on the game.

Both men stood entranced as one of the impossibly tall players sunk a three shot point from several feet behind the line. Both men let out little groans of delight at such an amazing shot.

"This is a great set up." Val admired as the tv fans cheered around him.

"Thanks, that's my doing. Coffee?" He was going to need several cups just to chase the dampness from his bones.

"No, thank you, I should go."

Gavan's face fell and he turned from where he was filling the coffee maker with grinds. "Aw come on."

"No, really, I'm not going to be much company tonight."

"All the more reason to stay."

Val opened his mouth to protest again, knowing that he'd been using distraction all day to keep from thinking about his sister and knowing he needed some time to think about her. Before he could get another word out, one of the doors opened and slammed against the wall.

"What the fuck is going on out here?"

Val's mouth stayed open as a slender, obviously angry man joined them in the living room. He snapped it shut and glanced to Gavan and back again at the livid man as the new arrival snatched up the remote and turned the cheering basketball game off.

"Hey, Trist, did you eat dinner?" Gavan managed without slurring his words.

"Are you fucking drunk? You are!" A long fingered hand rose to rub at his temples before his eyes fell onto Val. "And who the fuck are you and why are you drunk to?"

It was the eyes. Val had seen patients so lost to their own inner psychoses, worked with people that had butchered family members without remorse because of their illnesses. He'd seen madness, violent, almost evil dissertations of humanity and never once had he looked away. Now, in the comfortable living room, he looked away. He couldn't hold those eyes, brilliant, clear green circled with a ring of brown so dark as to appear black. The thin band of black around the outer edge of the iris locked and controlled any stare, sucked in all contact to the too clear green like a bull's eye.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, Trist, this if Val, he works at the hospital with me." Gavan kept making coffee.

"I fucking know that, what are you two doing here and drunk?" He spat the words out.

"I should really go." Val took a step toward the door.

"Hang on Val, this is my cousin, Tristram, Trist, behave."

"Nice to meet you." Val nodded his head. The two looked more like brothers than cousins. The stable, ordinary balance in Gavan was sharpened to handsome lines in Trist. Like the green based hazel eyes of Gavan that were so similar but so exotically different on Trist, it was all that way. They had the same, nose, the same shape to their mouths but Trist's cheekbones were sharper, the point of his chin more obvious and Val figured a lot of that was how much skinnier Trist was from Gavan. There was a look to the cousin that Val had seen in anorexic patients, a look of long term starvation.

They had the same dark brown, almost black hair, Gavan's cut short but Trist's was long and braided tightly into a single plait. They both had the same fair skin, Gavan's ruddy now from the drinking and cold walk home and Trist's flushed from anger. Neither man was as tall as Val, he judged them against his six feet and figured they were maybe five nine or ten. All and all, Trist wasn't what Val had been expecting.

The skinny cousin shook his head. "Not quite the drooling retarded gimp you were expecting, huh?"

Val pulled his professionalism around him the same way he wore his coat and barely blinked at the angrily spat words. It was Gavan that pushed past him, no longer swaying in drunken numbness. He reached out and caught his cousin's face between his hands.

"Trist!" He snapped. "Behave!"

"Fuck you!" He nearly shouted back and writhed against the hands holding him but made no move toward physical violence.

Gavan lowered his voice, drew a slow breath. "Come on, Trist, settle down. It's okay."

Trist shivered and his eyes clenched shut but the angry tension melted from his lean frame. This time when he pulled away, Gavan let him go but he followed as his cousin hurried to the kitchen. He managed to reach the sink before his stomach turned inside out.

Gavan stood beside him, holding the braid out of the way and rubbing his cousin's back. "Guess you ate dinner, huh? Easy there, easy now."

Trist hung over the sink a moment to make sure his stomach was going to behave before he reached to turn the tap on and rinse the sink and his mouth clean. "Ugh, sorry, I..." Val heard the weak whispering. "You're too drunk and he's too angry. I can't..."

Gavan reached over and pulled a paper towel from the rack and wiped his cousin's mouth. "I'm sorry."

Trist shook his head, his odd eyes sliding to where Val still stood but the man looked neither horrified or angry. "I've a client tonight. At nine thirty, you have to leave, both of you. You're too loud, I can't have you here."

"You didn't have anyone scheduled."

Trist shook his head and leaned against the cool marble of the counter. "No, they called a couple of hours ago." He was rubbing at his temples again.

Gavan put a hand on the back of his cousin's neck and placed a quick kiss on the tense forehead. "It's cool, no worries. You just take care and I'll be back in a couple of hours. Okay?"

Trist was nodding but unable to move from where he was leaning.

Gavan scooped his keys up and went to push Val out the apartment door. "Wash your mouth too, you smell like puke."

Val let himself be guided from the apartment, not protesting and not understanding.

"Blow me!" Trist tossed after them and Val saw how it made Gavan smile but before the nurse could shut the door the voice echoed after them with less malice. "Hey, Gavan?"

"Yeah?" He stuck his head back inside.

"I'm sorry about Wally." The words were laced with regret.

Gavan ducked his head. "Thanks." And pulled the door shut, leaving him alone in the hallway with an obviously overwhelmed Val. He forced a smile and clapped Val on the arm. "Sorry about that, didn't know he had a client, mind if we finish the game at your place? I really don't want to stagger back to the bar in this cold."

Intrigued as much as he was confused, Val found himself nodding. "Sure, the place is a wreck but sure." There was no way he was going to let Gavan off without explaining.

Part Three

They rode the elevator down two stories and Val had a sober moment to wonder why he was allowing what was basically a stranger into his apartment. The answer wasn't difficult to come by, he really didn't want to be alone, not tonight. At least not until after eleven. It would then be six months to the hour since he'd received that awful phone call, if he could make it past that point, everything else would be okay.

He unlocked his apartment door and flicked on the light switch. He tossed his keys into the basket nailed inside the door and shrugged out of his coat. Gavan followed close behind and dropped his own keys into the basket uninvited.

"You know, I normally don't let a guy take me home until the second date and no one meets Trist until at least the fourth or fifth date." He teased but when Val didn't laugh he held up his hands. "It was a joke, maybe one in bad taste, but a joke."

Val shook his head. "Sorry, still too sober to laugh much today. Come on in."

"Thanks." He stretched and heard his spine pop. "Oh, eight hours in surgery. Eight hours to stew over Wally, I'm such an idiot, you'd think I'd have learned not to return phone calls from boyfriends before going into the OR." He followed Val into the apartment and tried not to be too nosy as he glanced around.

The apartment was smaller than his own, one bedroom and the central living kitchen space. Only Val had lined the walls with bookcases which were overflowing with books. A modestly sized television sat in front of an older but obviously well loved sofa. The place wasn't dirty but it had a cluttered feel to it. Books sat in stacks along side chairs, a cotton blanket lay tossed along the side of the sofa unfolded. The kitchen was orderly but there were no small decorator touches anywhere.

"Remotes on the sofa, can you get the game on and did you still want that coffee?"

Gavan smiled. "Sure, since I doubt more whiskey will change anything." He found the remote and flipped on the television. When he turned to see if he could help in the kitchen he saw the one bookshelf that wasn't dusty, that wasn't stacked with books. This one shelf was cleared of all the clutter of life, a purple velvet runner covered the simple wood and set on it were photos. He was drawn over to it and studied the smiling faces.

"Is this your sister?" He nodded his head but didn't touch.

Val glanced up before busying himself again. "Yes, Violet, her husband Nayef, their oldest, my nephew Kamil and my niece Ziya." It had been forever since he'd spoken their names aloud.

Violet looked like her brother, lovely, soft brown hair and warm brown eyes. The same attractive elegant features, the same bright smile. Only, the woman in the photo wore a soft blue headscarf as did the girl who didn't appear to be more than five. Navef was obviously Middle Eastern, his skin a dark golden brown, his eyes black and both his son and daughter had is rich, lovely coloring. They made a handsome family, smiling, joyful.

"They were Muslim?" Gavan asked even though he already knew the answer.

Val pulled mugs from the cupboard. "Navef was a translator for the government, Violet worked as an analyst. They met in DC, fell in love and she converted. It's a lovely religion, can't judge the entire faith by a handful of radical misogynists. Hungry?"

"I'm okay." Gavan peered around the photos but most were of his sister and her family.

"I asked if you were hungry, I've banana bread that I'm never going to get eaten."

His stomach growled at the idea even if the thought of putting banana bread on top of six shots of whiskey worried him. Even if he'd spread those shots out over hours and the run in with Trist has sobered him up. "I'm never one to say no to baked goods." He moved now to the kitchen and was surprised to see the bread was on a plate, not a store box.

"Did you bake that?"

Val paused, knife half way through the loaf. "Don't laugh, I bake when I'm stressed."

"I would never laugh and risk being denied banana bread, it's been forever since I've had any homemade baked things. Are you sure you're not gay?" He accepted the plate piled high with slices of the rich bread. "I mean, coffee and banana bread is kind of faggy for a basketball game."

"I'm secure enough in my masculinity to bake." He moved to pour the just finished coffee into mugs. "Oh, only soy milk though."

"Black's fine."

He slid the mug over and carried his own black coffee with him. "Oh, man that guy is on fire this year!"

They plopped themselves onto the sofa and for the second half of the game cheered and groaned with nearly every pass of the ball. Gavan ended up eating every crumb of the surprisingly well made bread and the coffee was plenty to sober him up. Val had poured the last of the pot of coffee into their mugs as they both stood, watching intently, as the final seconds of the game ticked away and a last second ball scored the winning points.

"Aw man that's what's great about basketball!" Gavan grinned. "Most days, it just blows but a game like that is magic." He eyed Val's height as the man slid the empty pot onto the kitchen counter. "You play?"

Val shook his head. "Not seriously. You?"

"A pick up game occasionally. This was really great, thanks so much for letting me crash here. You really don't have a stick up your ass like everyone thinks."

Val raised an eyebrow. "Thanks, I think." He flicked the television off and was grateful for the silence.

"I didn't mean it as it sounds, you're just so, distant, all the time." He grinned. "Being around someone more subdued is nice, Trist is never subtle."

"About him, if you don't mind..."

"You mean what's wrong with him?" Gavan glanced into his coffee. "Technically, he's been diagnosed as undifferentiated schizophrenia, bi-polar, Dissociative identity disorder, and an entire slew of anxiety disorders. The schizophrenia is usually where doctors lump him."

"His medication must be good, he seemed very stable." And only someone who worked with unstable schizophrenics could say that and mean it.

Gavan shook his head. "Meds do nothing for him other than turn him into a zombie. He's been on them all at one point or another, a lot of them just make him worse." He wanted to tell the truth, he really did but he was liking the idea of finding a friend in Val and didn't want to spook him away.

"That's peculiar."

"It is, it baffles most doctors so they just up the dosage until he's in a corner drooling. He's not like most people, he's special. For the most part, he's able to stay in control so long as his routine isn't broken. Which is why I can't go away for the weekend, ever." He sipped at the coffee.

"And his parents can't help?"

"It's complicated. We've a great aunt who can keep him calm but she lives with our grandmother and the two of them don't get along."

"That must be difficult for you." But in his mind Val was replaying the scene he witnessed and it didn't match with any of the schizophrenics he'd worked with.

"I love him, he's family." He shrugged. "Sure, there are times I wish I could dump him into a kennel like a dog for a couple of days but hey, he's family. When I was a senior in college, I was desperate to go away for spring break. My girlfriend at the time had a place reserved, all my friends were going but there was Trist."

"He couldn't go." It was a statement not a question.

"Bingo. So I wasn't going to go. He promised he'd stay with our great aunt if I went and I agreed and left. Only, the first day he was there, our grandmother tore into him and he left, went back to our apartment and didn't tell me. I was gone five days when I got a call saying I had to come home. Trist had an episode, wandered out into the street, gotten himself hit by a car. It broke his leg but the hospital had to put him in your ward with the other nut cases because he wasn't making any sense. When I got home he was just gone, between the meds and getting lost in his

own head. It took him months to fully recover.” He picked at the crumbs of the bread still on his plate and sucked them off his fingers while hoping some of the resentment he still felt didn’t show.

“And now this Wally is doing the same thing, making you pick between him and your cousin. That isn’t easy. I can see why you’d be upset, there is respite care you know. You could call them in for a few days, he wouldn’t have to leave the apartment. The disruption would be minimal.” That was one of the hardest things with serious mental illness, the effects on the rest of the family. The guilt they sometimes carried for not being able to fix the illness and the guilt over their natural resentment.

“Won’t work, trust me. Thing is, he’s harder on himself than I ever am. He thinks he’s ruining my life. If Wally and I break up, Trist will beat himself up over it for weeks.” He shook his head. “He booked us rooms at this silly little bed and breakfast. God, I don’t know how I’m going to tell him no.”

“So don’t, call in the respite care for two days. How much trouble can your cousin get into for two days?”

The innocent, helpful, blissfully unaware tone that Val used made Gavan laugh. “More than you can possibly imagine. He scares the jeepers out of most people, I’ve had caretakers literally run out of our apartment. One of them, this charming, highly skilled, Latina woman, called in her priest, Trist scared her so badly.”

“How long can he go on his own?”

“A good day?” Gavan shrugged, trying to remember the last time they’d had more than a single good day in a row. “Nineteen, twenty hours, less than a day. A bad day? Not more than eight, at most, the less the better. It’s part of the reason I went for OR nursing, if he’s having a meltdown I can switch shifts with one of the other girls and then get my hours in on his good days. I know what you’re thinking and there’s no way he can swing forty eight hours on his own.”

That hadn’t been what he was thinking but the idea stuck in his head and took a long sip of the dark coffee to loosen it up. “Actually, I was thinking you should go and I could check in on him.”

Gavan swallowed his coffee wrong and choked on it. He was caught, coughing and unable to answer.

“The idea’s not that absurd, is it?”

“Christ you must be a masochist.” He forced out around the inhaled coffee.

“It is what I do for a living. I doubt he could scare me off and there are few crisis that could arise that I haven’t already seen before. It’s only for two days.”

“You’re actually serious about this.”

Val smiled a small, sad smile. “I am. I tried to cancel my time off but they’d already scheduled it in so I couldn’t. My fiancée, girlfriend, whatever, is going to Mexico for what would have been our honeymoon and she’s taking her sister not me. I’d really rather not sit on my hands this weekend and think too much about things. The distraction would do me good.”

“She’s taking her sister on your honeymoon? That’s harsh.”

“We haven’t been getting along very well of late, I didn’t want to go.”

“Let me think about it, that’s a big offer.”

"I understand, I know how I'd feel if he were my cousin."

"Wow, it's almost eleven thirty, I should get back up there and see if his head's exploded."
Gavan gathered up his coffee mug and plate and took them to the kitchen.

"You said he had a client coming by?"

He paused in the kitchen before turning and smiling. "Tell you what, Val, re-think that offer, I'll think about it too. Tomorrow, after work, I'll stop in and if you still think you'd be up to it, I'll explain everything. It's late and that story is complicated, fair enough?"

Val nodded but his mind was chewing over the options and not finding many. "Fair enough."

Gavan fished his keys from the basket by the door and paused on his way out to offer his hand.
"It was nice actually meeting you, Val."

Val accepted it and nodded. "Same here, we'll have to watch more games together."

"Count on it, so long as you keep making that bread! It was fantastic! Night."

"Goodnight." Val stood in the door and watched as the man, now sober, made his way down the hall toward the elevators. He'd made the offer on a whim and wasn't sure if it was a good one or not. In any case, he'd survived past eleven without too much grief and that was worth some repayment of the kindness.

Val turned his alarm clock off and slept, and slept, and slept. He woke up after noon and groaned at the headache behind his eyes from too much whiskey or too much sleep. He'd crashed for nearly twelve hours and that was something he hadn't done since he was a child. Since right after his parents' death to be exact and it was a sure sign that he was far more depressed than he was actually feeling.

He showered, shaved and forced himself to eat something before turning to putter about the apartment. His big project for his new found time off was to organize his books, before he could do that he had to get all the strays wrangled together. It wasn't something that held his interest, his mind kept running over the night before. Finally he gave up, dropped another stack of books at the base of a shelf and pulled his bike from the bedroom. If his mind wouldn't shut off, he could take his body along for the ride.

The day was chilly but the icy rain had disappeared and let the sun out. Val was glad he'd bundled up and covered his ears but the clear, cold winter air was brisk and just what he needed to shut his mind down. He didn't ride as far or as long as he would have liked, the cold drove him home, but it was plenty.

His sunglasses had fogged up the moment he'd re-entered the warm building but he didn't pull the hat and scarf off until he was on his floor. The bike was light so he just picked it up and carried it down to his apartment door. When he turned the corner and had his door in eyeshot, he was surprised by what was waiting for him.

Sitting on his heels, back leaning against his door, was Tristram. He was chewing on a thumbnail and had his eyes half closed. There was nothing to indicate how long the other man may have been waiting but Val had been gone well over an hour, he wondered what his neighbors would think of seeing the skinny man pretending to be a doorman.

"Tristram?" Val began carefully and stepped lightly down the hall.

The dark head snapped up and the obsessive gnawing on the already chewed off thumbnail stopped. "Trist, no one but my fucking grandmother calls me Tristram." He bounced to his feet, soothing out the wrinkles from his jeans.

Val watched as the odd eyes darted around wildly, unable to hold on to one object for too long. "What can I do for you?"

Trist shook his head and his eyelids fluttered in too many blinks. One of his hands waved in a vague motion to the air beside him. If a nagging child had stood beside him, the motion would have been one asking for silence or behavior but with only empty hallway, it looked random, insane. He swallowed hard and shook his head with more conviction. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come." With an uneasy start, he took a step to leave only to find Val had turned sideways a little and let the bike block the hallway.

"No, it's okay, what's on your mind?" He knew better then to let Trist leave. God only knew where the fellow might end up. At the least, he could get Trist back up to his apartment.

"I'm not a fucking prisoner." Trist snapped out, growing angry. "Fuck!" He drew a long slow breath and visibly started to relax. "Look, I'm sorry about last night." One hand began to rub reflexively at his forehead in what Val was starting to see as a nervous tic.

"There's nothing to be sorry for, you were right, we were drunk."

"No, it's just, I, damn..." Trist bounced his weight from foot to foot and chewed on a nail for a moment.

Val smiled mildly, lightly, and it was his professional smile because that was all he'd been able to summon up for months now. "Hey, it's okay. Whatever it is you want to say, I'll listen."

The black rimmed eyes locked tightly to Val's and there was clarity in them, not scattered madness. "Gavan's going to shit out a litter of kittens." He sighed and some internal choice was made. "Look, your sister's car wreck? It wasn't an accident. Navef didn't fall asleep, there wasn't a dog in the road, nothing like that." He hated that the open acceptance in the warm brown eyes disappeared and was replaced with sharp and brittle pain.

"What did you say?" Val whispered out, not sure if he should be angry or broken in grief.

Trist just shook his head and ducked his eyes again. "I said it, see, I said it, that's enough!" He pushed forward and shoved the blocking bike away but Val's grip was weak and he didn't even try to stop him.

"Trist?" Val managed to call out as the skinny man was reaching a turn in the hallway on his way back to the elevators.

"Leave me the fuck alone! I'm going home now!" Trist's voice floated back but Val had an odd suspicion the words weren't meant for him.

Val stood alone in his hallway too startled to even consider getting his door unlocked. He's seen thousands of people with every sort of delusions but never had one spoken about his private life. Gavan must have told his cousin, that was the only logical reasoning behind it. That meant, for as much as Val had enjoyed having someone to drink with and watch a game with, Gavan would either have to stop that or their new born friendship would die in it's infancy.

Part Four

Seven hours in surgery had been a short day for Gavan but since it should have been nine he felt exhausted. The first operation had been fine, in and out, no complications, the second, well, the second wasn't so kind. An hour into the four hour procedure the patient had crashed and died on the table. That was always more exhausting than if he'd been in surgery the entire time.

He'd finished his duties, washed up and changed back into street clothes and still was going to be home early. Which was good because Wally was supposed to be calling for his final answer that night and he needed time to make up his mind. He really, really, wanted to go but he wasn't sure he could fairly take Val up on his offer. Honestly, he wasn't sure Val would still honor the offer once he knew everything.

He knocked on the apartment door on the sixth floor and waited.

"It's open!" Val called from inside.

Gavan opened the door which was as unlocked as promised. A John Mellencamp cd was singing about pink houses and Val was no where to be seen. Little had changed from night to day. A bike leaned against one wall, books had been gathered into neater stacks but there was still a feel of untidiness to the place.

"Val?"

"Yeah, just a second." He answered from the partially closed bedroom door.

And it was only a second before Val pushed the door all the way open. His hair was wet and his jeans were faded and old. They hung on his hips at an almost obscenely low level, which may have just been an optical illusion since the man hadn't pulled on his t-shirt yet. As he tugged the red fabric over his head, it gave Gavan a moment to ogle the defined torso that he hadn't expected to find on such a withdrawn, scholarly man.

He reminded himself that Val was straight and that he really was happy with Wally. "Did I come at a bad time?" Gavan was proud that none of the sudden lust he felt showed in his voice.

"Sorry, went for a bike ride and then got distracted and didn't get cleaned up until just now." Val licked nervously at dry lips. "Look Gavan, we need to talk."

The part of Gavan that had already settled into the idea of a cozy, weekend of happy bliss and good sex felt sudden and sharp disappointment. "Hey, man, it's okay. We both were a little drunk, I didn't expect you to mean it."

"Gavan? Sit down." He turned the cd player off on his way past.

The serious tone, the steady eyes, made Gavan suddenly feel fourteen and facing down his school's principle. "Sure. What's up?" It was the same tone people used before they broke up with him.

Val lowered himself down on the other end of the sofa. "When I got back from my ride this afternoon, Trist was sitting outside my door."

"I'm sorry, I'll tell him not to bother you. He doesn't think sometimes."

Val waved the words off. "I don't mind. Look, Gavan, he said some things about my sister that he could only have known from your telling him. I wouldn't mind normally but, well, it's not something I even talk about often. I enjoyed last night but I can't have Trist saying distorted things about my personal life. I just can't do that."

Gavan drew a long breath and let it out slowly. He was going to tell Val anyway, so, in for a pinch, in for a pound. "Val, I know you don't know me very well so I'm going to ask that you hear me out and take what I say at face value." He studied the unforgiving brown eyes. "Okay?"

Val nodded. "Okay."

"Trist, he isn't insane. I mean, he isn't really schizophrenic."

"Okay."

"Christ, you'd think after having this conversation my entire life I'd be better at it." He sighed and fussed at the sleeve of his shirt. "Our family is Celtic, Gaelic really. Four or five generations ago we were mostly Irish, but now we're Welsh, that doesn't really matter to you, never mind. For as long as our family history goes back, every other generation produces a seer." He held up a hand. "You promised to hear me out."

"I don't believe in that mumbo jumbo bullshit."

"Fine, but just hear me out. Okay?"

Val sighed and nodded. "Sure."

"Okay. Look, it skips a generation and it skips genders. It usually doesn't follow linearly down the family line but will branch out, showing up in a great niece or nephew instead of a grand child. You've seen Trist's eyes?"

He nodded.

"Everyone in my family born with the sight has it. Our grandmother has the same eyes, our great, great, great uncle had them, we've photos, Trist has them, one of our great nieces will be born with them. It will happen as it's always happened."

"That's just a genetic variation, a recessive reinforced gene."

"Maybe, yes, but it always shows up with the sight, never without it. With every generation that has a seer, another is born at the same time that doesn't have the sight but acts like a switch for the one that does. They're always born nine hours, nine days, nine weeks, or nine months to the moment before the seer is born. I'm nine hours and nine days older than Trist, that's a double reinforcement. That doesn't happen. Worse, Trist is a direct line from the last seer, again, very rare. We both are, even more rare."

"Wait, a moment, just wait." Val was pretty sure Gavan believed what he was saying.

"Hear me out, please." Gavan sighed. "I know it sounds crazy. With our Grandmother, her sight is always turned off until her cousin, our great aunt, switches it on. On the rare occasion she'll have a vision that just arrives and it's only then that our aunt has to act as an off switch. Trist isn't like that, he's never been like that. He's always on, not just on but wide on. He's learned a lot of control but some days it overwhelms him, when that happens, I'm the only person other than my aunt that has the ability to shut him down."

"How?" He asked in spite of himself, the same way he'd ask a delusional person how the government was reading their thoughts. "How do you shut him down?"

"I don't know, I can feel him. It's, like..." he searched for words he'd never had to find before. No one had ever asked him about his side of the situation. Trist's skills always were the more interesting. "It's like standing near a fire, you can feel the heat on your skin even with your eyes closed. The more out of control he is, the stronger the heat feel and I just focus on the idea of it

cooling down and it does. That sounds crazy, I know.”

Val chewed over the information and still found he couldn't believe. “I don't think you're lying but I don't believe a word you've just said.”

“Fine.” Gavan laughed. “I'm not the one that can convince you, I'm not even sure you should be convinced but come on.” He stood up. “Let's go talk to Trist, ask him anything you want. He might not answer it all but you'll see how he works.”

“What do you mean, how he works?”

“He isn't just a psychic or a medium or madman. He's more and less and well, I don't think he even understands it half the time. You should ask him directly because I've known him since we were infants and I still don't know what it's really like for him.” He motioned with his hand. “Come on, what have you got to lose?”

“You said he'd been diagnosed, that he'd been medicated?”

“Often, yes. Look, if someone came to you, hearing voices, seeing things, what would you think? When he gets overloaded, when he's having a bad day and his mind shorts out, if I'm not there and he winds up out in public, he gets locked up. When he gets locked up they medicate him. It doesn't work.” His voice was getting angry and he knew it and couldn't help it, rather than shouting, he started pacing. “At the best, it shuts him down into a zombie. The meds push him into an almost twilight sleep where he doesn't feel, doesn't think, doesn't dream which is the only time the voices and visions stop for him. At the worst, it opens him wide up and doubles or triples the visions but shuts him down so he can't speak, can't move. It'll trap him in his own mind to be tormented.”

“But...”

“Trust me, meds don't work. Respite care is almost impossible because he freaks most people out. He can be a royal brat at times too because everyone treats him like raving lunatic.”

Things began to fall into place. “People come to him because they think he's psychic. That's what you meant by clients.”

“He is psychic. One of the best in the world.” He stopped pacing. “Now, you've heard me out, you think I should be on meds. Come on up to our apartment and judge for yourself.”

Val hesitated.

“Come on, I dare you to prove me wrong. Things would be so much simpler if he was just crazy. You'd be doing me a favor to prove me wrong.”

“Alright.” Val pulled on an old pair of sneakers and stood up. “Alright then.”

In the elevator, Gavan worked up the nerve to ask. “Just, what did Trist say to you?”

“Nothing that matters.”

“I'm sorry. He doesn't think about how other people will take what he says before he says it.”

“It's okay, he can't help it.”

That made Gavan shake his head because he wasn't always sure just how much of his cousin's crazy behavior was something he could control if he'd only try. Val seemed unwilling to talk about it so he left it there and left the taller man in silence.

The door to the apartment opened smoothly for him and he tossed his coat over the hall closet doorknob before dropping his keys on the counter. "Trist?"

"Busy, leave me alone!" Trist called back from one of the bedrooms.

"Get your scrawny ass out here now, or so help me I will drag you out here!" Gavan shouted even though he was more tired than angry.

"Shit, Gav, now who's panties are in a bunch?" Trist shouted back but the rustling from behind one of the bedroom doors made it clear the other man was on his way.

"Don't even try to play innocent with me."

"Look, I'm sorry, but they wouldn't shut up. I was going crazy, just tell him I'm whacko and don't worry about..." Trist's voice died when he saw Val hovering behind his cousin. Rather than being embarrassed, Trist grinned. "Opps." His eyes raked over their guest and had a chance to really see the man for the first time, unclouded. It was a pleasant sight.

"Get out here, Trist." Gavan tried to stay stern.

Trist shrugged, his shoulders staying a little hunched up and he shuffled out into the living room. His feet were bare and too skinny ankles poked out from under his baggy cotton pants. "Look, can we skip the lecture and just go to the part where I genuflect and say I'm sorry?"

Gavan glanced from Trist, slinking like a whipped dog out into the living room, dressed to make himself look the most pitiful possible, and Val who stood silent and tense beside him. "Just come here."

Trist sighed deeply but he moved closer to the pair and briefly locked eyes with Val. "I'm sorry, I do stupid things. I didn't mean to upset you." He dropped his eyes. "Don't take my stupidity out on Gavan, okay? I'll leave you be." As the words died he cocked his head to the side and his eyes narrowed. "This isn't about that. You told him and he thinks you're as crazy as I am." His smile came back. "Well, I won't be your trained monkey today. I'm tired and trying to settle down."

"Trist." Gavan's voice softened up. "Come on, Val's a good guy. He lives two stories below us and he's willing to check in on you this weekend so I can go away with Wally."

"Wally is such a stupid name."

Gavan closed his eyes and stayed calm. He was never sure when Trist was just being stubborn and bratty and when he was teasing. "Which is better? Having him know the truth or thinking you're crazy?"

"He already thinks I'm crazy and he's not going to baby sit me."

Val shook his head. "That's not true, I haven't made my mind up yet and does it matter what I think about you?"

"Please, why would you want to? You barely know Gav, and I'm not exactly a field of daises."

"I like a challenge and well, I've nothing better to do this weekend."

"Trist, he wants answers, for me, okay? If for no other reason, for me?"

The smile broke on Trist's face. "Fuck! Well, Valentine York, let me introduce to you Gavan

Maddocks, my personal travel agent to all guilt trips." He paced a moment before stopping to run a hand across his hair. "Sit down boys, I'm not going to pull punches here."

Gavan motioned to a pair of stools that were tucked under the kitchen counter top. He waited until Val settled down uneasily on one of them before taking his own. Trist paced around for a moment before he started chewing on a fingernail that didn't exist.

"What's going on?" Val asked softly, suddenly feeling like he should whisper.

"Just wait. I promise you though, I've told him nothing about you, not even what your full name is."

"No." Trist shook his head. "No, I'm not doing that, no." He sighed and rubbed at his temple but his pacing stopped. "Okay, look, Val, your parents are dead. I don't know how, something claustrophobic. Dirty too, I don't know. You weren't a teenager yet, they sent you to live with your bachelor uncle. He read a lot, tons of books. I think he was a teacher. He's dead too, ah, late teens, you weren't an adult yet but it wasn't like your parents. It was sudden, heart attack I think."

At the first, Val was startled but his shock quickly dissolved into cynical skepticism. "How do you know any of that?"

Trist shook his head. "I just do, darling. Freaky huh?"

"Not really, it's all things anyone could find out about me if they wanted to and you've had all afternoon." He refused to buy into the story. It was impossible and Occam's Razor was how he shaved his reality.

"But I didn't look it up."

"I don't know that."

Trist sighed loudly and stalked across the room. He stopped with his legs almost touching Val's knees before leaning forward and putting a hand on the counter behind the stubborn man. "Fine." He whispered out. "You want something that no one knows? I know all about you and Matt Poff. All about it." His voice took on a honey tone of teasing.

Val refused to be startled. The words were cryptic and vague and he wasn't one to back down to anything. "So? He was my roommate in college. Who doesn't have some secret they share only with their room mate? You've proven nothing."

Trist closed his eyes and drew a slow breath, the smile that teased his lips was languid. When his eyes opened again they slid from Val's too close, closed off expression to Gavan's confused. He could lean in and whisper the hidden secret but he wasn't feeling very kind at the moment.

"Really? Does everyone blow their roommate in college? I wonder what his cheerleader girlfriend, or your girlfriend for that matter, would have thought if they'd known? Captain of the basketball team and all that he was, respectable dean's list student that you were, neither of you could afford to be fags. Oh, wait, you didn't think of yourself as gay did you? That was too messy, too unsocial, too unacceptable. I wonder what your sweet little fiancée would think if she knew the real reason why you're such a frigid bitch with her?" Trist's words were a mocking caress and his crazy ringed eyes were filled with amused laughter.

Val couldn't breath. His heart had stopped, frozen at the words that came so easily out of the skinny, mocking man. No one, and Val knew that for a fact, no one knew about his room mate. He'd never even told Violet and he'd kept nothing else from his sister.

The three men sat for long second frozen. "Val?" Gavan asked gently in the silence.

Val stood and pushed Trist away from him, pushed him and his bold speaking of the truth physically away and stumbled a few feet away. "You can't know that!"

Trist caught his balance and still was smiling but it was less malicious now. "But I do. You even liked him being taller than you. I know, I can see it, want me to tell you more? I know what he used to call you, the only pet name anyone's ever given you. He loved you, did you know that? He loved you more than life and it's not your fault that he got killed."

Val's feet refused to work and he stumbled and fell hard to the soft carpeting. The fibers scrapped his hands, providing a sharp point of pain to focus on but it wasn't enough to kick his brain back into a functioning mode. "You can't know any of this." He heard himself whispering out.

No longer caught in manic pacing or random gestures, Trist crossed to where Val was sprawled on the floor and knelt beside him. "But I do know, so maybe Gavan isn't crazy and maybe I have a good reason for being nutso?" He studied the confused and lost man before stroking a hand across the uneasy face. "You poor dear, everyone you've ever cared about has died on you." He brushed soft brown hair back. "I'm sorry, I never know when to stop and I do stupid things."

Gavan had stayed out of the way until Trist looked up to him for help. It was only then that he rose and moved to kneel on Val's other side. "Don't worry, Trist may never know when to shut up about what he sees to the person it's about, but he's never one to blab secrets to other people."

Val shook his head. "I'm not gay! Matt and I, we, it's just..." his eyes darted between the two cousins. "Oh, God."

"It doesn't matter if you are or aren't." A life time around Trist had dampened Gavan's shock at his cousin's skills but he always tried to be understanding of other people's reactions. "What matters is if you believe me now?"

Val stared hard into those odd eyes, the black so harsh and stark and the gentle ring of clear green but even his logical mind could find no other answer. "I know Matt never told anyone."

"He never did." Trist sighed. "Gav? Still have some beer tucked away or did you finish it?"

"God, I could use a beer." Val agreed and slowly started to get himself back onto his feet.

"Got a couple left, want a glass?"

"No need." His heart was starting to beat again at a more normal pattern but he still felt a little like he'd been clubbed over the back of the head. He accepted the cold bottle from Gavan and downed a few swigs. "Well," he managed to get himself back onto one of the stools. "That isn't something one comes across everyday."

Gavan passed another open bottle to Trist but his cousin waved it off. "Happens all the time around here." He tried to laugh it off with Val but he didn't know the man well enough to judge him. "Trist is annoying that way."

"Hey! You asked, the pair of you pushed, I was happy and content now everything's all stirred up again." Trist mocked but he was smiling wickedly. "I'm going to go shower. You two bond and all that shit, leave Val my care instructions for the weekend and when you order Chinese, I want something spicy." He waved as he floated back into his bedroom.

"How does he know?"

Gavan shrugged and lowered himself down next to Val. "About what? Your college days? This

weekend or ordering food in?"

"Any of it."

"God only knows. You okay?"

"Not really." What Trist had said to him that afternoon suddenly came back. "How often is he right?"

"He's always right, he might not understand what he's seeing or hearing and he might not be able to get the idea out clearly but the message is never faulty. Was he right about this weekend?" He didn't want to get his hopes up.

"I want to know more about how he does that." Val said over the lip of his beer bottle.

Trist's door opened and he stuck his head out. "Oh, hey, Val, look, Gavan really could use the weekend away from my absurdity, and he's really good to me most days, when he's not beating me for misbehaving. If you do us this favor and keep an eye on me so he can relax and get his brains fucked out, I promise to be a good little choir boy and behave. I'll answer any questions you have and do whatever little lab rat tricks you want. Okay?" He grinned and glanced between the two. "Cool, it's a deal!"

Val's mouth worked but no sound came out.

"Don't think too hard about it." Gavan patted his friend's shoulder. "I'm going to call in dinner, what is it you want?"

"What?"

"Chinese, what do you want?"

"But, isn't that a self fulfilling prophecy?"

Gavan dug the menu with the phone number on it from a drawer. "Dude, trust me, don't think too deeply about it. I never know if he actually saw it or if he's just hungry for Chinese. So, what will you have?"

The mundane question refused to make sense and Val just shook his head, not caring about something as simple as food.

Part Five

Behind his bedroom door, Trist leaned against the wood and let the breath he hadn't know he was holding out. Gavan rarely brought anyone home, even lovers, but for him to randomly bring a friend home was unheard of. Even if his cousin wasn't aware of it, there was a reason for it, and the reasons were still blurred and chaotic to Trist. The weekend would give him plenty of time around the silent, tall, man to pick the voices and visions apart and hopefully make some order of it.

For right now, he needed to relax. He'd been bothered by the burning itch to go deliver that silly message to Val that afternoon and had been in a state of anxious unease until he'd relented. Just when he was starting to relax, Gavan had brought the man home again. He hadn't meant to pick so much off of Val, but once he'd reached out there was so much, under the steady, placid surface, begging to be noticed.

Not the least of which was the sight of darling Valentine writhing and moaning in his roommate's arms. Sometimes being a psychic wasn't all bad, sure most times he saw visions of violence, death, blood and gore, saw people at their worst moments but on the rare occasion he got a little jewel like this. It actually was lovely enough to make him horny and that was something Trist hadn't felt in far too long. So long, in fact, that he'd forgotten what it felt like to feel something that wasn't pain, depression and sheer exhaustion. He planned on savoring it as long as he could.

He pushed away from the door and stripped his clothes off as he made his way to his bathroom. Instead of letting them drop as he walked, he draped them over his arm and tossed them into his hamper inside the bathroom door. He had a nervous habit of cleaning and not being able to sit still when things were cluttered. The bathroom door pushed easily shut and he turned on the water to the shower.

He never minded being nude, but Trist hated the sight of himself in the mirror. Every year he was getting skinnier and skinnier and he was afraid one day he'd wake up and be gone. The more stressed he felt, the less he ate, the stronger, more violent the visions, the more likely he was to get sick. The more bad days he had, the less there was of him and the last year had felt like one, long, endless bad day.

What was worse wasn't his own fading waist line or the way his skin looked pulled too tightly over his muscles, it was seeing the worry in Gavan. The bad days weren't just bad on him, they were bad for them both. The poor fellow needed to get away from a few days and Trist only prayed he'd be able to keep it together until Monday. He would, he'd tie Val up and gag him to keep him from calling Gavan home early if he had to.

That made a happy mental image and chased some of the worry away from Trist's mind. It wasn't just that Val was pleasant to look at but he was so distant, so shut down that all Trist wanted to do was pry the man apart. There was anger there, deeply rooted and violent, such anger that the first two meetings had knocked him off balance and made him angry as well. He was certain there was so much more than just anger. Like a child with a fancifully wrapped present, he wanted to take his time and peel back the layers.

He pulled the tie from his hair and shook it out of its tight braid. It fell in wavy strands around his face and softened some of the starvation induced angles. He'd started growing it while still a teenager mostly because it had pissed his grandmother off. He'd kept it long because it had come to mean something to him, even if the few lovers he'd managed to attract had urged him to cut it. They'd complained it made him too much a cliché, a psychic with long hair was a dime a dozen. Trist liked it, liked the way it felt loose and free around his shoulders and back. It felt good to release the braid occasionally and let go of a little control, let things float a bit.

The water was hot and steam was filling the bathroom. As he'd lost weight, he'd lost all tolerance for being cold and found that unless the water was hot enough to turn his skin red, it wasn't hot enough. It felt almost indecently good to step under its beating spray, the heat and water soothing the tight muscles of his back and shoulders that never relaxed any more. It was a physical pleasure, small though it was, and his life was too short on those. The feel of his hair, dry or wet, against his skin, the heat of shower, the comfort of being wrapped in a blanket, that was all he really had left.

Then there was always the happy little visions like what he'd plucked from Val's head. There was no doubt it was from Val directly, all the glimpses were from his point of view. He let his eyes half close as he washed off, let the fragmented memories that weren't his own tease his mind.

Matt had been tall, delightfully tall, all long legs and long body, lean long muscles. Val had liked that his roommate's hands were larger than his own, he'd liked the way one hand could curl around his shoulder so totally. Trist knew that the only way Matt had stayed on the basketball team was because Val had tutored him, it was one of the reasons why they'd gotten along so well

to begin with. The college aged Val who had felt a deeper bond to his books then he'd ever felt toward a person, had been drawn out by the popular basketball star.

Trist's mind stumbled on one moment, one that was bright in Val's mind and had been easily picked up. The pair had been studying, bent over a copy of some dry, dull English literature book. It made Trist smile at how most of Val's sharpest memories were tied so closely to books, not a vision but a strong sense from the man. Matt had been loosing interest fast in the lesson Val was trying to get across and Val, being oblivious as always, hadn't noticed.

Matt put a hand on his roommate's jean clad knee. "How about a break?" He'd whispered.

"Not until we get through this chapter." Val had scolded, missing the meaning of the soft touch and whispery words.

The hand trailed higher up Val's inner thigh, instantly making him hard, making him forget what it was they were reading. The vision was so strong, even over so many years, that Trist's own breath caught and his own body grew painfully aroused. He tossed his head back under the spray of the water and moaned a little, letting the vision consume him as his soapy hand found his too often dormant length.

"Ahh, Pony," Matt had whispered against Val's neck. His nibbling lips had sent shivering tingles along the body he was tormenting, shivers that Trist's own body echoed. "I need motivation." His hand, those long fingers, had slid up to rub in hungry circles against Val's hard cock. "Help me, Pony, help me understand." The breath had ruffled Val's hair and pulled a whimper from the trembling, normally silent throat.

That was all Trist could stand. He never would have suspected Val could feel such passion. The memory of that moment burned so brightly, it pushed Trist over the edge. He cried out and came under the steamy water. His body trembling, shuddering, shivering in pleasure. For a moment, everything felt so good, so perfect, he almost wept, he almost forgot who he was and that the memory wasn't his own.

As his heart slowed and the euphoria faded away, Trist found an interesting thought in his mind. Most times, when his sight picked up some intimate moment from someone else, all it did was disgust him. It was like watching a bad porn movie. Only this time, something in Val's mind stirred him and he wanted more. As he finished his shower, more relaxed and stable then he'd felt in a long while, a single thought floated up. He didn't just want to pry into Val's memories of being with another man, as passionate as they were, it wouldn't be enough. Trist found he wanted to be the other man, he wanted to be the one that drew such noises from the seemingly dry and passionless man. Under the hot water, he smiled a wicked smile and liked the idea of the challenge.

Val sat, just where he'd been placed, and rolled the beer bottle between his hands. The cold was a good point of contact to focus on and that was far more comfortable then remembering Matt. Behind him, he heard Gavan on the phone, calling in dinner for the three of them but he really wasn't listening. It barely registered when the voice stopped and the phone clicked off.

"I thought I told you not to think about it too much." Gavan teased but his voice was gentle. Val was still frightfully pale and he was staring at the bottle in his hands like it might have more answers to give.

Val shook his head and swallowed hard. "Gavan, it's just, Matt and I..."

He reached a hand over to the back of the other man's neck, the same way he could for Trist. "Hey, it's not a big deal. I don't care one way or another and Trist, well, trust me, he's seen

worse. It doesn't matter if you're straight or gay or neither or both, it doesn't matter."

"No, it does, it's just, God." He sighed and glanced over. "It's good to know someone else knows."

Gavan patted a shoulder as he slid his hand away. "Trist always says that everything happens for a reason. Maybe we actually spoke last night because you really needed someone to know that, it can be an awful burden to carry in silence. I do understand. I didn't date a guy until I was twenty two but well, a secret like that isn't one for long around Trist. He thinks the entire world would be happier if they were all bi."

It took a couple of long swallows from the bottle before Val could even think his stomach and mind were settling down. "I can see how he'd scare people off."

"Yes." There was a theory to selling a home, the agent walks the couple inside and stays silent. Whatever they say, the agent agrees to and adds on along the same vein but never speaks the first word. Gavan had long since learned the same theory worked well for Trist.

"I'm not frightened." He wondered if he meant the words even as he was saying them. Matt wasn't the only thing locked inside his head, inside his memories, that he didn't like talking about. "So, I guess you should call Wally and tell him to pick you up in the morning."

Gavan hovered a moment between acceptance and uncertainty, too used to not getting his hopes up to believe. "Serious?"

"I've had odder birthdays."

That broke Gavan into a huge grin. "If I didn't think you'd deck me, I could almost kiss you!"

"I would hit you."

That only made him laugh. "Alright, I'll print out a list of phone numbers in case. Okay, let's see..." His mind was spinning, it had been so long since he'd left Trist in someone else's care that he wasn't sure where to start. In the end his mind settled on the basic care. "As I'm sure you saw, he's not eating right."

"Almost anorexic if you ask me."

"He eats, he just can't always keep it down. It's mental, totally, the more often he gets sick the more he expects to get sick the less he's willing to try. You have to make sure he's eaten but don't sweat it if you find out he's had like thirty twinkies or something awful. Anything he wants to eat, let him, it's better than when he has no interest in food. No more than a single beer, at most two and only with food and no hard liquor. Alcohol doesn't dim the voices, it just dims his control of them. Ahh, shit, sleep." Gavan bit his lip.

"What? He needs a bed time story?"

"No, he sleeps better with someone in the apartment. I'll put fresh sheets on my bed. If he's having a bad night, would you mind..."

"Staying up here?" He raised an his eyebrows. "I think I could deal for a night or two."

The breath he'd been holding whooshed out. "Cool! Nights are often harder on him, it's the nightmares. Come on, I'll show you my room, I keep his meds there." His eyes slipped to the other bedroom, on the far side of the apartment and led Val toward his bedroom.

Val followed. "I thought he wasn't on meds?"

"He's not but I've all his prescriptions filled in case. We've some pretty heavy sedatives on hand too." He pushed his room door open and let it drift shut behind him.

The bedroom was tidy, orderly and not what Val had expected. It had the same clean professional look of the entire apartment and little personal warmth to it. The bed and dresser was a light wood, the bedspread was toned in blocks of various shades of brown. Gavan moved to the bottom drawer of the dresser and pulled it open. It was nearly filled with dozens of pill bottles.

"Jesus." Val whispered and he wasn't sure the hospital pharmacy had quite so many.

"Scary looking isn't it?" Gavan moved and sat on the edge of the bed and let Val gingerly pull bottles out to read labels.

"Pertofrane, Nardil, Prozac, Remeron, Ludiomil, Adapin..."

"That's the anti-depressant side of the drawer."

"Ludiomil and this one here, the Desyrel, they block neurotransmitters, the others increase them, they're total opposites."

"I know but I told you they've had him on just about everything at one point or another trying to get it to work. Sometimes it takes me months to wean him off that shit."

Val kept digging and felt more and more horrified. "Lithium, Risperdal?"

"Ah, the bi-polar zone."

"Clozaril, Geodon, Haldol, Thorazine, Jesus Gavan, this, this isn't right." He kept pulling bottles up and saw the increasing level of sedatives. "Some of these dosages, for how much he weighs..."

"They're close to overdose levels, I know. That's another thing. I keep them in here because well, depending on how bad the day is, he'll take one, and then another and a fourth and sixth without remembering he took any. Not often but he doesn't come in here when I'm not in here, it's our deal. I stay out of his office, he stays out of my bedroom."

Val dropped the bottles back into the drawer and pushed it shut, happy to have the orange bottles out of sight. "Is he suicidal?"

Gavan just shrugged. "Do I think he wants to die? Some days, but I don't think he's ever deliberately tried to kill himself. He doesn't think like we do, if cutting himself up stops the visions, he'll do it. Don't worry, he hasn't been that bad in months."

"What triggers him?" He leaned on the dresser and finished his beer.

"Who knows? If he's working too much, that'll make things worse. Crowded places, places of death, like hospitals, cemeteries, or, like, driving past where there was a house fire and people died, he'll get it. He's erratic, he'll get swayed by other people's emotions, especially repressed emotions. He says you're filled with anger, that's why he was so enraged last night." Which sounded really freaky and odd even to his own ears.

"Can he read my mind?" Val wasn't sure he'd believe it but he had to know.

"Not really, he'll pick up images, impressions of thoughts sometimes, visions of memories, emotions, that sort of thing. Honestly, I don't know what he's capable of, he's never had to try

before. Still not freaked out?"

"Oh, close to it, but I want answers."

"Good luck getting them." The doorbell rang breaking into their conversation with the arrival of dinner. "Oh, and be warned, he'll swing from not wanting to be touched to begging to curl up next to you. Just, if he gets like that, think of him as a child. He gets scared, it helps to be petted and told it's okay."

"I'm not very good at that."

Gavan's smile softened. "Don't worry, he'll understand. After all, he has promised to behave." He prayed anyway.

Part Six

Val followed Gavan back into the living room and toyed with his beer bottle while food was delivered and money exchanged hands. The apartment soon filled with the smells of hot, Chinese food. It was an oddly comforting scent and Trist must have agreed because he came out of his bedroom sniffing the air.

"That smells fantastic!" His hair was damp and loose around his shoulders and he was deftly welding a hairbrush to force it back into its tight braid. As he was tying off the end he hurried over to hover around the brown paper bag that Gavan was carrying into their kitchen.

"Get back and what are you wearing?" He shooed at his cousin as he started to pull cartons from inside.

Trist looked down at himself, the sweatshirt had always been baggy but now he almost was drowning in it, but it was warm and had a picture of Ben Franklin on it wearing sunglasses. He liked it. Going with the theme of warmth, he'd pulled on red checked flannel pants and thick, dark green socks that had plenty of room for his toes to curl about in.

"What?" He looked generally hurt. "I was cold."

"You look homeless." Out came chopsticks from the paper bag and sodas from the fridge.

"I was fucking cold!" Trist snapped a bit more sharply than he needed to. Gavan gave him a hard look and he shook his head. "Sorry. I need one of those heat lamps like lizards have." His stomach growled loudly in a long low rumble. "Oh, come on Gav, I'm dying here!"

He pushed a box across the counter and shoved a pair of chopsticks after it. "It's like feeding time at the zoo!"

"There's a kung fu movie marathon on too!" He grinned and brushed past them to curl up in the corner of the sofa and flip the television on. "So, Val, did Gavan give you my care instructions. No food after midnight, never get me wet... oh wait that's something else."

Val nodded his thanks to Gavan as his own carton was passed over to him. "Yeah, he said I'm to take you to the park for walkies twice a day and if you mess in the house I'm supposed to smack your nose with a rolled up newspaper."

The joke was so unexpected and stated with such dry, dead pan seriousness, that Trist snorted and nearly choked to death on a carrot. Gavan chuckled, more amused at seeing Trist laugh so fully than at the joke. Too many days he felt like taking a rolled newspaper to Trist to find much

humor in the joke.

"You two will be fine this weekend." He nodded, convinced everything would be okay.

They sat and ate, sucking in vegetables and rice balanced at the points of chopsticks and watched Trist's kung fu movies. Oddly, Val felt comfortable there, sitting on their sofa, eating the take out food. The cousins were so easy together and so easy around him, that it felt foreign to him. His family had been so formal, so proper, they'd never sit together like this, laughing at good action sequences and bad dubbing. If he was a touch silent, the cousins over looked it.

"It's for you Gavan." Trist announced seemingly at random. "It's Wally."

"Cool!" He was on his feet and half way to the phone before it started ringing.

Val turned and could tell from the smile that cracked across Gavan's face and how he quickly carried the phone into his bedroom that Trist had been right. He shook his head, bit his tongue and turned back to the movie. Only, a few short seconds later, a sock clad foot nudged his shoulder.

"And you," Trist punctuated his words with little nudges from his foot. "Cut yourself some slack."

"What?" He glanced to where Trist was mostly curled up on his end of the sofa, one leg drawn up close to his body and the other left to drop between them.

"It's only been six months."

Val rubbed at his eyes that suddenly felt too watery. "I'm fine."

Trist nudged the man again with his foot. "Bullshit but it's okay, just, don't be so hard on yourself. If that fiancée of yours wasn't so cold hearted she would've had you snuggled on the sofa every night since."

"If you must know, I told her I wanted space. I have to deal with this on my own."

Trist rolled his eyes and snatched up Gavan's box of food and started finishing it off. "Just like I like my privacy but Gavan doesn't leave me alone. Sometimes, what we want isn't what's good for us." He picked out the mushrooms and happily popped them into his mouth.

"I'd rather not talk about this."

"Fine by me." He grinned and it carried a honey warmth to it. "So, tell me, why'd he call you Pony?"

"Another subject I'd rather not talk about." Val kept his eyes firmly on the television but he could feel the smile the other man wore.

"Don't make me guess, and don't make me dig for it. I'll find out one way or another, it's cute. Better then something creepy and morbid like lamb chop or something, what boy wouldn't want his very own Pony? Was it kinky? Were you a naughty boy in college? Beyond the entire homosexual affair thing, did you two get wild? I know he's the only one you let call you that, I know it was a joke between the two of you alone." Trist poked again with his foot.

"Stop that! It wasn't kinky, I'm not naughty and I'm not gay!"

"Of course not, sweetheart, whatever helps you sleep at night. Though, a good hard fucking can help you sleep at night too. Something to be said for both sides." He slurped another mushroom into his mouth, licking the sauce from his lips.

"Fine, you want to know? It's terribly dirty. When I started tutoring him, he accused me of not having any fun, said I was just a workhorse. I protested and tried to make a joke of it and show I was a smaller workhorse, that I was more of a work pony. He laughed, it stuck and he never called me anything by Pony, ever again." Val sighed in frustration and hoped the grinning man across from him didn't pick up on the double meaning. It had started out just as he'd said but once they'd become lovers, Matt often teased him about taking his Pony out for a ride. "Happy now?"

Trist set the now mushroom free box of Gavan's dinner down but his smile fled. "Yes, thank you. Sweet that it was Matt that didn't let anyone else call you that, very protective of him."

Val held up a hand. "Please, I don't want to talk about him."

Trist studied the closed and carefully guarded expression on the handsome face. It made him want to crawl into Val's lap and lick his ears like an overgrown cat just to make him smile again. Well, he had all weekend to test the waters and once Gavan was gone he doubted Val would call him home because of a little sexual tension.

"Hey," Trist cheered up. "Do you like Kurosawa? I think Seven Samurai is maybe my favorite movie? Have you seen it? The man is a fucking genius."

"Can't say that I have, sorry."

"Well, I know what we're doing sometime this weekend. You have to watch Seven Samurai with me. It's fan-fucking-tastic."

"With praise like that, how could I refuse?" Even Val wasn't sure if he was being sincere or sarcastic but he knew he'd end up watching the movie so it didn't matter.

Gavan's door opened and he came back into the living room smiling. "Wally is thrilled. God, this is going to be amazing. He's picking me up tomorrow at nine, we'll be back sometime late Monday, is that okay?" He slid down between the two men, lifting Trist's extended leg to make room and setting it down across his lap.

Trist shrugged.

"Suits me." Val muttered, a few hours more or less wouldn't make any difference.

"Thanks so much, both of you, thank you."

"Thank me on Monday afternoon." Trist sighed and wiggled around to curl up in the corner again.

"Everything will be fine, I just know it, I..." Gavan glanced into his dinner. "Hey, what happened to all my mushrooms?"

"I told Val you wanted them but he just kept eating them and eating them. Kept licking the sauce off his lips and getting me all hot and bothered too. He's insufferable. Ow! Hey!" Trist flinched from the pinch Gavan delivered. "I'm fragile, quit it."

"Just be glad I'm in a good mood, brat." It didn't miss Gavan's notice that Trist was steady, stable and almost balanced like he hadn't been in ages. Nor did he miss the quiet way Val was keeping to himself and his mind quickly started putting pieces together. Trist could be obsessive about things, and if he'd latched onto Val as a new way to distract himself, well, it would get them past the next few days. Even if Val might not ever speak to him again after dealing with the relentless Trist for the weekend.

Part Seven

At eight forty five the next morning, Gavan pulled his apartment door open to find Val waiting outside. "Oh," He sighed breathlessly. "I thought Wally had come up. Come in, sorry."

"He's not supposed to meet you here?" Val watched as Gavan hurried about the room and dropped a plain, black travel bag by the door.

"No, I'm going to meet him downstairs." He stopped and grinned the goofy grin he'd been wearing all morning. "Here, keys to the apartment." He placed the spare set on top of a carefully printed out paper. "Phone numbers. Start at the top and work your way down, they're in order of effectiveness. Only in an absolute emergency, call our aunt, if she gets called so does our grandmother and that often makes things a thousand times worse." He looked Val over in his sneakers and old jeans, wearing an old sweatshirt that he'd rolled the sleeves up on and knew the poor man really had no idea what he was getting into. "Questions?"

"Where is the hellion?"

"Still asleep, he was up until almost four so he'll sleep until at least noon, or he'd better anyway." He ran a mental checklist and couldn't think of anything he'd overlooked or forgotten. "I can't thank you enough for doing this, Val, I really can't."

He ducked his head. "Don't worry about it. It's not easy being a caretaker, you need time away. Try not to worry, I'll call if there's any problems I can't handle."

"Still, thank you." If Val had been anyone else, he'd have hugged the other man but that felt like a bad idea. "Just going to say goodbye to Trist and get out of here. You don't need to hang out up here, just leave him a note but make sure he let's you know he's awake."

Val followed, nodding, as Gavan opened Trist's bedroom door and slipped inside. He didn't follow though the door but hovered in the doorway. Trist's room was as orderly as the entire apartment except the bed. The sheets were tangled and twisted, some partly around the curled up sleeping form, most slipping over the side of the bed. Trist lay, curled into a tight ball, near the edge of the bed, sleeping off his pillows and wearing warm flannel pants and a tight fitting t-shirt that still had managed to ride up and twist about his chest.

Gavan walked softly across the room and tugged the blankets back onto the bed and draped them back over his sleeping cousin. Trist muttered a little and almost instantly unfolded from the tight curl he'd been in. "Hey, Trist?"

"Hmmm?" A sleepy groan rose up.

"I'm leaving now." He leaned down and stroked the side of the sleeping face.

"Have fun..." A hand snaked out from the covers and caught at Gavan, pulling him until he leaned down. Without even opening his eyes, Trist managed to find and kiss his cousin's lips.

"Go back to sleep, you."

"Okay." The sleepy voice muttered and the arm slithered back into the warmth.

Gavan checked to make sure the blankets were pulled far enough over Trist before leaving as silently as he'd entered. He pulled the door shut behind him. "Shit, look at the time. I need to get down there. You're sure? You're okay with this?"

Val nodded. "Go, he'll be fine, we'll be fine."

"Right." He pulled his coat on and draped the bag over his shoulder. "Right now. Okay."

"Go!" Val ordered.

"Right, okay." He smiled shakily. "Thanks, Val." And hurried out the door, shutting it behind him as he went.

Val waited, standing in the living room, for several minutes just to make sure Gavan didn't return. When it was pretty clear he wasn't going to wimp out and come back, he wrote a quick note, included his apartment number and phone number and left it out for Trist to find. He gathered up the spare set of keys and locked the apartment behind him and went back to his place.

Trist woke up a couple of times from uneasy dreams but exhaustion clawed him back to sleep and he stayed in bed until almost one. He staggered from bed, pulling his clothes about him and ended up in the bathroom. While he batted away the images from fragmented dreams, he emptied his bladder on auto pilot and scratched his side. He washed his hands and face, shaved while still yawning and brushed his teeth.

It wasn't until he stepped out into the living room and the intense emptiness of the apartment that he remembered what day it was. Gavan was gone, hours now, and from somewhere in the sleep hazy images of dreams, he vaguely remembered saying goodbye to his cousin.

Still yawning, he found Val's note on the counter. The neat handwriting was so different from his own scrawling chicken scratch but it suited the proper and controlled man perfectly. He scanned the message, reading it with eyes and senses as well. There was a promise of coffee down at Val's place if he wanted to come down and a request to eat something if he didn't. It was direct, to the point and effective. It was controlled.

"Day one, operation crack Val open, mission accepted." He grinned and wondered if he owned black spandex shorts and a green tank top. Figured even if he did he'd freeze to death before he reached Val's apartment and giggled at the silly thoughts. As he dug out clean clothes and started dressing for the day, he started to wake up and the voices started getting louder. It always made him edgy knowing Gavan wasn't there to shut him down if it came to it, like walking the tightrope with no net. If he could just stay focused on Val, maybe the voices would leave him alone for a little bit.

The apartments were well made and well soundproofed but in the hallway, Trist could hear the music drifting from Val's apartment. He doubted knocking or ringing the doorbell would do any good, if the music was as loud as he suspected. So, he did what he always did, he barged in.

The door was unlocked, not surprisingly since Val should have been expecting him. What did surprise him was seeing stacks of books everywhere. Piles of them, gathered in seemingly random order and Val moving to dust off and gather another armload. His back to the door and Trist stood, unnoticed.

The music was vaguely familiar, like some distant one hit wonder but the song wasn't one Trist had ever heard. It was obvious it wasn't a distant memory to Val, the man sang softly along with it. His deeper mumbling voice vibrating along with happily deceptive tune.

"Fuck the world around, don't let it confuse you, you're not heaven bound so God can not abuse you, just, push the feelings down when they start to come. Put those feelings in their place, 'cause this lousy human race don't deserve them, they don't deserve you, they don't deserve you." Val muttered along, his head bouncing a little to the perky tune.

It was more than Trist could stand. The sight of Val happily bopping along to any music let alone singing as well seemed so at odds with the man he'd seen that it alone would have made him laugh. Add in the perfectly ironic lyrics and he lost totally control.

Chuckling behind him stopped Val's mindless singing in it's tracks. He turned and frowned at seeing Trist leaning against his open door, smiling widely and laughing lightly. "Hey." He nodded and snatched up the remote to turn the music down.

"Holy, fucking God, it's the Valentine York theme song!" He shut the door and came into the apartment, openly studying the art on the wall and the general disorder of things.

Val listened to the song playing that had just been background noise to him. "Oh, Push the Feelings from Matthew Sweet. You know him?"

Trist shrugged. "Nope."

"It's normally more guitar rock but this new album is like a post-millennium twisted Beach Boys thing. It's good." He lowered the stack of books to one of the dozens of seemingly random piles before straightening up. "Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough."

"Good. Coffee is made, I put a mug out on the counter. Milk's in the fridge, just soy though, and sugar is in the tin there. Oh, and there's muffins in the oven, they should be cool enough to eat if you're hungry. Or, there's tuna salad in the fridge and ah, couscous but that's a couple of days old." He wiped his hands off on his jeans and considered taking a break to eat, as well. He changed his mind when he saw the suddenly uneasy way Trist was moving in his apartment. The man obviously wasn't used to being in a different setting and for as much as he was trying to not show it, Val saw through the act.

Trist nodded and was grateful when Val continued to go about his sorting. The apartment wasn't what he'd expected. Val seemed to place so little attachment on things, on people, he felt so removed that Trist had been expecting the apartment to almost be a blank slate. What he found, instead, was that everything held meanings. The art on the walls, the paintings done with shadow figures and moody shades of blues and greens, Trist knew they'd been painted by a client of Val's that had killed herself. The mug waiting on the counter top reminded Val of a vacation he'd taken as a child. The books, well he was afraid to approach the books because each one felt like a loaded gun to his senses. Even the muffins, still in their tray in the oven, had been baked as a means of releasing stress and unhappiness. It made him smile a little that Val took bitterness and made it into something sweet, that somewhere in the steady man's mind, he actually saw that image.

It was going to take a while for him to sort out things, to shift out what was relevant and what was secondary. He sat down at the high backed, raised chair that lined the counter toward the kitchen and flinched from visions that didn't arrive. Luckily, the chairs held no double meaning, no secondary reminder to Val. It let him watch Val's steady progress through the books over his very good muffin in peace.

"You know, I thought Gavan was shitting me when he said you baked." Trist shoved more of the blueberry muffin in his mouth.

"It's just from a box, not that big of a deal."

"Says you, Gavan set the kitchen on fire the last time he tried to bake something more complicated than a pizza."

"You don't cook?"

"Didn't you hear? I'm not allowed sharp objects."

"Now, who's kidding who?"

The light teasing made Trist smile. "True, I'm just too lazy to bother. That and everything I make tastes like utter shit." He started in on the second muffin. "These are nice, thanks."

"Welcome." He straightened up and noticed the time and froze.

There was no need to ask what Val was thinking, Trist saw it like a bad movie. Two o'clock, the wedding was supposed to have been at one. Trist saw a woman with shorter hair, bleached blonde streaks in it, wearing a fussy white dress and he knew. If things had gone according to the way Val had planned his life, he'd be married by now. They'd have been introduced as Mr. and Mrs. Valentine York and been in the middle of toasts to their future. Oddly, Trist felt no pain at the vision, just confusion and a sense of loss.

"So, today would have been the big day, huh?" He tried to ask the question gently but the look Val shot him made it clear he'd failed.

"Try not to do that."

"Do what?" Trist tried to look innocent and apparently failed with that as well.

"Your parlor tricks, reading my mind, whatever it is you do, just don't do it."

He slurped his coffee. "Wish it was that easy, sweetheart, but it's not. You threw that image at me, I didn't go looking for it." He promised to behave so he backed down. "Gavan get away, okay?"

"With a little fussing, yes."

"Good, it's a shame though, about Wally."

Val dusted a now empty bookshelf before moving on to the next one. "What about him?"

"He's eventually going to dump Gavan, make him cry and everything."

"You're certain?"

Trist nodded. "Yeah."

"Did you tell Gavan?"

"No, I don't tell him shit like that. He's happy now, going this weekend will prolong things. Dear Wally has his eye on a new accountant at the firm, someone as boring and stable as he is. Stupid Wally is just a house in the burbs, white fence, two point five kids kind of fag and as much as Gavan wants that, he's stuck with me. There's no room in Wally's fantasy world of the American dream for his husband's crazy ass cousin." He sighed, feeling even more like a burden. "So, bit by bit this new guy will look better and better, they'll have coffee, then dinner and opps, sex will just happen. Balless wonder won't tell Gavan until after he's snug in his new relationship."

"You can't be sure of that."

"Yeah, right, I can't be sure." He repeated with an extra helping of sarcasm. "The point is, for now, he makes Gavan happy. Lets him pretend he's got something normal and that's good."

He finished wiping off the books from the current shelf and started sorting them into stacks but he was really watching the way Trist was picking about the muffin and swirling a spoon around his coffee. "What's it like?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, do you hear voices all the time? Visions? What's it like, how does it work?"

He sighed, those questions bored him. "I did promise to behave and play nice with you so." He shrugged one shoulder and propped his head up on his hand, resting the elbow on the counter. "It's like, being in a really crowded room all the time. Sometimes the crowds thinner, sometimes it's like being in the center of a stadium. Everyone is always talking, shouting, screaming, but it all blends into this..." He shook his hand trying to figure out the right word. "This roaring. None of it makes sense as a whole but like if it was a crowded place, you can focus your ears on one voice or conversation or direction and catch snippets of meaning."

"Doesn't sound like it's being directed at you."

"It's not, not really." He smiled, softly, liking that Val was believing or trying to and that he was quick to understand. Even if he knew it was because part of his job was to quickly understand the delusional worlds of madmen, Trist was glad he didn't have to repeat himself to be understood. "Sometimes it's directed at me, shouted at me. They'll scream and curse and fuss until I listen or find a way to silence them. They don't make a lot of sense normally."

"And the visions?" He began to put the smaller stacks with the main groups.

The visions were exhausting. "Sometimes, it's like remembering a movie you've seen. It's totally inside my head. Sometimes, it'll be right here in the real world." He let his eyes drift to the side and tried to ignore the little girl standing there, staring with large, sad eyes. "Most times I can tell what's real that everyone can see and what's real that only I see, sometimes I can't." He firmly told his mind to ignore the girl. "It's normally a real pain in the ass."

"I can imagine, is that how it is when it gets bad?"

"Fuck no!" He shook his head. "When it's bad, I'm lucky to remember who I am. Nothing makes sense, I don't see things that are real and solid. Everyone's screaming at me, I can't help but do stupid shit to try to purge it out. It makes no sense but it does at the same time. I took a hit of LSD once, when I was like sixteen, that made more sense than a bad day. Shit loads more sense and trust me, a seer on acid isn't a pretty sight."

He glanced over to see if Trist was teasing him but the other man looked far too serious. "That sounds like an incredibly stupid thing to do."

"Oh, royally." He grinned. "But oddly satisfying at the same time. I've done a lot of dumb shit when I was younger. I don't see much difference between LSD and shit you docs push on me."

"I'm not a doctor and their meds were trying to make you better."

"Darling, this is as better as I get." His head whipped to the door and he shivered. "Oh, cold, cold, cold."

The change in tone made Val look up in time to see his guest staring at the door and the door in question open. The woman that walked through the door stopped his heart, but not in a good way. He stood up but still held the book he'd been cleaning off in his hands.

"Kelly."

"Hello, Val." Kelly answered and tried to smile, her eyes flicked to the strange man perched on one of the tall chairs, picking at a muffin. She moved uneasily into the apartment.

"Oh!" Trist pulled a knee up under his chin as he got a good look at her. She was slender, narrow hipped and rather tom boyish. Her short cut brown hair was streaked in trendy blonde highlights. She wore well cut jeans and a stylishly classic pale green sweater set under a sleek black coat. In her hand she held a set of keys and a very elegant, and expensive, handbag. "The ice princess!" He started biting on a fingernail. This was better than he could have asked for.

She glanced at Trist and back to Val. "You've company, I'm sorry, I should have called."

He waved a hand in Trist's general direction but his eyes stayed on Kelly. "It's okay, this is Trist, he's a neighbor. What are you doing here?" His voice hardened. "Don't you have a plane to catch soon?"

She nodded. "Yes, I..." her eyes slid to Trist and back to Val. "I wanted to see you before I left. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Val's voice answered but there wasn't any emotion in it.

"Bullshit." Trist whispered around the nail he was gnawing on.

It made Kelly look his way again. "Could we, maybe, talk somewhere in private?"

"It's okay, it won't make a difference anyway."

That wasn't like Val, he never wanted to talk in front of her, let alone someone else but she bowed her head. "I wanted to return your keys and well..." she tugged at the ring she wore and set the diamond down on the counter beside the returned apartment keys. "I know it was your mother's, I wanted to make sure you got it back."

Val's cold expression broke. "Kelly, don't, have we really come to this?"

"Val," she made no move to try to comfort him even if he looked like he'd suddenly been shot. "I'm not saying I won't ever put it back on, it's just, right now, don't you think it's for the best?"

He shut his mouth and steadied his expression. "Whatever you think is best."

"Damn it, Val! Don't you ever listen to me? I'm an inch away from leaving you!" Her anger spiked and she wanted to throw her handbag at him, punch him, anything to get past the wall of ice he'd grown between them.

"You have to do what you think is right for yourself."

She tossed her hands up. "I might as well be slamming my head into the wall for all the good this conversation is going to get me! Are you even human? Do you feel anything at all?"

Val's hands clenched around the book he now held up like a shield, against his chest.

Trist grinned. "He feels more than you'll ever know, sweetheart." He mumbled.

"Look!" She turned to point at Trist. "I don't know who you are but this doesn't concern you, stay out of it!"

He smiled wider and held his hands out to his sides, palms out, in surrender.

"Val."

"What is it you want from me?" He finally asked.

"What do I want?" She sounded generally surprised that he didn't already know the answer to that. She'd spent the last few months trying to show him, tell him and he'd never understood. "Do you even love me?"

"We were getting married."

"But do you love me?"

"Of course."

She shook her head. "Love is a verb, Val. You really want to know what it is I want? I want to be loved! I want to be loved so deeply that it hurts, I want a kill for you, die for you, climb a mountain, last forever kind of love!"

"That kind of love isn't real, Kelly, we've had this conversation."

"Okay, maybe it isn't, but I want to at least try. I can't even try with you, you don't let me! The more I try, the more you push me away. I can't live like that Val." She sighed. "Even now, hearing I'm about to walk away, forever, you just stand there."

"I've done everything you've ever wanted of me. You wanted to date, we started dating, you said you were ready to get married, I proposed, you thought we should push the wedding back, I agreed. You canceled the wedding indefinitely and I agreed. I can't win in this fight, if I agree, I don't love you, if I fight, I'm an asshole. This is who I am, Kelly, you've always known it."

She shook her head. "You aren't who I thought you were. I don't know who you are."

Val actually took a step backwards, Trist almost heard the other man's heart break. He paused, swallowed the lump in his throat and drew a slow breath. "I guess I'm not the man for you."

"Look, all, I'm suggesting is a little space." She stood her ground.

Trist snorted. "You've enough space between you to drive a truck their."

"Shut up!" Both Val and Kelly snapped at him.

"Sorry." He muttered and went back to biting his nails.

Kelly pulled her coat a little tighter around her body. "Just, think about things, okay, Val. When I come back, we'll talk about it some more. You need to figure out where your head is at, I'm tired of being the only one emotionally invested in this relationship." She sighed and moved toward the door. "I should go."

"I'm sorry, Kelly." Val forced out as she started out the door.

It froze her steps. Her head lowered. "I'm sorry, too, Val." But she shut the door behind her and didn't look back.

Part Eight

The silence was heavy in the small apartment but the voices were shouting at Trist. Val stood, as

silent as reality, still clutching the book tightly in his hands. The expression on his face wasn't one of pain or grief, or shock but a sick, twisted mix of them all coated over with stunned disbelief and raw acceptance. When he finally could move, he turned and set the book carefully down onto its proper stack.

The sound of the heavy, bound book settling gently on top of another solid book, made Trist flinch. He'd expected the book to soar through the air, smash into the wall. He expected Val to shout or curse or something. In his entire life, he'd never felt such coarse and raw emotions that somehow managed to simply redirect and disappear before reaching the surface. Trist knew his eyes had grown wide as he watched the purely internal train wreck of Val's heart.

"Well," He started softly, oddly afraid if he spoke at a normal tone that Val would just snap. "It might be for the best. She's going to get an awful case of crabs from some dude named Javier."

Val held his hand up and he swallowed a couple of times before he could get his voice to work. "Trist?" He was barely able to force out a whisper. "Excuse me a moment."

"Val.." but whatever he might have said went unspoken and would have been unheard. Val brushed past the stacks of books, knocking one over. His head was bowed and he disappeared behind his closed bedroom door.

Trist sat and sipped his coffee. He let his eyes fall half closed and tried to indirectly listen to the noise around him. None of it seemed relevant so it was odd that the moment Val had grown upset, the volume had gone way up. He gave himself a moment to settle down, to let the noise drop down or maybe just to adjust before he set the mug down and went to follow Val.

"Huh." He muttered as he found his feet unwilling to walk past the fallen stack of books. He tried again but his feet simply refused to move. "Well, this sucks." He closed his eyes and tried to picture his feet taking another step forward but his body refused to move. He took two steps back and everything functioned to do that but again, when he reached the spilled line of books, his body simply wouldn't step over them.

"Fine." He knelt down and started to roughly gather the books up.

Only, his angry gathering of the spilled volumes slowed. His fingers traced the oddly warm covers and that warmth spread up his arm and filled him. Trist knelt, turning the books over in his hands, tracing their lines, filled with wonder at the deep emotions embedded in them.

With reverent hands, he restacked them. Each volume held memory, yes, but he wasn't seeing specifics. The entire collection was so imbued with safety and warmth, they oozed out a feeling of contentment and security. It was peaceful, just handling them spread the peace into Trist and he found himself smiling as understanding dawned. These volumes, these books, were Val's friends. Likely the only ones that had ever stood by him, the only ones he allowed himself to feel safe with. He'd poured so much of himself into the reading and rereading of their lines that the characters inside the stories would step from the page and comfort him if they'd been given the option.

"I understand." Trist smiled and patted the stack. "I do, thank you." They couldn't return Val's trust and friendship, but they could entrust Trist to do it for him. "Now, may I pass?"

This time, when he tried to step forward, his feet actually moved. It was yet another wonderful side of his birthright, being accosted by books, but a fairly harmless one for a change. He managed to reach Val's bedroom door with no further troubles and listened outside the door with all his senses.

He heard nothing so he knocked lightly. "Val?" He whispered, knowing the man wasn't able to hear and not wanting him to hear. "I'm coming in, tell me to piss off now or hold your peace?" He

waited, knowing Val wasn't going to answer. "Good enough."

The door swung open freely and he crinkled his nose at the disorder. The bed wasn't made and didn't look like it got made, ever. One of the dresser drawers stood open, the socks inside weren't paired. Dirty clothes piled into a corner, apparently where they'd been thrown from across the room. It made him want to straighten and tidy and the idea of seeing what chaos may be lurking in the closet made him shudder.

"Val?" The light under the mostly shut bathroom door was shining out into the darker bedroom. He heard water running as he got closer. "Val?" The emotions churned out with the spilling light, too mixed to pin down and identify.

Trist pushed on the bathroom door lightly and it swung in. Val was leaning over the sink, splashing water on his face, letting it drip away forgotten. The sight of Val curled over the sink, wet, the smell of Val in the small space, the man's emotional unease and vulnerability, it was an intoxicating blend. It shot across Trist's nerves and settled in the pit of his stomach, the ember of a desire waiting to be fanned into a fire.

"Hey?"

Val let the cold water roll from his face one more time before shutting the water off and snagging a towel. The soft cotton felt good against his skin, the darkness it provided felt safe. He had a crazy image of pulling the towel over his head and pretending he didn't exist.

Trist chuckled at that image. "I don't think it would work."

"Please, stay out of my head."

"Then don't fucking project it to me!" He snapped back, angry because of the undertow of Val's never expressed anger. He bite a little on his lip and shook his head. "Sorry."

"I," Val dropped the towel onto the counter. "I forgot to ask Gavan what you two normally have for dinner."

Trist pushed forward, snatched up the towel and folded it into a neat lines. "Fuck's sake Val! Dinner should be the last thing you're worried about!"

He shook his head. "I don't get to cook for two very often, I can't manage to cook for one."

"Val! Are you okay?" Trist was starting to wonder if he'd had another episode. Maybe he was in a padded room somewhere and this was all in his head. That made a hell of a lot more sense than the walking iceberg across from him.

"I'm fine."

"Like hell you are." He dropped the neatly folded towel back on the counter top. "No point in lying, I know better."

Val's mouth tried to work but no sound came out. His face twisted up in pain but no tears fell. Trist raised his eyebrows, waiting for the steady man to give in. Val shook his head and his knees buckled.

"Whoa!" Trist sprang forward and caught an arm around the taller man's ribs and eased them both to the cool tile floor. Val sprawled around Trist like a puppet who's strings had been cut.

"Say it." Trist demanded.

"What?" Val managed to force out.

"I know what you're feeling but you need to say it."

Val shook his head and couldn't meet those intense eyes. "Who's supposed to be the nut case here?"

"We're all nutcases, baby doll. Some of us are just a little more honest about it." He smiled softly and dared to brush the soft brown hair back. "Say it."

"I..."

Trist waited but Val didn't continue. "Come on, you?"

Val drew a slow breath. It felt insanely good to have those slender fingers sliding across his hair. "I can't take much more." The words spiked a sharp pain into his chest.

Trist watched as Val shut his eyes and how he drew a slow, shuddering breath but it was how he leaned into the comforting tease of Trist's hand in his hair that sent shivers of delight across his body. He wanted to lean forward and kiss the tight, unhappy mouth across from him. If he was anyone else, he might have, but every sight and sense Trist had screamed not to. He'd gain a bigger foothold by not taking advantage of the other man's vulnerability.

He behaved, but just barely. There was no doubt that speaking such a simple line had taken a tremendous amount for Val, that it was horribly vulnerable to him and Trist respected that and stopped pushing. He stroked across the hair one more time before forcing his hand to retreat.

"I'm not fussy, so long as I don't have to cook it, I'll eat anything." And his mind provided the dirty joke to go along with that.

Val nodded and straightened up a little. The broken look started to fade. "Okay." He drew a breath and then another and bit by bit backed away from the edge of a breakdown.

"You know, we've the fixings for really good soft tacos, sound good to you?"

"Suits." Val nodded, starting to pull his legs under him. "About Kelly?"

"Hmmm?"

"How bad of a case of crabs?" He pulled himself to his feet and offered a hand to help Trist up.

The slender man was grinning again. "Bad. Real bad." He let his fingers slid from Val's hand.

"Almost makes me feel better."

Out in the living room, Val stood and stared at the task he'd undertaken and just couldn't summon the energy to finish. He hated leaving the books sitting about in stacks but he'd rather that than handle them in the mood he was in. Taking the time to bring them to was a pleasure, not a burden and he wasn't in the mood to enjoy it.

"So," Trist started behind him. "Guess ya like to read, huh?" It was really lame but he wasn't used to being the one putting someone else back together, he was far more used to being the one that had fallen apart.

Val nodded. "A good number of these were my uncles. It's the only thing we ever had in

common.”

“Huh.” Trist nodded and refused to see the shadow of the grumpy, self centered uncle that lurked in a corner near Val. He refused to focus and give the vision form and shape. His eyes fell on a distraction when they landed on the diamond ring left sitting on the counter. “You should put this someplace safe.” Trist reached over and picked the circle of cold metal and stone up.

“Oh!” His eyes went wide. “Oh fuck, no, oh, no, oh fucking hell!”

Val turned at the cursing to see Trist stumble backward. The slender man fell hard against the counter top, the edge ramming into his spine but he showed no reaction to it. His odd eyes were wide and unseeing, scanning around but not watching anything in the physical world. The string of swearing died off into choking, gagging gasps. With each moment, it became more and more clear that Trist was having greater difficulty breathing.

Val moved on instinct, his eyes fell to where Trist held his mother’s ring between an index finger and thumb. He swatted out one hand and knocked the ring from Trist’s fingers. As soon as the contact was broken, Trist lurched forward, falling against Val’s chest. He clung there, gasping, gagging, choking for air and managing to get only a few raspy breaths down his throat.

His arms wrapped around the slender man without being forced. Val held on as, slowly, the coughing and retching eased and Trist started to breath easier. “If you’re going to puke, let me know. I’d rather not have you do it down my shirt.”

Trist shook his head and nuzzled in a little tighter to the warm chest. It had almost been worth it to end up where he was now, almost. “I’m okay.” He croaked out.

“Can I get you something?”

“Water? All I can taste is dirt.” His voice wheezed and he let Val nudge him into a chair. When the glass of cold water appeared, he wrapped his hands around it and drank thirstily. “Fuck me.”

Val moved carefully, found the ring and picked it up. “Should I ask what just happened?” He set the ring down in front of the pictures on the one shelf that didn’t hold books.

Trist refused to look at that shelf, there were far too many shadowy half formed visions waiting over there and he wasn’t in the mood. “That was your mother’s ring.” He stated again.

It wasn’t a question but Val nodded. “Yes.”

“She was wearing it when she died.”

“Yes.”

“God damn, Val, she died in a fucking cave in!” His face twisted up as those last moments of panic and pain floated across his mind again. “Fucking buried alive!”

“She was an anthropologist, my father was an archeologist, they worked as a team. The summer when I was eleven, Violet and I were sent to summer camp so they could go help a dig for six weeks.” It was so easy to say the words so long as he didn’t think about it. “A week and a half into their stay, they were down in one of the tunnels, the support beam wasn’t properly braced, it collapsed and killed them and five others. They told me that it was quick, that they’d been crushed.”

“Yeah, quick, and the tooth fairy, Easter bunny and Santa Claus get together for tea every Tuesday. Quick my ass.” He muttered into his water before he remembered who it was that was listening. “Oh, Jesus, Val, I’m sorry.”

Val waved it off. "I've always suspected the truth. You okay?"

The words were neutral but Trist felt the cold grief behind them. He nodded. "Yeah."

As much of a shock as it was for him, Val figured it had been far worse for Trist. The slender man hunched over the glass of water, his eyes looked sunken in. What little color he'd had was faded and gone. His breath still caught in his throat in a wheezing gasp and all the previous, if somewhat annoying, life had drained from him.

"This happen often?"

"Often enough."

Val stood in helpless uncertainty before he settled on the only thing he really knew how to do. He pulled the unfolded blanket from the back of the sofa and tossed it around Trist's hunched shoulders. "Come on, you'll be more comfortable on the sofa."

He gave in to the gentle tugging mostly because he was too shaken to protest. Val was right though, his sofa was old and soft and accepted his weight like falling onto a cloud. The sofa and blanket both smelled like Val, which he found oddly comforting, as he watched the man in question move to one of the stacks of books.

One of his fingers slid down the spines until he found the book he'd been looking for. He gently eased it out and settled on the sofa, squirming a little to reach a comfortable position. Without explaining, Val opened the book and thumbed through the pages until he settled on the story he'd been looking for.

"The Purloined Letter, by Edgar Allen Poe."

"You're going to read to me?" He wasn't sure if the idea pleased him, amused him, or offended him.

"Yes, now, hush."

"You're going to read me Poe?"

"Yes." Val sighed and started to question the idea.

"Like I don't have enough nightmares."

He looked across to the other end of the sofa. "If you don't want me to, say so."

Trist shook his head so hard it hurt. "No! I'm sorry." No one had read to him since he'd been a small child. He'd fallen asleep, then, to the sound of his great aunt reading children's tales to him and Gavan, it was a memory he hadn't even recalled in years. "Please, I've never read that story." Truth was, he wasn't a reader, his mind was too scattered for it.

"Okay but if it bores you, tell me and I'll stop."

"It won't."

"At Paris, just after dark one gusty evening in autumn..." Val started.

Trist leaned back and shut his eyes and focused only on the sound of Val's voice. It blocked out the noise, shut off the looping image of dirt and death and he surrendered to it. Before the story was half way read, Trist had slid across the sofa, drawn to the soothing voice and the steady

pattern of Poe's words. Before the end was reached, he was almost curled up against Val, his head lolling gently against the other man's shoulder and all of the earlier panic and fear was completely gone.

Part Nine

Val closed the book when he'd finished reading the last lines, his throat dry and his voice a little scratchy. He normally didn't speak so much over the course of days, let alone hours but it had been worth it. Trist not only had relaxed, he'd been drawn into the story and ended up leaning most of his weight against Val.

They sat in silence as Val tried to twist and see if the face buried against him was awake or not and found the angle too sharp to give him a clear answer. He shifted his weight and freed the arm Trist had curled against, only instead of pulling away, he found himself stroking a hand across the buried head. The hair felt fine and silky even being so tightly pulled back, the braid was a tight rope that Val struggled with the urge to unravel.

"You awake?"

Trist sighed and took advantage of the opening to wiggle himself under Val's arm. He curled up there, head pillowed against the strong chest, ear pressed to flesh to listen to steady breath and heartbeat. "Kelly is a fucking twat."

The stroking hand faltered at the vulgarity but Val shook his head. "She's really a good person."

"Doesn't mean she's still not an utter twat." He sighed and would have crawled into Val's lap if he thought he could get away with it. "You're amazing. When I convince you to fall madly in love with me, I'm going to beg you to read to me like this all the time."

Val's hand stopped. "What?"

Trist worked his way around until he was sitting in the opposite direction and able to look into Val's uncertain face. "Not a seeing, just a challenge, don't look so panicked. She was never happy with who you are, always wanted you to be different. I really like the man I see, not the man I think you should be."

"Really, Trist, I'm flattered but, I'm not..." Val's protests were shut off because Trist struck.

He was already well within the quiet man's personal space, within the circle of his arms and had full access to the core as it were so it was a very simple matter to surge forward. Before Val even had time to register that he was moving, Trist had both of his hands wrapped around the startled face and his lips pressed to the protesting pair across from him. Val pulled back instinctually but Trist followed and allowed him no escape.

If Val really wasn't gay and was happy dating his ice princess bitchy women, Trist would shortly have a black eye. The shock of the moment was wearing off, the mouth, caught in a kiss in mid-protest, trembled below his own. Trist tickled the line of uncertain lips with the tip of his tongue and braced for impact.

Val didn't hit him, instead he tried to force Trist back by attempting to rise from the sofa. That was easily solved, Trist straddled the body in front of him and let his weight settle down onto Val, almost, but not quite in his lap. He flicked his tongue again in tease or challenge, felt the way Val's entire body tensed and for a horrible moment thought he was going to get thrown across the room.

Val didn't do that either. His arms moved to pry the slender body from his own, but as soon as his hands encircled the too skinny waist, all of his will melted. The tension poured from his body and dribbled away forgotten, everything suddenly felt limp and weak. He surrendered. He moaned. He parted his lips and let Trist really kiss him.

Trist sighed and struggled for dominance but he knew Val's resistance was just another barrier. Val wanted to give in, but like everything, he had to be convinced or coerced before he'd let himself enjoy it. Trist used his grip on the sides of Val's face to tilt the man's head back, raised himself a little up on his knees and used the sheer physical presence of hovering over him to force Val to surrender and let go. But when he shuddered a little, a tiny shiver that Trist found his own body echoing, and stopped trying for control, the kiss became the sweetest one Trist had ever felt.

He teased, he tormented, he swallowed the small, whimpering sounds that Val was making. Trist wanted to press down into the warm body, arch his hips down into Val's and take them both from half hard to aching hard. He wanted to rub their bodies together until they both found release, or suckle on the pillar of Val's neck, finding all the right places, until he was begged to suck on something much more satisfying. However, Trist had promised to behave, so he left it with a single, breath taking, kiss.

As he backed away, the hands around his waist clenched tightly to him and he wasn't sure if they were gripping in a final protest or a final plea for more. Trist nibbled on Val's lower lip before letting it go. "Gay." He announced into hazy, lust clouded, soft brown eyes.

Val blinked and tried to re-boot his brain. "What?"

"I was finishing your sentence." Trist grinned and leaned back, sitting on Val's knees. "You said, 'I'm not...' and I finished it for you, gay."

"Oh." He was breathing too hard, he was too hard. He let his hands slid from Trist's waist but that just put them on his thighs and that wasn't any better. He pulled them from the slender body and let his arms drop beside him onto the sofa.

"Unless," Trist began with a teasing, sexy, smile. "You were going to say 'I'm not straight' or 'I'm not interested in stupid twats when I've sexy, slightly disturbed psychics in my life'?" He leaned forward again, forcing Val back into the sofa and to tilt his head up to look him in the eye. "And, buddy boy, if it was that last one, the insane seer you're speaking of had damned well better be me, cause I can get awfully jealous."

The tormenting lips returned again, but this time it was a quick, passing kiss that left Val's head supported only by the back of the sofa and his eyes shut. "Trist, I..."

Trist stretched and untangled himself from Val. "I'm starving! Let's go eat dinner? That muffin was good but having a bad vision like that always makes me so hungry!"

Val watched the lithe form slide off his legs and skip around stacks of books with more grace than he'd seen from the other man yet. "Trist?" He managed to whisper out, confused and hard and uncertain.

"Oh, I haven't had tacos in so long! Do you like hot sauce, if it doesn't make my eyes water it's not worth eating." He forced himself to smile lightly, and forced himself to not return to the sofa to continue what he'd started. "Come on, Val! I'm wasting away here!"

Frowning now, and still hard, Val forced himself to follow. He was good at pretending everything was okay, he was just used to it being not okay in an unpleasant way. They locked up his apartment and rode up to make dinner in Trist's and the entire trip up left Val confused enough that he was able to regain control of his body.

Val tossed dinner together while trying to analyze what had happened on the sofa but it wasn't easy. Trist kept bumping into him, sliding an arm against his shoulder, letting a leg brush against his own and it was slowly driving him crazy. It'd been years since he felt so out of control about sex, so consumed with the idea of physical contact. He just didn't think of himself as a sexual creature. In fact, it had been so long he had to think about when was the last time he'd been so easily turned on.

His mind stopped. It had been Matt. He hadn't been so easily stirred up since college and it had been Matt not his girlfriend that had always done it to him. Porn did nothing for him, in print or on videos, except, sometimes, it made him laugh. That didn't seem odd, he'd known other straight men that didn't find porn or strip clubs sexy. Not being turned on by slutty pictures or women that only wanted his money didn't make him gay. It's not like he got hard thinking about men. Trist brushed against him again and it sent tingles of pleasure across his body, made him jump a little, startled, and he ended up burning his finger against the side of the skillet.

"Ouch!" He pulled his hand back and sucked the burn into his mouth. From the corner of his eye he saw Trist grinning at him. Val pulled the burnt side of his finger out of his mouth.

"Careful." Trist warned, brushed his hip against Val's side as he slid past him to get plates out. He nearly broke down and laughed at how Val jerked away from the contact. It would so easy to push again, trap Val against the counter top, kiss him silly, but this was a game of slow advancement and careful holding of ground. If he went too fast, he'd spook Val off, and he didn't need to be a psychic to know Val was already on an uneasy, low simmer.

He glanced over a shoulder to see Val stirring a covered pot, a wonderful aroma drifted over and made his stomach growl. "God, what are you cooking? I thought this was taco night?"

"Dirty rice, to go with, is that okay?"

"You made dirty rice? From scratch?" Trist tried to nose his way in to smell but Val dropped the lid back onto the pot.

"It's not difficult, peppers, onions, rice, parsley, spices and such. You two really don't cook, do you?"

"Pretty obvious isn't it? You apparently do. Who taught you?" There was a flash as soon as he'd asked of a soft, round, older woman with white hair and a deep laugh but it faded as soon as he saw it. Trist shook his head and stayed out of Val's way while he plated up dinner.

"What? You can't just pluck it out of the air?" Val knew he was mocking but he couldn't keep his words gentle when he was so unbalanced.

"I'm fucking trying to not be a total pain in your ass." He snapped. "It's not easy, I'll go looking if you'd rather? It was just a simple fucking question!" The anger was swift and sharp and carried him away. He wanted to scream in rage, break something or someone and Trist knew it was totally from Val. He struggled with it, tried to force it out but it was a losing battle.

Val turned and slid a plate of steaming hot food next to where Trist was visibly shaking in anger. His anger, if Gavan was right, and it seemed whenever Trist tried to ask about him, all the other man got back was rage. Val sighed and reached out, he let his fingers slid along Trist's neck the way Gavan had the other night, let his hand rest along the tense column.

"Her name was Anna, she was the cook at my uncle's house in England. Every summer we'd go over and he'd do his research and ignore Violet and I. The only one to care that we were there was Anna." He shrugged. "I hung out a lot in the kitchen and I paid attention."

Trist shuddered under the light touch but it wasn't sexual. All his playing games of earlier disappeared, all the building tension and desire to kiss Val again was gone in the face of the anger the seemingly calm man carried. There was no way Trist could shunt it off so easily, pure, raw emotion was the hardest thing for him to process. Gavan had to turn him off or he had to let it run its course, those were the only two options. Only, as Val slid a hand along his neck and casually explained, the rage faded. It didn't turn off like with Gavan but it dimmed down, eased back and let him regain control of himself.

He nodded, swallowed hard and missed the hand that disappeared from his neck. "Thanks." But Trist couldn't swear if he was thanking Val for answering or for helping him keep control. He wasn't even sure if Val had any idea of what he'd just done.

"Welcome." He smiled softly. "Now, eat, while it's hot."

Trist barely had himself onto a stool before he was shoving food into his mouth. His eyes half closed in pleasure as the spicy, warm food filled his stomach. Val just sat a moment and watched before he shook his head.

"Slow down, you'll make yourself sick."

Trist licked sauce from his fingers. "You have no idea." He moaned at the sharp taste. "I'm in a food is my friend cycle, I'm going to enjoy it." A stray piece of shredded cheese was popped into his mouth. "So when I hit the cycle again where the thought of food makes me puke, I'll at least have enjoyed it now. Right now, everything tastes so good." He made no apologies, it was a small enough pleasure. "Especially how good this rice is!" He pointed at the half finished pile with a fork.

Val shook his head and almost laughed at how happy such a simple thing made Trist. "There's more on the stove if you want it."

They ate dinner and Val watched the skinny man put away twice what he'd expected and in the same amount of time Val took to eat at a more normal pace. He'd thought about going back to his apartment after dinner but Trist pulled him to their sofa and turned on the television. It was pretty clear the other man wasn't eager to be alone and since Val had no burning desire to stare at his books all sitting in lonely stacks with no heart in him to finish the project tonight.

This time, Trist made no pretense about staying on his side of the sofa. As soon as Val was settled down, Trist flopped down beside him. He wormed and wiggled and laid down. His body curled up on the remaining two thirds of the sofa and before Val could protest, he plopped his head onto the other man's legs. Trist smiled as he felt the man tense under the contact but he squirmed a little, sighed and stayed put.

Val held very still but his mind blanked out. He waited for Trist to push the contact, started thinking of escape plans, but all the other man did was sigh and relax. Which was a far cry from what Val was able to do, he sat, tense and ready to bolt for a good half hour.

Trist sighed again. "Fat and happy." He pulled his knees up closer to his chest and laughed a little at the silly movie that flickered across the tv. He was making a huge effort to block everything out except the show, no voices, no visions, no thoughts about how the back of his head was so close to rubbing against Val's groin, nothing but the comedy. It was working, bit by bit he felt Val's thighs start to relax under him.

Finally, Val sighed. "If you're going to stay like that, I need to move." He wanted to push Trist away but it felt so good to have his weight close by. It felt comfortable, made him forget Kelly and the wedding and Violet's anniversary and his own birthday.

"Awww, fat, happy, comfortable, don't move." Trist protested but Val tugged on his braid until he

sat up a little.

Only, Val didn't push him away. He just curled his own legs up on the sofa, his body tucked into the corner of seat and side, legs curling near Trist's chest. "You're skinny, you'll fit." Val patted the space behind his legs.

There was no asking him twice, Trist slithered between the back of the sofa and Val's curled legs. He fit perfectly. When he lowered himself back down, his head pillowed on the outer edge of one Val's thighs, it was the most comfortable position he'd ever watched television in.

He promised Gavan he'd behave, he'd promised. "Thanks Val, this is nice." He sighed and tried to relax.

"Welcome." It was nice, as he relaxed into the feel of another person touching him, it felt really nice. So nice, that Val didn't even notice when he started stroking a hand in soft caresses over Trist's head.

Part Ten

They stayed that way for almost an hour. "Bloody hell!" Trist sighed and sat up with no warning, a moment later the phone rang. "I'm not working this weekend!" He shouted toward the phone.

It kept ringing.

"Damn it!" He pulled himself off the sofa and snatched the still ringing phone from where it had been charging. "No!" He snapped into the phone. "I'm not working, Lydia!"

Val watched as Trist paced and rubbed his eyes.

"No, no, it's late, it's almost nine. No, it isn't about money, Lydia, I'm not working!" He turned and kept pacing back and forth, shaking his head. "No." But he sighed and the anger was being battered down. Trist bite a little bit at a nail and sighed. "Hang on a second." He pulled the phone from his ear and pushed a button before setting it down.

"Problems?"

"Sort of. Look, Lydia is a good client, she's stinking rich and can't pick out which one of her stinking rich boyfriends to date tomorrow. Girl is hopeless I swear, she doesn't need me, she needs a slap upside the head. But, she pays ridiculous amounts of money to talk to me, so who am I to refuse." He sighed and studied Val's face, it was a huge risk working while Gavan was gone. "I promised Gavan I'd behave but she'll pay me more for an hour than he makes in a week. I'm going to do this over the phone, so it shouldn't be so bad but her fucking grandfather always shows up and yells at me to yell at her, it's his money, he earned it, blah blah blah. If you tell me not to, I'll hang up on her."

"Well," Val didn't know what to say. "You know what's best."

Trist bit his nail again. "Would you wait until we're done? It'll be like an hour? In case, you know, I flip out or something."

"I can wait."

"Good, thanks, good." He moved to pick up the phone, pushed a button again and held it to his ear. "Okay, but only over the phone and no more than an hour, agreed?" He grimaced at the voice on the other end. "Fuck child, settle down, let me get into my office."

Val watched as Trist disappeared into the only room he hadn't yet seen, the slender man shaking his head as he pulled the door shut behind him. It didn't leave Val a lot to go on, he flipped the tv to a basketball game, college this time, and waited.

It wasn't an hour, it was closer to two, before the office door opened and Trist shuffled out. He dropped the phone back onto its charger, rubbing at his eyes and looking wilted. "Fuck, I could hate that girl. She's not even a girl, she's like thirty five."

"You okay?" Val stood from where he'd sat, waiting.

"Yeah, just headache and really tired. I'm going to have to crash. Are you, no, you're not staying up here. Okay, well I've your phone number, if I wake up I might need to call you." He didn't want Val to leave, but he was suddenly so tired, drained.

"Call, if you need anything, call me." He clicked off the television and circled around sofa. "I'll pop up tomorrow morning when I get up but if you're still asleep, come downstairs when you're awake, okay?"

"Sure." He followed Val to the door, and admittedly, he wasn't thinking clearly. When he saw Val really meant to just leave, he reached a hand out and caught one of Val's shoulders.

"What?"

That was all Trist allowed him to get out. The firm grip, and how was such a skinny man able to be so strong Val didn't know, tugged him backward and pushed him against the wall beside the door. Before he could even process what was happening let alone react to it, Trist was pressed against him. One of the slender legs slid between Val's legs, the knee rising up slightly just to tease at contact. Trist's hands caught his shoulders a breath before his lips crushed into his own.

There was no thought to fight this time, Val's mind exploded. His lips parted with a whispered moan and his eyes dropped shut under the assault of Trist's demanding kiss. The wall behind him didn't feel solid, he felt like he was melting into it, or melting down it and his knees were weak enough to support the latter theory. Such a simple thing like a kiss totally dissolved him and Val found himself embarrassingly aroused by it.

Trist broke the kiss with a shuddering sigh before he nipped at Val's neck and ear. "What? You'd think I'd let you leave without kissing me goodnight?" He grinned into the neck and ignored his pounding headache.

"Trist, I..."

He shook his head and opened the apartment door and half pushed Val out into the hall. "Night, Val, I'll see you tomorrow." Trist smiled softly, Val stood in the hallway looking shocked and hideously sexy. One of his graceful hands had risen up to press to his kiss swollen lips but Trist saw the confusion in his eyes. "Sleep well." He shut the door on Val's stunned face.

He wondered how long Val would stand there, in the hallway, looking like he wanted someone to fuck him, before he'd turn and go to his own apartment. It was an ideal thought, one Trist was too tired, in too much pain, to linger on. He staggered his way to his bedroom, turning out lights as he went and fell into his bed.

"All of you, shut the fuck up! I'm tired!" He shouted into the silent apartment and pulled his pillow over his head.

He wasn't gay. Val stood in the hallway staring at the closed apartment door, his hand touching his mouth like some idiot child. The kiss, so sudden and so wicked, so hot, had instantly made

him hard again.

"I'm not gay." He whispered into the empty hallway. "He's just got me turned around." He shook his head and headed for the elevators. "I've had sex with women." He mumbled waiting for the elevator to arrive. "Good sex with women, lots of times." Val was too caught up in his thoughts to notice the odd looks the couple leaving the elevator gave him as he stepped in.

Kelly couldn't be an example. She was as busy with her job as he was with his. They only really saw each other two or three times a week and they didn't always have sex but that was because they were busy and tired and she'd like to go out instead of staying in. Val conceded that it had been Kelly that had initiated most of their sexual encounters but that didn't mean anything, he just wasn't a very sexual person.

The uncomfortable tightness in his pants debated how much of a sexual person he was. Val ignored the evidence.

If Kelly was removed from the picture, he still had other women in his past that he'd had very good sex with. Lisa, his girlfriend in college, they'd had a solid relationship. The sex hadn't been mind blowing, but it had been sweet and gentle.

His traitorous memory agreed with the tight fit of his pants, sex with Lisa had been okay, nothing like sex with Matt. It was the rougher touch, the feel of hard lines instead of soft. He'd had great sex in college, but it hadn't been with Lisa.

Val told his memory to stop helping.

Besides, Lisa was a lesbian. She was having great sex now with Inez. They would have been out this weekend for the wedding had Inez not been seven months pregnant with their first child. It occurred to him, maybe Lisa wasn't bi-sexual, maybe she'd been a lesbian all along. Maybe that's why the sex had been okay but not great. Maybe, and he knew it was absurd, maybe he was just such a bad lover that he'd pushed her from being bi to being gay.

So, now Kelly was out and so was Lisa, he let his mind search for other women and found only the Irish girl he'd lost his virginity too. He'd been seventeen, drunk, at a country fair and hanging out with other teens he didn't know. That didn't qualify as great sex, he barely remembered it.

Three women, one he was drunk with, one he'd turned into a lesbian and one that he'd almost had to have his arm twisted to sleep with didn't make a great track record. On the other hand was one man, pushy, demanding, rough, teasing, hot, sexy, erotic man that had curled his toes. Four people in twenty nine years, it was almost absurd.

"I'm not gay." He repeated as the door to his apartment opened. "I'm not, I couldn't have had sex with women if I was gay. It doesn't work that way."

But, Lisa had sex with him for years. Was she bi or a lesbian? If she was bi, he could understand but if she was a lesbian, not at all interested in men. His mind stopped, unwilling to finish the sentence because if Lisa was gay, and had not only had sex with a man but somewhat enjoyed it, that would mean he could be gay too.

"I can't be gay." He sighed out, not even noticing his protest had weakened. The clock on the wall showed it wasn't that late, not that late at all in Seattle where Lisa and Inez lived, certainly not to late to call.

He dialed the number from memory and Lisa picked up on the third ring.

"Hello?" She was laughing, her voice was warm and happy, it almost made Val hang up. "Hello?"

"Hello, Lisa."

There was a pause. "Val? Oh my God, we were just talking about you! How are you?"

He started tracing patterns on the countertop with one finger, suddenly wondering what he was doing. "I'm okay. How're you, and Inez and the baby?"

"Oh, I'm fine, the baby is splendid and Inez is being a pain in my ass." There was a muffled protesting shout in the background and Lisa laughed again. "So, you and Kelly pick out a new date? If it's far enough down the road Inez and the baby will come."

The wedding, he'd forgotten he'd promised to call them with the new date. They were one of a very short list of none work acquaintances he'd invited. "About that, there isn't going to be a wedding."

"Oh, no! What's happened? Is everything okay with you two?" She asked as if she knew already.

"Kelly," he glanced to the keys still on the counter. "Well, I think she's left me."

"Aw, Val, I'm so sorry, when did this happen?"

"This afternoon." He sighed.

"She dumped you on the day you were supposed to have gotten married?" Her voice rose now, growing angry.

"Yeah, ironic huh?"

"Bitch, I never liked her. Are you okay? Want me to come out for a few days?"

The offer washed warmth over him and drew a slight smile to his face. "Thanks but I'm okay. Lisa, I'm sorry to bother you, I've just been doing a lot of thinking and I wanted to ask you..."

His voice got cut off by a sharp squeal of startled surprise. "Hang on a sec, Val." There was a muffled sound of a hand covering the receiver or it being pressed to her stomach but Val still heard her clearly. "Stop it Inez! Kelly dumped him today! Uh huh, I said that too, go, I'll be right there, baby." There was a scratchy muffled sound again. "Sorry about that, I swear, being pregnant has made her continuously horny. If I'd known being gay would be this much work, I'd have stayed with you! We had a good, safe, asexual thing going on." She teased lightly. "At least we got sleep!"

He frowned. "Did you really see us that way? As asexual?"

There was an uncomfortable pause but Lisa had never openly lied to him before and she wasn't ready to do so now. "Val, come on, you always knew I was a lesbian. That's why we were together, wasn't it?"

He hadn't always known. "You see me as asexual?" See! He scolded the tightness of his pants, he really wasn't a sexual person.

"Actually," she started slowly. "I always thought you were gay. I think you were dating Kelly like three months before I figured out Kelly was a girl."

He almost dropped the phone. "What would make you think I was gay?" His voice rose in shock and a little fear.

"Well, you aren't obvious like a flaming queen or anything, I mean there's no sign on your back

that says 'hey I'm a big homo' but I don't know, I always just assumed. That's why we were so good together, I wasn't ready to be what I was and I figured you weren't either. And, well, you never looked at me the way you and Matt sometimes looked at each other, didn't think you were getting it on or anything, but thought you might one day." She let the words pour out, surprised that they were even having this conversation.

"Shouldn't you be bi, though? I mean we had sex, regularly and it was..."

"Satisfactory?" She supplied.

"Yes." Val agreed and wondered if he could feel any lower.

There was a pause on the phone of what felt like forever before Lisa spoke again. "Val, you know I care about you. You're a good friend. I'm not bi. I can have sex with men but I'm not bi."

"But?"

"We may not have had that spark between us, but surely you had it with Kelly?" She paused but Val was silent. "Look, with you, it was okay. It got us both off but it wasn't good and it sure as shit wasn't great. Except that one time, when I came over to spend the night and you just grabbed me. God, you were like some primal animal, made me almost think I might be bi." She laughed.

Val's heart stopped. He remembered that, it had been good but he hadn't been thinking about Lisa while they'd had sex. Matt was supposed to have left to spend the night in his girlfriend's room, only, before he left, just moments before Lisa was to arrive, he'd pushed Val down onto the bed and fucked him. Only, he he'd been so quick, so erotically needy, that he'd left Val so hard he was throbbing. Before he left, he'd whispered in Val's ear that while Val was fucking Lisa, he'd be thinking of Matt. And Val had, with the lingering ghosting feel of Matt in his body still around him, and the sex had been good with Lisa.

Lisa listened to the uneasy breathing on the other end of the phone. "Val, when Inez kisses me, my toes curl up. It's not just her, there have been other women. When I kiss a guy, it doesn't make me feel like I'm on fire. Doesn't gross me out but it's like, oh, dancing. I can go through the motions but it's not the same. Like a stick figure of a person compared to some beautiful painting, does this make sense? Have you felt this with Kelly?"

"Not really." He admitted.

"Okay, I know you didn't feel it about me. Have you ever felt it?"

He had, twice. Val felt his face going red. "I've," he sighed. "I've sort of met someone. Actually, just met them, they kissed me tonight."

"And your toes curled?"

"Yeah." It wasn't his toes, not entirely.

"Good." Her voice was warm and Lisa had a pretty good idea that the person wasn't a woman. "Val, I think I know where you're at. It's not easy. I mean, I'd never ask to be a lesbian. My mother still won't talk to me because of it but what Inez and I have, everyone should have something like it. Life's too short, time goes by too fast and happiness is too rare to not take the chance."

"Lisa," his palm pressed to the cool counter top. "I'm not... I don't want to be." He couldn't say it but he didn't need to.

"Shhh, it's just labels, love, just labels. God knows, you've had way more than your share of

heartache, it's okay to have something that feels good in your life. I'll tell you, the worst part, is denying it. Once you say to yourself it's okay, things get so much easier." She paused and listened but he wasn't saying anything. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." He sighed. "I'll think about it."

"No! God, no, don't think about it, all you do is think! Go, find him, kiss him, see if your toes curl, if they do just fuck him already!" She laughed.

"Lisa!"

"Hush, I'm not stupid, we aren't talking about a woman. Seriously, Val, are you okay? I can be there tomorrow if you need me."

"Thanks but I'm coping. I will think about it." He paused and plunged ahead. "About him." Val found he was holding his breath, waiting for the sky to fall on to him. It didn't.

"Good, call me in a couple of days so I know you're okay?"

"I will, thanks Lisa."

"Just, take care of yourself, you deserve to be happy, Val."

Those words weren't easy to hear. "I'm just glad you're happy. You are, right?"

"More than I ever expected."

"Good." But he ached for that, wanted that, and didn't think he had the courage to gain it. "Thanks."

"You're very welcome. Call me, okay?"

"I will."

"You'd better, and Val? Happy early birthday."

"Thanks. Night."

"Bye, Val."

He hung onto the phone even after the line clicked shut. Lisa would be on her way to their bedroom and Inez's arms. They'd wrap themselves around each other, love each other, fall asleep together. It made his heart ache to think about.

Kelly couldn't sleep if he was touching her. The nights she spent over or the ones he spent at her place, they had to sleep on opposite sides of the bed, a pillow between them to keep them from touching as they turned in sleep. Not that he considered himself a touchy feely kind of guy but it had felt nice to have Trist snuggled against him.

He shook his head and went to shower and go to bed. Only, his mind refused to let it go. Lisa had been a snuggler, even when he'd protested, she'd curl up against him while they watched movies in the dorm or when she'd fallen asleep in his arms. That had been nice but not as nice as when Matt would leave his bed and slid into Val's. Even if they did nothing other than sleep, the feel of his strength, wrapped around his own body, the feel of that maleness, had been so comforting.

He showered quickly and pulled on boxers, cotton sleeping pants and an old t-shirt and climbed

into his very empty bed. Given his train of thought, it wasn't odd how much more empty it felt tonight than other nights. He smacked at his pillows and pulled them close to prop around his body and sighed. The thoughts still rolled around his mind and he silently cursed Matt for dieing. Other than Lisa, Matt would have been the only other person he could have talked to about this.

"Okay." Val sighed as his birthday officially started as the clock rolled past midnight. "I might be gay." He closed his eyes and tried to shut his mind off to sleep.

Part Eleven

The phone rang and woke him up. Val's hand groped out, smacked about his nightstand until he found it and pushed the button to turn it on. "Yeah." He mumbled out, trying to wake enough to read the glowing green numbers on his alarm clock.

"Val?" A small, obviously upset voice whispered across the line.

"Trist? It's," he lifted his head and squinted. "God, it's three twenty, what's wrong?"

There was a snuffling sob before Trist could speak again. "I'm sorry, I can't make it stop, I can't, and there's blood everywhere, I..."

Val sat straight up and was turning the nightstand light on instantly. "Stay put, don't move, I'll be there in a moment. Okay?"

Another sob. "Yeah, I'm sorry."

"Stay still! I'm on my way." He clicked off the phone and dropped it on the bed. Visions of pools of blood and a dead Trist floated behind his eyes and hurried his steps. He didn't bother with shoes, or a robe, or anything, he grabbed the keys from the basket by the door and was on his way to the elevators at a dead run.

The keys rattled but didn't want to be shoved into the lock, Val forced them. He pushed the apartment door open with such force that it slammed into the wall and bounced back at him.

"Trist!" He called and scanned the living room. There was spots of blood on the carpet, smears on the wall. The charging station for the portable phone had blood streaks around it. It wasn't the pools of blood he'd feared but it was a scary sight. "Trist!" He called again and followed the blood to the slender man's bed room.

The smears, splatters and spots lead into the bedroom. A lamp by the bed was on but the room was dark. The covers were kicked from the bed, pillows thrown across the room but there was no Trist in sight. The light was on in his bathroom and Val distantly heard soft crying. He followed it and the blood trail to the bathroom.

He pushed the door open. "Trist?"

The bathroom was a mess. Pills lay scattered everywhere, small round red and yellow ones, long, slender white ones, and rolling with them were empty aspirin and Tylenol bottles. The mirror had been smeared completely with what looked like petroleum jelly, a small tub of it lay on it's side on the counter. It's contents had been scooped out and apparently used to obscure the mirror. There were small pools of water on the counter and broken glass lay in sharp and dangerous shards everywhere. Across almost ever surface, blood was smeared.

None of that mattered. Trist was huddled along the wall, crammed into the space between the toilet and shower stall. The phone was dropped near by, blood smeared. His knees were drawn

up, his head was bowed down, arms wrapped tightly around as if blocking out a great noise. He was rocking in short, frantic motions and muttering but not forming words.

Blood was everywhere. The clothes looked to be same one's he'd been wearing when Val had left, they were splattered and soaked in spots, fabric soaked dark in blood. Blood ran down in small streams across slender arms and dripped from the points of elbows. Blood pooled around his feet, thick, dark red.

Val's eyes scanned and saw nothing gushing, nothing spurting to show a vein had been severed and he relaxed a little bit. "Trist?" But the man didn't move or seem to hear him. He pulled a towel from a towel rod and knelt down. The towel made a good broom, he spread it out and pushed the broken glass and pills tight against the vanity cabinet.

With the way swiped clear, he slid across the tile to kneel near Trist. He reached a hand out and stroked it across the back of Trist's head, smoothing the unraveling hair back into place. Val pulled his hand back, for a moment, it had felt like it was burnt. He stretched a hand back out toward Trist and sure enough, the closer he got, the warmer the air felt.

"That's crazy." He closed his eyes and focused. Sure enough, it was there, the way Gavan had described, a sense of being too close to a fire. Val could almost feel the warmth on his skin. So he tried to picture the fire lessening, tried to feel it cooling down and it did, if only slightly.

"Val?"

He opened his eyes and stared into Trist's red, tear stained face. He smiled a little. "Welcome back." His hand continued out and stroked the frazzled hair again, only this time his fingers didn't feel burnt, just warm.

"You're real?" The small, shaken voice asked, blinking away more tears.

"As far as I know."

Trist sobbed and dropped his head back onto his knees. "I can't, I can't make them stop, I can't."

"Shhhh, it's okay, it's going to be okay." He stroked the hair again. "Focus on me Trist, okay? On me."

The hidden head bobbed. "Trying."

"Will you slid out here? So I can see where you're cut?" He slid back and patted the tile beside him.

"Please, please, Val, please..."

"Yes?" He tried to see into the face and couldn't.

Trist sobbed a little and shook his head, when he spoke, his voice was small and frightened. "Don't let me hurt myself. Please."

"I promise, now, can you slid out here? You're bleeding."

"I am?"

"Yeah."

Trist looked at his arms, at his feet and the blood on his clothes. "Oh, God, oh, did I do this?"

"I don't think you did it intentionally, please, slide out here and let me take a look?"

There was a pause before Trist nodded and gingerly slid out of the corner he'd curled into. Tears still streaked down his face, his whole body still trembled but he was moving and starting to think a little more clearly. When Val took a hold of his arm, he let the man turn it over and inspect it.

Val looked over both arms and legs as much as he could. The cuts all seemed to be from the broken glass and while messy, seemed fairly superficial. "Trist? I should take you to the hospital."

"No!" He tensed back up and pulled away from Val's careful inspection, which started some of the cuts to bleed sluggishly again.

"There's a piece of glass in the side of your foot. They should take it out, not me."

"No! No! They'll lock me up and shoot me full of shit and I'll be stuck listening to all this forever. No!" He started rocking again.

"Okay, okay, no hospitals. Hear me? No hospitals." Silently, in his mind, Val added so long as the bleeding stopped and the wounds didn't get infected but by then Gavan should be home and he could make that choice. "Trist, can you hear me?"

Trist just nodded. "No hospitals."

"Yeah. I need to go down to my apartment, get some things. I want you to sit right here, don't move." He tried to slid away and stand but Trist reached out and caught his arm.

"Please, don't leave me, please, please, I don't want them to be right, please don't go."

"I'm not leaving you, I'll be right back. Count to three hundred, I'll be back before you finish, okay?" There seemed to be some sense in Trist's eyes but Val couldn't swear how much.

"Three hundred, okay, I can, okay. One Mississippi, two Mississippi."

Val stood and hurried from the bathroom before three Mississippi. He tried to keep count in his head but lost it before he reached the stairwell. There was too many things to think about. He wondered if he should call Gavan, and about the cousin's first aid supplies. It was likely they were well stocked but could he get Trist to tell him where they were kept? He doubted it, hit the stairs and made up his mind to grab anything he might need from his place.

This time the keys to the apartment didn't fight him. From within the kitchen he grabbed a plastic bag, flicked it open with a sharp shake and pulled open his utility drawer. The silver grey roll of duct tape was pushed to the back, he fumbled, found it and pulled it out. From there he hurried into his bedroom, pulled open drawers. A pair of boxers, jeans and a sweatshirt joined the duct tape inside the bag and went into the bathroom. His first aid supplies were kept under the sink. A big, plastic box full of them.

There was no point in wasting time being neat or tidy. The cabinet door flew open, the box got yanked out and he pried the lid off. From inside he pulled the big bottle of iodine, checked to make sure the lid was still tight, and tossed it into the plastic bag. Kelly's cotton squares, she didn't like cotton balls, said they left fibers behind, that she used to remove her toenail polish followed the iodine. He dug and found a roll of gauze and a box of various sized and shaped band-aids. Just for good measure, he added in a tube of antibiotic cream.

Something in the back of his mind said he was running out of time. Val glanced around the box, around his bathroom, figured he'd have to make due if he'd forgotten anything and turned out the bathroom light. On his way to turn off the lamp beside his bed, he tripped over his sneakers and

added them into the bag as well. The plastic was straining now but he didn't waste the time fussing at it. Lights went out, keys were snatched back up and he was heading for the stairwell at a dead run.

"Trist!" He called out, sidearm throwing his keys onto their kitchen counter and kicking the apartment door shut behind him. "I'm back!" The bloodstains, he'd forgotten to get something to put on the bloodstains. Deal with Trist first, worry about ruined carpets a distant second.

He rounded into the bedroom, winded from such a quick sprint and pushed the bathroom door open. Trist sat where he'd been left, head folded back down.

"Tw... tw... two ninety f...f...four Missi-f..f....fucking something."

"Trist!" He dropped the bag and knelt down. "Hey, I'm back." Now that he wasn't so focused on the blood, Val saw Trist's hands were glossy with petroleum jelly, it was smeared in spots on his clothes, his skin, into his hair. The skinny, trembling man was mess. He reached out and touched a shoulder. "Hey, I'm back."

Trist's eyes focused slowly. "You're back, see, I was right, he came back, he came back. Oh God, shut up!"

Val caught Trist's face between his hands. "Focus on me, not on them. Trist!"

He nodded in the warm hands. "I'm so cold."

"First things first, I need to clean up these cuts okay?" He started tugging on the bloody and ruined shirt.

"No, no, no, no, no." Trist tried to pull away.

"We need to get this off, make sure you're not cut somewhere else."

Trist's face screwed up and went bright red, tears started falling again and Val wasn't sure if it was from the voices or from his desire to strip the shirt off. It didn't matter, things had to be done. This time, when he tugged, there was no protest. He tossed the fabric toward the towel he'd used to brush away the broken glass but had to pause at when he saw Trist minus a few clothes.

It was clear the man had never been a large man. He didn't have the frame for it, even if Val was starved down to the same bone slenderness, he'd still be thicker and wider than Trist was. So some of the initial shock was made worse because Trist would never be a physically intimidating man. There was little left to soften the lines to the slender torso.

Trist's body wasn't to the point of anorexic patients Val had seen, it had yet to start eating away muscle tissue, but there was nothing extra left. The ribs were sharp under skin that looked too pale and too thin. There was a sharpness around the inside of his elbows that shouldn't have been there and Val swore as the man moved, he could see the muscles under the skin gliding. Even with how obviously unhealthily skinny Trist had become, Val's stomach still fluttered.

To distract himself and buy him the time to remember he had to think of Trist as a wounded child right now, Val opened the bag and started pulling things out. "Towels?" He asked.

Trist kept his eyes shut, he couldn't stand to see the revulsion in Val's eyes that had to be there. "Closet." He pointed to a narrow door along the bathroom wall.

Inside the closet, towels, washcloths and hand towels were perfectly folded and stacked neatly. They were all dark blue, fluffy and certainly not the cheap make due towels Val had bought for his own place. "Ah."

"Don't worry about it." Trist shook his head. "If they get ruined they get ruined." He'd normally be screeching about the stains but he just couldn't bring himself to care.

Val nodded and snagged a washcloth. He ran it under cool water in the sink and started to gently wipe blood from Trist's arms. As the blood came away, it was pretty clear the cuts were superficial.

"See, not so bad. Glass and razors and really sharp things, they cut cleanly. Our platelets that start the blood clotting, they respond to ragged edges so a clean cut is harder to get the clotting started. It's why a small, razor sharp cut will bleed more than a larger ragged tear." He poured iodine onto the cotton squares and started dabbing at the cut lines. Val couldn't swear they hadn't been self inflicted. The lines were straight, five on Trist's right arm, two on his left, and none were any where close to vein. He finished and started slapping band-aids over them, most had stopped bleeding.

"Here now, let me see your feet?" He tugged and pulled until Trist uncurled enough to extend his legs and it was then that he pushed the loose pants legs up to check lower legs. "Cut anywhere else I need to know about?"

Trist just shook his head, crying in hitching sobs still, eyes shut.

There were a couple of slashes on Trist's feet, all but one on the tops. They could have been from when the glass broke and fell but they could also have been slashed into the skin. He cleaned and iodined and bandaged which left him only the point piece of glass stabbed into the side of Trist's foot to worry about.

"This is going to hurt." The idea turned Val's stomach.

Without pause or warning, Trist reached out, gripped the flat sides of the glass and pulled. There was a sickening wet sound and the clink of the glass shard hitting the tile floor but Trist neither flinched or made a noise. His eyes didn't even open.

Val pressed the damp cloth to the bleeding wound and picked up the shard. A good half inch of the point was bloodied, the wound was deep. "Since you won't go to the hospital for this, we're going to wait a moment to see if the bleeding will slow down. Okay?"

Trist nodded.

"Then," he peeked under the wash cloth before pressing it back tightly to the side of the lean foot. "I'm going to soak it in iodine, put an iodine soaked cotton square over it, put a wide bandage over that and we're going to slap a piece of duct tape on it." He checked again, saw it was still bleeding, but slower, judged that it wasn't going to fully stop until it was taped shut and got to work.

"Duct tape?" The words had sunk in but not made any sense.

"Yeah, it'll help keep it somewhat dry in the shower." He unrolled the duct tape, used his teeth to start it tearing and gently attached the small piece to the side of Trist's foot. "When you get out, we'll replace all these bandages, take the duct tape off." He reached out and got a grip on Trist's upper arms, the slim body was still trembling or shivering, he couldn't tell which. "Here, now, let's get you up and set you on the toilet."

He pulled, Trist tried to stand but it was only Val's strength that got the man sitting. He swayed but stayed on the lid, but he was shaking harder now. "Let's get that tie off your hair, can't wash the blood off if it's braided back."

"Val?" Trist forced out, forced his mind to work. "I can't. It'll have to wait. I don't think I can stand, I..."

Val knelt down so he could look up into Trist's face and he smiled. "Don't worry about it, I'll help you."

Trist groaned. "Oh God, just kill me."

"Don't say that!" He snapped back.

"Why not? I'm going to die of embarrassment." He sobbed, his voice broke into a pain filled moan. "They're right, they're so right, I can't make them stop when they're right!"

"Who's right?"

Trist just waved at the air around him as if it explained everything.

It didn't, but Val could guess. "Focus on me, Trist, try to stay focused on me. Tell me what they're saying that you think is right?"

"I, that, I'm a burden, and useless and awful and selfish and they're right, they are! They're right, I hate being this way, I hate it, I hate myself, I'm so disgusting!" That broke more tears out as the voices surged around him, mocking, pushing, hating him.

Val pushed forward and brushed his lips against Trist's. It was chaste, gentle, and scared him silly to do it. "I don't think you're a burden or useless or awful or disgusting but I do think you're a total selfish brat and that's part of your charm. So shut up, don't worry about it and let me help."

The raw honesty and the shock of the shy kiss shook a choked, startled laugh from Trist. "Okay, not how I pictured showering with you though."

"I'm not..."

"I know, you're not gay. How're we doing this?" He wanted to be clean, he wanted to be held.

"You're wearing something under these pants?"

Trist nodded.

"Good." Val stood up. He picked pills from the sink and plugged it before running cold water. He stuffed Trist's dirty shirt into it, trying to soak it and maybe save it.

Trist glanced up and watched as Val opened the door to the shower stall and turned the water on to warm up. He watched as Val stripped off his shirt and peeled off his pants. God was truly mocking him, laughing, he could hear it, he was sure of it. Val had been responding but there was no way the fellow would ever look at him as anything other than a crazy man again. And, well, he hadn't expected to be undressed around Val for a while, if ever. He'd wanted time to ease the man into the idea of being undressed around another man and at how revoltingly skinny he was. Now, it was all ruined, yet again, he'd ruined it.

"Your turn." Val refused to blush under the obvious stare. He was thinking of Trist as a client now, as someone he could be a caretaker to, not as the man that had kissed him silly a few hours ago. He was just glad his boxers were loose.

It took two tries to get Trist onto his feet and he had to hold onto the counter to steady himself. Every time he moved, he started shaking again, harder than before. He pushed the pants down to his ankles and used his toes to pull them off, grateful he'd worn a newer pair of boxer briefs in

dark navy instead of an old, worn out, ugly pair. His foot throbbed at the weight he was putting on it.

None of that mattered. Val stood behind him and pulled the tie from his hair. Trist closed his eyes at the feel of the slender hands as they unwove the braid. Val did more than that, he ran his hands through the length, straightening it out. Only he did it way more than he needed to and it felt so good, Trist sighed and the voices backed down in volume as he started to relax.

He knew this was going to be a bad idea, but he let Val guide him into the shower, following him inside and shutting the door. Trist shivered and turned the heat up on the water.

"Man, you're going to burn your skin off."

"Cold," he shivered and stepped away from Val's supporting hands, only his knees buckled.

Val pressed forward and wrapped his arms around the slender body. "Easy, careful now." He wasn't sure if he was talking to himself or Trist but it was a sight uncomfortable having a wet, trembling Trist curled tight to him when the both were more naked than dressed. He was glad the loose boxers he was wearing weren't white.

It took a lot of work, Val had to almost hold Trist up the entire time. Together, they got his hair shampooed, his body washed off and a lot of the tense unease soothed. Sometime, while clinging against Val's chest, Trist stopped crying. It was like, when Val was touching him, all the noise faded to background chatter.

Neither man spoke until Val turned the water off. "Those cuts must sting."

Trist shook his head. They had but wasn't unbearable, he was just starting to feel again, the numbness wearing down and leaving him exhausted. He wasn't too exhausted to miss the way the cotton of Val's boxers clung to his ass when he stepped out of the shower to grab towels from the closet.

Val pulled one around his waist more to cover himself before he turned around then because he was cold. Trist however, was so cold his lips were starting to turn blue. Even the hot water did little to keep him warm. He wrapped a towel around the slender man's waist and threw a second around his shoulders before attacking the man's hair and limbs with a third. Trist was unable to stay standing so Val pushed him to sit down again but he was shivering so much it made re-bandaging the cuts difficult. This time, he smeared a little of the antibiotic ointment on the wounds before again covering them with the band-aids.

"F..f....fu...fucking freezing." Trist stuttered out and almost before he could finish an extra towel wrapped around him. "It's, it's not ph.. physical."

Val glanced up from where he was tending the shallow cuts on the Trist's feet. "How so?"

"Shock." He was trembling. "Ha... ha.. Happens every time this ha... ha... happens."

The duct tape had held and kept the wound underneath mostly dry but the tape was easy to pull off so it was just barely holding. Val shook his head at the still slowly bleeding cut, put iodine and ointment on it and finished it with wide band aids. He wrapped the entire foot in gauze trying to pad it a little and not sure that it wouldn't bleed thru the band aid.

"Want to tell me what happened?"

"Na.. na.... na... not really."

"Fair enough." Val nodded. "Where do you keep your clothes? You'll warm up faster out of those

wet boxers.”

“Top drawer.” He whispered out and started to really see the mess he’d made of things in the bathroom.

Val disappeared into the bedroom. When he pulled open the top dresser drawer it held neatly folded underwear and flannel pants and t-shirts. Obviously what Trist normally slept in, all of it perfectly put away and right at hand. He snagged one of each, rooted one drawer down and found perfectly paired socks and found a warm looking set. He returned and handed them to Trist. “Can you?”

He blushed. “I’ll manage.” Trist forced himself to his feet.

“Be careful, there’s still glass everywhere.” He gathered up his plastic bag that only held his change of clothes. He stepped into the bedroom and pulled the bathroom door shut behind him.

Val quickly toweled his hair dry and peeled the wet cotton from his hips. The clothes he’d been sleeping in had blood and petroleum jelly on them, they were dirty and sticky and he couldn’t wear them. It was boxers alone then. When he was as dry and dressed as he could get, he moved to Trist’s bed and pulled the covers back over it, tossed the pillows back at the head.

“Thanks.” A soft voice said from the door way. Trist was still shivering but less violently now.

“Want to try laying back down. You have to be exhausted.”

He nodded and crossed the space to the bed with barely a limp. He dropped un-gracefully onto the bed and let Val pull the covers up over him. “Are you, I mean, I…”

Val brushed the loose wet hair back. “I’m staying up here. I’ll be over in Gavan’s room if you need me, okay?”

Trist shut his eyes and shuddered, grateful beyond words. “Thanks.”

Val moved to the bathroom and soaked a couple of washcloths before turning out the bathroom light. He dropped the wet fabric onto the worst of the blood stains on Trist’s bedroom carpet before he went back to the bed.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, we’ll clean it up tomorrow. Try to rest, okay?”

Trist nodded but when Val clicked his light off, leaving only the pale moonlight from the windows that didn’t open, his eyes were still wide and sleep seemed impossible no matter how tired he was. He watched Val leave, pulling the bedroom door shut behind him. The light stayed on in the living room for a little while but it eventually flipped off and left Trist alone in the darkness.

Part Twelve

It was easier to react to things then sit around and think about them after things settled down. Val moved, he needed to keep moving and doing, to soak paper towels and lay them over the still damp bloodstains on the carpet. He’d done the same thing the night he’d been called about Violet. He’d kept moving, kept doing until days later after the funeral when there wasn’t anything left to do. Navef’s family had taken care of closing out their house and setting it on the market. All he’d had to do was sign papers and nod, but it hadn’t kept him busy. Those were the worst moments, when there was nothing to do and he’d been left standing alone in his apartment.

Now he was left standing in the middle of Trist and Gavan's apartment. He sighed and carried his bag of clean clothes and shoes to the other bedroom. It was odd, Val wasn't one to be afraid of the dark, but he found himself turning on the bedroom lights before he turned off the living room. It was the lamp by the bed so the main bedroom light could go off and that stayed on as he crawled into the bed.

The sheets smelled like crisp laundry soap. They were soft, of a high thread count and comfortable. The pillow was firm, the way he liked it and fit his head well. There was nothing uncomfortable in the room except his thoughts and Val was too tired to really examine them. What he wanted was a book, something to read.

Gavan had a small stack of books under the nightstand. Val doubted the man would mind terribly so he reached in and fished one out. Each book made him blush more, it started with a collection of short gay erotic tales, moved to a book about gays and lesbians in history. There wasn't one, but two trashy romance novels but the lead characters were both men and the final book he pulled out he had to turn over to read the title.

"The Joy of Gay Sex." Val dropped the book like it was a viper. "God, this is so not funny." He restacked the books and shoved them back under the nightstand. It wasn't worth trying, he clicked off the light and tried to go to sleep.

Only he lay there in the dark for what felt like forever, his eyes wide open. He could almost hear the minutes ticking off in his head and still sleep refused to arrive. It wouldn't be so bad if his mind was working, but it had stalled and left him in blank darkness.

The bedroom door clicked open, softly but it was like the crack of a whip in the silence of the room. Val froze and held very still in the darkness but he saw the shadowy form of what could only be Trist slip inside and ease the door shut behind him. The moon was just bright enough to make out the shape and show that Trist carried a blanket and pillow in his arms. Confused, Val waited to see what the silent shadow of the man would do but when he saw he was still confused. Trist carefully crept close to the side of the bed before he knelt down, dropped his pillow and wrapped the blanket around him. As if it were the most normal thing, he curled up on the floor beside the bed and sighed softly.

"What are you doing?" Val whispered into the darkness.

"Oh!" Trist started. "I'll leave. I didn't mean to wake you." He felt his face blushing at being caught.

"What're you doing?" He repeated.

"I..." he sighed. "I couldn't sleep. Sometimes when I can't sleep I sleep with Gavan but I didn't think you'd really want to wake up with me in bed with you so I thought I'd make do with this. It's not so bad, I sleep on the floor all the time."

God was so laughing. It was one huge joke, that was the only way any of this made sense. Val sighed. "Don't go, if I let you sleep in the bed, will you pretend I'm Gavan?" Which was a nice way of asking if Trist was going to behave or try to pull something like a goodnight kiss.

Trist nodded. "Promise, I just, promise."

Val patted the side of the bed, the way he had once for his nephew and niece on the few occasions he'd slept over at Violet's house. Both Kamil and Ziya had demanded to sleep with their uncle and they'd piled into the bed like puppies and snuggled tight against him. It had almost made him want children until he remembered that Kelly had no intentions of starting a family.

There was no pause, Trist dropped the blanket and pillow and crawled to the empty side of the bed. He slithered under the covers but he didn't stay on his side of the bed, before Val could settle into the idea of not sleeping alone, Trist was pressed against his side. Not really sleeping spooned against him, but his curled up knee brushed the side of Val's leg and his hand rested slightly against the side of Val's arm.

"Trist?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to sleep."

"Is this how you sleep when it's Gavan here?"

"You're not Gavan." He hated it and half wished it had been his wrist slashed to ribbons not his arm in this latest fit.

Val didn't speak, he just found an arm under the covers and tugged until the chilled and tense body was beside him fully instead of lingering to his side. Trist shivered, his entire body trembled but with a long, releasing sigh, he relaxed.

"Thank you."

He let his hand stroke the still damp, loose hair. "Welcome." He tried to tell his body that the chilled hand that rested against his bare chest wasn't something to get excited over.

"It's just," Trist tried to explain. "I can't help them all. I can't."

"Huh? All of them?"

"The voices, the spirits, whatever, there's only so much I can do. Sometimes they get angry with me, they gang up, get noisy. They'll shout at me, tell me all the things I tell myself." He tucked his head against the warm chest.

"About feeling like a burden?"

"I am a burden. Gavan would be so much better off without me. I know that I'm ruining his life, I'm crazy, not stupid. He'd be so much happier if I was gone."

"Don't ever even think that." Grief split across him. "Don't, you've no idea what losing someone you love feels like. If you care for him, don't wish him that pain."

"I'm sorry."

"Shhh." He went back to petting the hair.

"I just, I woke up with the headache still and I went and got some water and got the Tylenol out but when I saw myself in the mirror, they started and I couldn't get them to stop. They're right, I'm so revolting, so pathetic." He squinted his eyes shut. "I hate myself most days, hate what I am. I wonder what I did in a past life to deserve this."

"Is that why you smeared up the mirror?"

Trist nodded and liked the way his face felt rubbing against Val's chest. "I thought, if I couldn't

see myself, they'd leave me alone. I hate seeing how much weight I've lost."

"But they didn't?"

"No, I'd made a mess and they kept laughing, kept saying all the things you don't want to hear from other people. I dropped the glass or broke it, I can't tell, it got hazy about then. I just know that I had the bottles open and the pills lined up and they kept wanting me to take them, maybe I broke the glass then? I don't know. Did I call you?"

Val nodded. "Yes."

"I can't remember. Thank you for coming, they said no one would. When you left, they kept saying you weren't coming back."

"But I did."

"You did. I'm sorry, Val, I'm so sorry."

"Shhh."

"I just, for one day, I just want to feel..." He groped for a word. "Normal, safe."

"We don't pick our lives, we just make the most of what we've got to work with." He repeated back.

"The wise words of your dear uncle." Trist sighed. "Was he an ass or am I getting that wrong?"

"Do you ever stop?"

"I wish I did. Hate me?"

"Not even a little bit." He confessed without thinking. "My uncle wasn't an ass, not really, well, he just wasn't good with people and didn't like children. He was a stern man."

Trist yawned and tossed a leg up over onto Val. "He hurt you." He mumbled as exhaustion started pulling him down. "He's sorry for that, says, he was wrong and he's sorry. Says, he didn't know shit, not his words mine, he's a wordy bastard." Another wide yawn overpowered him and he finished it with a sleepy sigh. "Says, he's sorry that he didn't try to understand, that you should forget all his shit and be happy." The words mumbled off into contented sleep, snuggled against Val's warmth.

Sleep wasn't so kind to Val. The casually muttered words kick started his mind and sent it whirling off into random directions. He had so much unresolved with his uncle, so many words that hadn't been said that should have been and too many said that shouldn't have. It only served to remind Val that he needed answers from Trist, he needed to know how much of the slightly snoring man's words were random and how much could be believed.

Curled against him, Trist twitched in unhappy dreams. His hands balled up into fists and he buried his face tightly against Val's chest. It broke some of the random, circling thoughts that Val had been chewing over. He brushed at the drying hair, stroked a hand down across Trist's shoulder.

"Shhh, it's just dreams." Val whispered into the night. "Just dreams." And wondered if, for a man like Trist a dream could just be a dream.

Touch or words soothed him, some of the unease faded. Trist's hands fell limply against Val, the line of tension between his eyes soothed out and he dropped into restful sleep again. There was

no reason to continue to stroke Trist's hair or arm but Val did. It just felt so good to touch someone. Tears for his sister, tears for himself, welled up in his eyes but they didn't fall. Val sniffed them back and pulled Trist closer to him and slipped, unaware, into sleep.

Val woke slowly, stretching and yawning. He always slept soundly but something about waking up this time felt better, deeper. With another yawn he rubbed his eyes and saw in the very late morning light the indentation of where another body had slept.

"Trist." He sighed and traced the flat spot on the other pillow where the slender man had slept. Val had woken once, sometime around dawn and found that they'd wrapped around each other while they were sleeping. Trist was a comfortable, warm, weight in his arms and Val had quickly drifted back to sleep.

He staggered from the bed and found the bathroom. On the counter was a hairbrush and a toothbrush, new it's packaging and a tube of toothpaste, on the other side of the sink was a new razor and a bottle of shaving cream. He shook his head and yawned again, trying to shake off the final clutches of such a sound and restful sleep. He was still yawning when he pulled on the clothes he'd grabbed the night before and stumbled into the living room to find coffee.

"Hey!" Trist grinned from the kitchen. "You're up!"

Val blinked, once, twice and shook his head. "Your toaster is on fire."

Trist turned and sure enough, the waffles he'd put into the toaster for Val's breakfast were smoking and burnt. "Oh! Shit, fucking hell!" He pulled the cord from the wall and tried to force the toaster to spit out the blackening waffles. The toaster refused and he burned his fingers in the process. "OW! Aw man, stupid ass thing!" He smacked the side of the still smoking toaster.

Val yawned and moved into the kitchen. He jiggled the toaster, smacked the side and the burnt waffles popped free. Still yawning, he turned it upside down over the sink and let the charred remains fall away. "Coffee?"

With his mouth hanging a little open at how easily Val handled the minor crisis Trist nodded. "Want me to get it?"

"God, no, you'll set that on fire too." Still half asleep, Val poured a mug and slurped on it black. "What were you trying to do?"

"Breakfast, for you, for your birthday."

Val frowned. His birthday. "Oh, shoo, out of the way." He yawned and sipped his coffee and let himself wake up slowly while mixing eggs and flour, milk and vanilla into a bowl. He put one of the nice copper skillets on the stove and heated up butter and in short order, was turning pancakes out onto plates. "Hungry?"

"Fuck." Trist whispered, in awe of watching flour become food.

"I'll assume that's a yes." He pressed the plate at Trist and made more pancakes for his own breakfast. "How's your foot?"

"Hurts but been worse."

Val nodded and slid his mug and plate onto the counter and moved to sit down. "Huh? How long have you been up?"

"Oh, hours now. I slept so well." He sighed and grinned. "Got the blood out of the carpet. Thanks for putting the paper towels on the spots out here. Gavan has this cleaner, they use it for crime

scenes, it gets blood off of anything. Took me longer to get my mirror cleaned off.” He took a huge bite of the pancakes. “Oh, my god, these are good.”

Val just nodded. “Are you okay today?”

“I’m better.” He nodded. “Val, I’m so sorry, I…”

“It’s okay, happens.” He waved it off.

He opened his mouth to protest that it shouldn’t happen but he shoved a piece of pancake into it instead of letting words out. Val didn’t look awake, and he didn’t look like he wanted to talk. “So? What do you want to do for your birthday?”

“Forget it exists.”

“How can you not like your birthday! You’re born on the most romantic day of the year!”

“My parents named me Valentine. Isn’t that punishment enough?”

He chewed and swallowed his bite of pancake. “We’re going out today.”

“No, we’re not.”

“Yes we are, I promise I’ll behave, I want to show you something. I can’t go far on this foot anyway.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Well, I’m going with or without you. Choice is yours, you can tell Gavan I got lost and wound up as some homeless guy talking to his underwear.” He grinned cause he knew Val would go with him. “I’m ready to go when you are.”

Which wasn’t entirely true but Trist never worried too much about such things. He had to change clothes, bundling up against the damp cold of the outside world but he was careful to shove his feet into his shoes after Val had left to go ahead down to his apartment to get his coat.

He was nervous going out, he always was. It wasn’t a fear of being away from his home or of the unknown, but the anticipation of trouble. As he’d gained some stability in this life, the day to day solidness of life, he’d found he hated to have it broken by the chaos of the world at large. With Gavan along, he’d not worry too much but alone, well, it had been years since he’d ventured outside while sane, without Gavan.

But the elevator doors opened and he spied Val in the lobby. Wearing his simple brown coat, collar turned up to keep his neck warm, looking handsome and alone. It made him smile, warmly, and know they needed to do this.

“Hey!” Trist called as he hurried from the elevator, not limping and forcing a smile.

Val shook his head. Trist was bundled into a thick, warm, black wool coat, double breasted that still managed to make the slender man look too skinny. There was a black knit cap pulled down over his ears and black gloves on his hands. Around his neck was wrapped what looked to be a handcrafted knitted scarf in varying shades of rich dark purples, blues and greens. The man looked ready for knee high snow drifts, not the relatively sunny late winter day.

“Will we need a cab?”

“Yes, there’s one waiting.”

"You're limping."

He hadn't thought he was. "Foot hurts."

"Then you should stay off it." Val frowned.

"I'm not a child or a woman, I've had way worse, it's nothing!" He snapped back loud enough to gain the uneasy eye of the doorman. They had orders to not let him from the building if he was acting oddly. Orders they'd been given by Trist himself with Gavan's agreement.

Val shrugged. "Fine by me, if you make it worse you know we'll end up at the hospital."

"I'll risk it." He looped an arm around Val's and laughed at how the other man blushed in awkward embarrassment while pulling him toward the door and waiting cab. The doorman nodded to them, his eyes checking to make sure Trist didn't look anymore crazy than normal before letting them out of sight.

Trist pushed Val into the back of the cab while giving the driver the address. He wasn't fond of cabs, but since they didn't own a car and neither did Val, it would have to do. "I figured this was better than having me ride on the handlebars of your bike."

That made Val smile. "Indeed. Am I allowed to ask where we're going?" The smile fled at the serious expression Trist wore.

Trist rubbed at his eyes a moment, wondering how much to explain. "When I was twelve, I had to live with my grandmother. I'd worn out my welcome with my parents and well, Gavan needed a chance to be a kid. She and I, we don't get along. Anyway, when I was fourteen we had this huge fight." He sighed. "I ran off. She has trouble seeing things about me, I block her she says. I don't know, it doesn't matter. I made my way here."

"You ran away from home?"

Trist grinned. "Yeah but what kid doesn't think about it? I just have impulse control issues." Val hadn't, he'd felt smothered, felt trapped but never even thought about leaving his uncle's home. Trist liked that the idea of running never occurred to Val.

"How long were you gone?"

"Almost two months. It wasn't bad, I mean, I was loopy half the time but people avoid the crazies so no one messed too badly with me. One day, I was crouched by a dumpster, waiting for the voices to die down enough to let me think straight and this woman stepped up to me. I thought she was a vision, not real cause she looked right at me and shook her head. No one looks at street kids, so I figured she was in my head. Then she holds out her hand and says, 'come on child, I'll make you some chicken soup.'" Trist laughed at the memory.

"So she was real."

"Very. My family had been frantic trying to find me and with my Grandmother unable to see where I was it was a guessing game. They'd sent word out to others with the gift in near by towns, hoping one of them would pick up my trail and it was Eshe that did. It's in her line too, her father had the gift, his father. They connect to ink on paper, she reads tarot. They're good people. I stayed with them for almost five months. It was the first time I'd met someone even close to being like me that wasn't in the family." Trist glanced to his gloves and wished he could bite his nails and still keep his hands warm. "It was the first time I'd ever been around anyone that didn't wish I wasn't around. Even Gavan as a kid, he hated that he had to put up with me." He smiled widely. "Not that I blame him, I'd run screaming for the hills if I were him."

"I didn't know, you two seem so good together."

"Now, yeah, but hell, we both were kids. I'd worry about him if he didn't resent me, resent what was expected of him. I was such a pain in the ass during puberty."

Val grinned. "Still are."

"True!" Trist nodded but there was no bitter sting to it. "So, Eshe and her father Nuru, they've been good to me. Anytime I've needed a place to hide, they've had the door open."

"Is that where we're going?" He suddenly felt ambushed.

"Yup, oh, don't look so trapped. You'll see why soon enough, I promise I won't embarrass you too badly." To prove his point, he didn't snuggle against Val in the cab for the rest of the ride.

Part Thirteen

(sorry for the short chapter, been a LONG weekend and wasn't sure I'd get anything up!)

The cab pulled to a stop along a curb on the other side of town and Trist pushed bills at the driver. Val watched, it was quite a bit more than the fare and the slender man smiled warmly and shook his head, refusing change. The driver drew a breath and the line between his eyes eased, some small worry was lifted and he nodded and thanked them as they climbed out.

"His daughter's sick, they don't have insurance and he doesn't get paid until Friday." Trist explained as the cab pulled away. "Well, here we are."

The neighborhood was older homes, most with store fronts and the entire neighborhood felt fifty years behind the times. The side walk was cracked but children played on the corner with no fear of violence. Cars drove slowly around, parking on the street was mostly filled, it was a place with character.

They stood in front of one store, raised slightly from the street level. The glass front windows had the name "Everly's" written in a flowing script across the front but blinds were pulled and there was no description of what kind of business lay within. Trist didn't wait, he stepped up the wide path to the door with gingerly placed feet.

Val followed but it was the kind of store he didn't visit. It was local, you had to belong to the neighborhood to know what was inside and Val had never belonged to any neighborhood. There wasn't a moment's hesitation for Trist, he pulled the door open and old, brass bells overhead jingled. Val followed into the dim store but even before his eyes adjusted, he knew the smell of old books and green tea.

"Well, honey child, I was wondering when you'd show up."

It took blinking like a bewildered owl for Val to pull his eyes from the shelf after shelf of old, cloth and leather bound books to the large, black woman that was sailing around the corner of the counter she'd been sitting behind to wrap her arms around Trist. Her skin was as black as night and her eyes as dark and even with the weight and years she wore, she was lovely. Her hair was twisted into tight braids and small beads and bells hung from their length and added a cheerful noise when she moved. Small, round reading glasses sat forgotten on her nose and when she smiled, her face nearly split in two.

Trist tossed himself against her bulk and clung to the comforting warmth and feel of her. "Eshe,

how'd you know I was going to stop by."

She stroked a hand down the back of his head and across the braid while squeezing him tighter in the hug. "Honey, anytime Alice in Wonderland falls off the shelf I know you'll be stopping by." She whistled low. "What've you been up to, boy? You're vibrating like a badly made bell?" But she was glancing around Trist to the man that had followed him and the uneasy way he was eyeing her and the collection of books.

"Gavan's away for the weekend, I had a rough night." He sighed and felt knots in his shoulders letting go.

"Well." She pulled the skinny young man away. "If he's away and you're only a little shaky after a bad night I'd say you're doing fine indeed!" She leaned in and pressed a kiss to the side of his face. "Now, who's this you've got with you? Don't tell me, you've finally got a boyfriend?" She smiled and tucked an arm around Trist.

"I'm not, I mean, we're not, I..." Val stuttered.

Eshe laughed. "Oh, he's cute."

"Val, this is Eshe Everly. Eshe love, this is Val, my keeper for the weekend and yes, he is beyond adorable." When Eshe slid her arm from around him, Trist grinned wider.

Val, however, was blushing. It only made him look more charming. "It's nice to meet you." He managed to force out but before he could offer his hand to the approaching woman, he was gathered into a hug. It made him tense, unused to such casual contact but when she withdrew he wasn't kissed as Trist had been.

"Very nice to meet any friends of Trist's." She turned to where the seer stood, a soft and contented look on his face. "I assume you'd like to go upstairs?"

"Always but..." Trist pulled his eyes away from Val's enchanting blush and his lewd thoughts.

"Oh, go, take your time, honey, you need it. I'll keep Val here occupied." She smiled. "We'll have tea."

"Thanks." Just being in the store eased Trist's nerves. "I promise I won't be long, Val, I'll be right back."

"Sure, this was your outing." Val shoved his hands in his pockets as he watched Trist turn and head to the spiral staircase at the back of the store.

"Take that coat off, Val." Eshe shooed at him as she turned the look on the door and flipped the sign around to closed. "I turned the heat up knowing that Trist was on his way. We'll both boil here soon!" She moved to return to her seat behind the counter. "Tea?"

"Thanks." Val eyed the ceramic pot and the three waiting mugs. "Will your father be joining us? I know Trist would like to see him."

She paused in her pouring. "My father?" The wide smile split her face again. "Oh, to Trist it would be that way. Honey, my father's been dead for almost thirty years."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

"Hush, father is still here, as I will linger when my daughter takes my place here and she will when my grandson replaces here. It's the way of our family. I may not have the gifts Trist has, but I know who knocks Alice In Wonderland from the shelf before he shows up for a visit." She

raised her eyes to the back stairs and the small room at the top. "To Trist though, he talks as easily to my father as he does to me."

Val nodded and sipped his tea.

"But, you doubt his sight." Eshe nodded and kept her eyes on the handsome man sitting on the other side of her desk.

"I believe he thinks what he says is the truth. He's said things he shouldn't have been able to know. I've no other explanation."

She laughed warmly. "Oh, spoken like a true man of logic. You are cute."

Val blushed and it only made the woman across from him laugh harder.

"If I was twenty years younger, hmm." Her head shook and the beads rattled. "But I'm old enough to be your mother! Here." She pushed a deck of cards across the flat surface. "Pick me a card, any card."

"I'm sorry?"

"Indulge me. They won't bite, just pick one." She sipped her tea while Val uneasily selected a card at random and handed it to her. "Ah, the five of cups. You've lost someone you loved, sorrow and grief and it's recent."

The mug rattled slightly as Val set it back down.

"A little girl, no..." Eshe stared at the card. "A boy, odd a woman older than yourself?" She frowned. "A family." She sighed and smiled gently. "I'm so sorry dear, your sister?"

"How do you..." He felt his heart pounding and wished he could escape back to the sane world he used to live in.

"The cards tell me, I listen. Draw another card for me?"

His hand was shaking a little but he pulled another card.

The card turned over. "The nine of swords? Dishonesty and death, odd." She studied the card. "There's lies around your sister's death, things you don't yet know. Oh, my such sadness in it. You're the last of your family?"

"I don't think I want to do this anymore, I'm sorry." Val glanced down to stare into his tea but a comforting warm hand wrapped around one of his and drew his eyes back up.

"Draw another card, child, drawn another and see it through."

Black eyes locked to brown and Val drew another card.

"Knight of wands. A lover with a generous and mercurial nature..." She glanced back to the stairs Trist had climbed. "Another, please?"

Val pulled a card and slid it across the table.

"Ten of swords..." She stared at the cards for a moment before glancing up and smiling. "Well, now that wasn't what I was looking to read!" The cards scooped together and she set them aside.

"What did it mean?" Val asked carefully.

"Val, it's just cards."

"What did it mean?"

She glanced up to where Trist had gone. "There's more to your sister's death than you're aware of, a new lover, Trist as I see it, is a good guide to finding those answers but to pursue it will lead to danger."

"What about my sister's death? It was an accident." Only, he remembered Trist standing outside his apartment door saying the same thing that Eshe was trying to say.

"I don't know, I only see what the cards show me."

"Trist and I, we're not involved like that. I'm not, I mean..." He gave up under her steady, knowing look.

"Pull another card for me?"

"Why?"

"Because I wish to see."

Val pulled one more, and rolled his eyes.

"Ah, the lovers, the start of a meaningful romance. Hit me again, dealer." She smiled wickedly.

Val sighed and pulled another card from the deck.

"Interesting, another major card, the Hierophant, reversed, an unorthodox or break in convention. One last card?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Am I allowed to say no?"

"Not really."

Val let the card snap out onto the table.

Eshe laughed. "How powerful! All major cards! The fool, a card of new beginnings, of unlimited options and one of pleasure and passion. So, do you want to tell me again that you're not gay and not interested in Trist?"

Part Fourteen

Trist could have stomped down the steps and trumpeted like an elephant and Val wouldn't have noticed him. He saw it the moment he stepped from the small upstairs office to glance around the store's main floor and spotted how Val moved slowly around the shelves. The books had him now and there was no breaking into that.

"How long has he been browsing?" He nodded to the shelf Val was hidden behind when he rejoined Eshe at the counter.

"Oh, nearly an hour? Have a nice visit?"

Trist took up Val's mug of forgotten tea and downed a swallow. "It was just what I needed." He

grinned. "So?"

"Hmm?" She pretended to confusion.

"What do you think of him?" Trist whispered out in frustration.

"Beyond what a cutie he is?"

He waved that off.

"The books love him, I haven't seen them respond to anyone as strongly." She patted Trist's arm. "I like him. He's solid, stable, but you'll have your hands full with him."

"Oh, I know, I like the challenge. He's so..." He sighed looking for the word. "Proper, maybe? I want to rip his clothes off and lick him until he forgets his manners."

She laughed. "Well, whatever is brewing between you two, it's good for you. This is the happiest I've seen you in a long time, Trist. I'm not wrong in saying it's his doing?"

"He's the only change in my life. Don't look at me like that, this isn't going to last and I know it's not but while he's charged with being my babysitter, well, I'm not so proud as to let an advantage like that pass me by." He let his eyes trace Val's back as the man slid from one shelf to another.

"You're an evil man."

"No, I'm a horny one. It's been so long, I thought maybe my little friend had stopped working." He glanced over at her and his head tilted to the side. "You read his cards, didn't you?"

"Now, you now better then to ask that."

"Did they say anything about me?"

"Trist!" She scolded but softened at the hopeful look in his eyes. "He's inclined to indulge you, just he's not some college bimbo. This is said as your friend, not his reader, this pretty one? If you want to get him into bed, don't let him think about it and if he gives in, honor the risk he's taking."

For once, there was no teasing come back or mocking answer, Trist just nodded and thought for a moment. Gavan would be back tomorrow and when he returned, Val would disappear. His time was running out and he'd changed gears from getting closer to Val to getting Val into bed. "So," he began as he slid a check from his pocket. "Which books are going home with him and how badly are you going to fleece me?"

Eshe smiled and shook her head. "There's a good dozen or so that want him but there's only three that need to be his."

"Which three?" He narrowed his eyes as he felt his bank account grow a lighter by the glow from her eyes.

"The Life and Works of Thomas Paine and the Dumas series, both from the nineteen hundreds."

Trist winced. "You're sure?"

"Very, he wouldn't even let himself open the covers, just brushed across them like he was touching a lover."

"Now, who's the evil one." He picked up a pen and started filling the check out, and didn't really

mind the money but he did figure he'd better get Val out of the shop before he had to increase the amount on the check. "You'll pull and wrap them for me?"

A paper wrapped bundle slid across the counter. "Already did, dear."

"Evil! Strictly evil!" But he slid the check across to her without any real fuss. "Let me collect my duckling." He moved to find where Val wondered among the books and when he finally located him, he was at the back of the store.

Trist grinned to himself, Val stood, stretching to place a book back on top of the top shelf. One of his hands gripped the shelf at shoulder level, the other reached high over his head. The sight made him so happy, Trist didn't think about it. On silent feet he slipped behind Val and wrapped his arms around Val's ribs and pressed himself along the taller man's back.

Val jumped, startled but all that did was press him tighter against Trist. "What?" He struggled to glance behind him but he already knew who it was. "Trist?"

"Shhh, you're irresistible like this." The body he held stiffened in anger or embarrassment or denial.

"Let me go!" He hissed out, sounding vaguely like an angry and very put out cat.

"No."

Val froze. "What?"

Trist let his face nuzzle against the back of Val's neck. "No, I'm not going to let you go just because you told me to. God, you smell good." The nuzzling turned into light kisses, Trist barely brushed his lips to the nape of the exposed neck but Val shivered at the contact.

The whisper of kisses was too much, and at the same time, not nearly enough. Val's eyes shut, he wanted to fight, wanted to deny how good it felt, but here, with only the books as witness, he didn't have the strength. He bowed forward, his hands gripping the wood shelf in front of him with frightened strength and Trist followed. The slender body bowed over Val's back, pressing tightly against him, his back, his sides, his ass and the lips grew more demanding.

When Trist licked the curve of one of Val's ears, his entire body shuddered. He moaned, just barely but it slipped from his control and earned an echoing chuckle from Trist. "Stop." He forced out but there was no strength to his words.

Trist kissed the back of the Val's neck again. "Your wish is my command." He whispered and felt how Val trembled as he pulled the contact away. Just to be bad, Trist let his hands slide over Val before he removed them. Let them slide from the firm grip on ribs down over vulnerable stomach and over the curve of a hip, and just to show he could, one hand softly traveled over the half hard length in Val's jeans.

"Oh." Val moaned and twitched in uncertain direction, he moaned again when Trist full stepped away and his lust clouded mind understood that Trist really had stopped.

"Ready to go home? It's getting late."

Val glanced over his shoulder. Trist didn't even look flustered, he smiled softly, in a secretive way that made Val shiver but there was nothing to the other man to even hint at what he'd just done. It wasn't fair that such small things could leave him breathless and shaking and not even cause Trist to blush.

The startled deer look to Val's eyes made Trist feel like he'd won some small battle. "I'll meet

you out front when you're done looking around." Without waiting for a reply, he turned and left.

It gave Val a few well needed moments alone to compose himself. When he finally followed Trist back to the front of the store, he was reasonably sure he wouldn't embarrass himself.

"Sally is coming over in a little while with Paytah, they're going to smudge the shop. You two should stay." Eshe's eyes narrowed a little at the deeper unease etched into Val's face.

"Thanks, but we can't, I need to get home. I've been out too much and well, you know, sunlight makes me smoke and catch on fire like a vampire." Trist had already re-bundled himself into his coat and tucked the package under his arm. "Besides, our cab just pulled up."

The large woman came back around and demanded another hug. "Don't be a stranger, okay?" She moved from one man to the other and before pulling away whispered into Val's ear. "Try to remember, it's okay to be happy." She patted Val's arm and took a step back.

Goodbyes were said but Trist was obviously herding them out the door.

"Just, Trist," Eshe's voice stopped them. "Be careful, something's brewing lately, a darkness and things like this are drawn to people like you. Promise me?"

He nodded. "I promise to try to be careful." Which was all he ever did or could do.

"It was nice meeting you, Val."

"And you as well." Val nodded and let Trist tug him along until they were back in a cab again and heading toward the other side of the city. The silence in the car was good, it let him settle his thoughts. Trist was making a point to not talk, or touch him. The emptiness of the silent ride left Val uncomfortable, he found himself missing the easy voice and easier touches.

"Well." Trist said as they waited for the elevator back inside their apartment building. "I'm going to take a nap. Would you come up and wake me in about an hour? If I sleep much longer then that, well, I won't sleep at all tonight."

Val just nodded. "Of course." His thoughts were whirling but not making any logical sense, like random items throw into a blender. When the doors opened on the sixth floor he paused. "Trist, I..."

"About an hour." Trist broke in. "Not less then okay?"

Val didn't finish his sentence. "Okay." He stepped into the hallway and let the doors shut behind him.

Inside the elevator Trist was laughing. "One hour and counting." He shook his head. "See, things are fine, just fine." He hour would go by quickly, he'd have to work fast.

Val had showered and changed and while the hot water washed his body, his mind settled onto the idea that things weren't what he'd been told about his sister's death. He rode the elevator up the two flights, wanting answers. At the apartment door, he didn't knock, just let himself in.

The scent of spicy, freshly fried chicken hit him before he was even fully in the door and made his stomach growl. The lights in the living room were on and when he stepped inside Val froze. "What's going on here?"

The sofa had been pushed back almost to the counter at the kitchen, chairs and end tables

pushed toward the walls. A blanket was spread across the now bare carpet and pillows were tossed around it, to one side sat a wicker picnic basket. It made no sense and from the kitchen, Val heard a wine cork pull free.

"Surprise!" Trist came around the corner, pouring red wine and grinning.

"Huh?" He took the wine glass reflexively.

"It's your birthday, silly, happy birthday." He slipped over and pressed a quick, dry kiss to the startled lips before waving to the blanket. "Go, get your shoes off and get comfortable."

Val stood there.

"Go!" Trist laughed and brought the flat of his hand down against Val's ass in a light spank.

"Hey!" Val protested and jumped from the light contact with enough shock that he almost spilled his wine.

"Go!"

"Have I mentioned that I really hate making a fuss over my birthday?" He protested but went and settled on the blanket. "That I'd rather forget about it?" Especially this year, the only person that ever disobeyed him and fussed at him, his sister, was dead.

"Too late. Don't look so glum I didn't cook any of this so it should be edible." Trist pulled the tin of spicy fried chicken tenders from the oven and balanced it, the bottle and his own wine glass on his way to the living room.

"But, how? I mean, it's Valentine's day, no one could deliver with this short of notice."

"Oh, I called it in this morning. All I had to do was tell them when. Smells good huh?" He reached into the basket and started pulling out cold sesame noodles, a round loaf of crusty bread, a hunk of cheese and a plastic container filled with cut up pieces of fruits. "I thought, what kind of celebration could you have never've had for your birthday and thought, there's no way you could have been on a picnic. So, here we are! I know, I know chicken doesn't go with red wine but it's your favorite so." He shrugged and handed Val a fork and napkin. "Dig in."

"But?"

"Oh!" Trist set his wine and chicken down and crawled on all fours toward the television. He didn't have to turn around to feel Val's eyes on him. It was going to be a long meal, but Trist was a man with a plan.

The TV flicked to life and the movie started playing, it took Val's clouded mind to know what had been put in when it did he smiled. "Blazing Saddles! I love this movie."

"Good, now eat." It wasn't fair, Trist almost felt sorry for Val. He had such an advantage, down to what movie would make the normally reserved man laugh and relax, to what wine he'd be sure to drink too much of. He should feel bad for Val, but, he didn't.

Part Fifteen

They slurped noodles and ate chicken. Trist tore off hunks of the bakery bread and Val nodded as he chewed on it. The cheese was set between them and shared and Trist kept Val's wine glass full. And, in a wicked little way, he made sure that every time Val dipped his fingers into the

container for a hunk of fruit, their hands would brush against each other.

What was best, was how Val let himself relax. He started out sitting with a perfectly straight spine but as food and wine and the comedy progressed, he slumped. An hour into the film and he was lounging on the floor and laughing, not just chuckling but outright laughing. It made Trist want to hump his leg, the sound was perfect.

When the credits started, Val laying down, head propped on one hand and the other toying with his wine glass. A lot of the tense unease the other man wore had faded and the sight of him, relaxed, was stunning. His entire face changed when he was laughing freely, not the tight, sarcastically bitter chuckle he normally allowed, but a real laugh.

"I love that movie."

Trist poured more wine into Val's half empty glass. "It is funny, I'm surprised at you though. I thought for sure the fart jokes would be too low brow for you."

"My uncle didn't allow such coarse forms of comedy in his house. Violet and I would sneak out to go see them. Most teens were sneaking into horror movies, we were going to comedies."

The mention of the uncle chased the lightness from Val and made Trist frown. "Were your parents as stiff as your uncle?" He hated asking questions that he already knew the answer to.

"Oh, no, he thought my father was a hippy." Val laughed again, lightly but it didn't touch his eyes. "My uncle had very clear ideas of civilized society and made sure we obeyed. He didn't believe a child should be rewarded for surviving another year, so birthdays were muted events."

"Well, lucky for you, I don't." Trist dug out one last container from the basket and set it between them. "Happy Birthday, Val."

Val blinked and stared at the white frosted cake, six inches around and like a shrunken version of a full sized cake. There were small, red flowers on it and written in red icing script it declared a happy birthday. "A cake?"

"A cake. I thought you might be pissed at candles, besides, I couldn't fit them all on there, not without melting the frosting, you're getting old!"

Val blinked but the cake remained real. "You got me a birthday cake?"

"Well, yeah, cause, it's your birthday dumb ass."

He sat up a little more. "I haven't had a cake since I was ten, I, wow."

Trist had hoped for some reaction because he knew Val hadn't had a cake in years but being near tears wasn't the one he'd been hoping for. "Wait, it gets better." He smiled and pulled the knife from the basket and cut a section of the cake away. The white frosting parted to show deep, bright blood red cake.

"Red velvet! That's my absolute favorite cake, how'd you...oh." He picked at a crumb. "Oh, and they made it right too, that's good."

"You can make cake wrong?"

Val nodded and picked at another crumb. "Yes, red velvet is too often a yellow or white cake died red, it's not supposed to be that. It's made with cocoa powder and vinegar, this is really good. Thanks, Trist, this was really nice." He reached to lift the hunk of cake off the plate.

"Wait! Before you get your fingers messy, I'm not done yet." He pulled the wrapped books from under one of his pillows and pushed them toward Val. "What kind of birthday would it be without something to open?"

"Trist, I can't accept, I..."

"Fucks sake! Shut up and open the damned package! God, if I'd actually wrapped it in birthday wrapping paper we'd be here all night listening to you be self effacing!"

Val actually found himself laughing at the mini tantrum. "Okay, okay, down boy."

"God, let someone do something nice for you for a change! Man, you take all the fun out of it, serious grumpiness there!" He muttered and toyed with cutting the cake into manageable slices, but he was watching Val from the corner of his eyes.

Val picked at the plain paper. "Isn't this the package you picked up today?"

"Fuck!" Trist reached over and with a yank the brown paper came away. "God have mercy on us all at Christmas! It'll take you a week to open one damned box!"

"Trist, this is..." Val let his fingers gingerly touch the cover of the top book. "I can't accept this." He lifted the book about Thomas Paine up and his mouth fell open at seeing the double set of Dumas books. "Oh, my God."

Trist leaned over and looked at the finely made books he'd bought, sight unseen. "They look horribly dull."

"This is too much, the Paine volume alone had to have cost a small fortune, I can't accept this."

"You can and will and smile about it."

"Trist..."

"Stop it! Smile, put the books aside and put cake in your mouth because obviously you're unable to say thank you and be happy!" He scolded and fussed but the sheer awed delight in Val's face made it worth all the fuss.

"Thank you." He answered solemnly and set the books very carefully to the side before picking up a piece of the cake.

Trist nibbled and nodded. "Hmm this is good, I'd never heard of it before. Lucky for you, every bakery makes it this time of year." Carefully, Trist began to discreetly clear the blanket between them and he made sure the wine was where it wouldn't spill.

Val shoved the last bite of the slice into his mouth. "Even the frosting is great, this was really wonderful, Trist, thank you. The books, I can't begin to say how perfect they are." He popped his little finger into his mouth and sucked the frosting off.

That was too good to refuse. "Hmm, you're right it is." Trist nodded and reached over and caught Val's wrist. He pulled the hand away, frosting covered fingers curled lightly in confusion. Trist kept his eyes on Val's, locked solid and refused to let the older man look away as he let his tongue wander out to lick at the pad of the frosting covered index finger. "Very good."

Val's breathing instantly went sharp, he blamed it on Trist's odd eyes and how steadily they held on to him. The hot, graceful tongue swiped along first one finger before moving to the next. "Don't." He heard himself whispering but it was difficult to think. How could something so simple be so erotic?

Trist felt the wrist try to pull away and he gripped tighter and held Val's arm still. "Not this time." He sucked one finger totally into his mouth and Val actually moaned. The man was so responsive.

"Trist, I'm not, I don't want this." Val forced out but his blood had pooled lower and he could feel his own pulse in the side of his thigh.

"Don't let him get away with that shit."

The voice was so startling that Trist broke eye contact. No one was visible in the room but he could feel him, hovering, watching and it drew a languid smile to his lips. He'd felt Matt near by off and on since he'd first met Val but so far the other man had remained silent. If he wanted to speak up to offer advice on how to seduce Val, Trist wasn't going to complain.

Trist shook his head and licked down the length of Val's fingers before swirling his tongue across the tense palm. "I don't think you mean that."

"He doesn't, he always protests."

"In fact, I think you want it as badly as I do." Trist let his eyes wander down across Val's body to the growing evidence of the other man's arousal.

Val blushed. "No, I... oh God." He moaned and his eyes fluttered shut when Trist nipped at the veins at his wrist.

"Shhhh." Trist slid over and crawled into Val's lap, sitting facing him, his weight balanced on his thighs. He ran his hands through the tumbled soft hair and smiled at the tense, unhappy face in front of his own. When Trist leaned forward to kiss Val, the lips that met his own were tight and unwilling. He tried nibbling a little on them and it didn't change anything.

"Pull his hair, hard."

Trist nodded and this time when he ran a hand across Val's hair, he fisted the hand into the locks and yanked. It should have gotten him scolded or tossed from Val's lap but instead Val's eye went shut and he let out a low, throaty moan. Now when Trist kissed him, the lips that met his softened and surrendered. He began to understand that Val liked to be controlled.

"He does, until he remembers it's okay to let go." Matt whispered.

Trist began attacking Val's jaw line, moving to suck and nip his way across the lean neck, the sensitive ear. "You want this as badly as I do." He whispered, a tickle of words that brought a shiver to the flesh below him.

"No." Val managed to whisper, his hands dug into the blanket below him. He tried to shake his head but the hand in his hair tightened again. The slight pain made him moan again.

Trist dragged his hips forward and stroked his own erection tightly along Val's. "Do we need a safe word so you can keep saying no?" He chuckled and bit on Val's earlobe hard enough to earn another moan. "Because I'm not stopping for a no."

"Well done."

"I'm going to suck you, Val."

"Oh god, I don't, I can't, it's..."

This time it was Val's hips that jerked forward to rub tightly to his own and Trist swam in the pleasure. He growled and dug both hands into Val's hair and pulled his face away. "God, I can feel how much you're enjoying this, its like having a second body." Trist sighed and arched backwards, letting their hips glide into one another again. "I've never felt this from a lover before. God, I can't wait. All those things I did to your fingers? I'm going to do to your cock, Val, I'm going to swallow you whole until you scream my name."

Trist heard laughter, warm and heady. "If I'd had known he'd get off so much on dirty talk, I'd have been more bold."

It was oddly erotic hearing Matt egging him on, knowing Val's other lover was watching, maybe even enjoying the show. Suddenly, just sucking Val off wasn't enough. Trist wanted, needed more and he planned to get it.

"Val?" He whispered, the tv clicked off behind them from sitting idle and forgotten for so long. "I want to fuck you, I think you want me to fuck you."

Val's eyes slid open and the sight of Trist, sitting across his lap, writhing in small, little erotic motions, was nearly too much. He opened his mouth to protest but the words wouldn't work. Trist was like an elemental force, demanding, driving, untamed and he had all his attention directed at him, it left Val feeling drunk and it wasn't from the wine.

"Just for tonight." Trist started, leaning forward to scrape nails along the cloth covered body he was sitting on, letting lips brush across the confused and hungry face. "No strings, no requirements, no obligations, no promises, nothing beyond pleasure for just tonight. No guilt, just you and I alone here, all you have to do is close your eyes and feel. You can even pretend you're back in college and it's Matt and not me. I'll call you Pony if you want while I fuck you until you pass out."

Val's arms unlocked from where he'd been leaning his weight on them and they reached for Trist. He found the slender body, his hands spread wide along the falsely fragile back. Every nerve ending felt overloaded, the rub of the fibers of his clothes felt impossibly rough and he needed and hungered.

"No, not that way Trist, not that way." He forced out, panting now, aching. "If we do this, it's you I want to be with, no one else."

It seemed against natural order, but Trist grew harder. He pushed himself up onto his knees and grabbed both sides of Val's face. As he smashed his lips down with a shattering force, he kissed the now willing man with a devouring need. He bit at the tongue that chased after his own, he sucked it hard, he pushed it away and Val took it all with deep, short, moans of agreement.

When he broke the kiss, Trist pulled away and stood up. Val sat, looking bewildered, his arousal an obvious bulge in his jeans, his hair mussed up and messy. Trist nearly pounced on him again. Instead, he stroke a hand across Val's face with tender gentleness. "Follow." He ordered and without a backward glance, walked with careful strides to his bedroom.

This was his out, Val knew it. Trist couldn't have made it more clear if he'd spray painted it on the wall in big neon green letters. He could leave, right now and be back locked into his apartment before Trist knew he was gone. This could stop, right now. He could pretend it was just how skilled Trist was at kissing that was making him moan and ache.

He forced himself to stand, his legs trembling and weak. There was no thought to leaving, he'd been given an order and he followed it. To cross into the bedroom, to accept the invitation, meant accepting more than just a single night of pleasure. Even clouded by lust, Val understood this and still he walked toward the bedroom.

If he crossed that threshold he'd be giving in. It would be a surrender, defeat, release. There would be no retreating, even if he could never find the courage to admit just what he desired again, even if he never again kissed another man, he'd not be able to go back to pretending. Val knew, if he crossed into Trist's bedroom, his reality would be taken apart and the new order assembled would be frightening. He knew if he obeyed the soft spoken command and the need of his own cock, that, at least for the night, there would be nothing he could deny Trist.

Trembling, Val wavered. His mind beat against the idea of letting go, giving in and feeling such delight. The door to the apartment suddenly looked like salvation. There was no retreat there, either. If he ran now, he'd spend the rest of his life running.

Val crossed into the bedroom and prayed he'd not become sick with unease and lusty fear.

Trist sat on the edge of the bed. There was an almost unnatural calm to the slender man. His odd eyes were steady, the normal random, waving motions of his day to day life was gone. "Shut the door."

Val obeyed and stood in the dim light of a single lamp. His heart raced, his palms were sweaty.

"Strip."

"What?"

"Get. Naked. Now." Trist strengthened his tone and saw the shiver run across Val's body. The power, the control the beautiful man was giving so freely into his hands was a better drug than Trist had ever been on.

"It's him, he had the same effect on me. It's like he's some rare opium. One taste isn't going to be enough for you, I promise you that."

Shut up! Trist thought as loudly as he could, not wanting to slip and speak aloud to voices only he heard. One night, it's plenty.

Matt only laughed.

Standing just inside the door, Val began to remove his clothes. The eyes watching burned him, made him feel like a desired object and that made him shiver in hunger. His hands shook but he peeled off his shirt and dropped it to the side. He paused there, barely able to breathe.

"All of it, I want to see you naked."

The voice was a velvet touch, strong, steady, hot, across Val's body. The desire was clear in the tone, Trist wanted him, badly. He was having as strong of an effect on the seer as was being had to his own body. He was a source of pleasure to another, it was a warm feeling that he hadn't felt since college. The pants and socks peeled away, the boxers went with them. Val turned a little to the side as he stepped from the legs, feeling painfully shy under the intense eyes.

"Turn so I can see you."

He shuffled a little and couldn't meet the eyes that were raking over his skin as he turned. It took an effort but he kept his hands from covering his groin and trying to hide the evidence of just how much Trist was turning him on. His skin felt flushed and hot and Val knew he must be blushing from head to toe.

"Beautiful, God, Val, you're just fucking beautiful. If the world would obey me, you'd be naked in front of my eyes forever and I would be greedy. No one but me would be allowed such an exquisite sight ever again." Trist breathed out, shuddering, aching, needing to throw the man

down and fuck him hard.

Val blushed for sure now, the words were too sexy, too much. He wasn't such a creature to deserve anyone thinking such thoughts about him. It would have pulled protests from him but Trist stood and crossed over to stand in front of him.

"Untie my hair." Trist ordered, knowing without having to be told how Val's hands itched to free the braid. "I want to feel your hands in it with it hanging loose around my shoulders."

"Oh, my God." Val whispered but he jumped to obey. Trist stepped with within an inch of touching his body and held perfectly still. They were standing so close that the head of Val's cock rubbed against the fabric of the clothes Trist still wore. The ghosting touch was making him shiver and his hands shook so much he struggled with the tie wrapped so tightly around the slender tip of the braid.

It felt sacred to unravel the dark hair. The strands slid like spun silk against his hands and as each section released, Val stroked it. Bit by bit, the hair fell free and softened the underweight sharpness Trist carried, took away some of the unearthly sharpness of his odd eyes. It made him look human, fragile and approachable, something real instead of someone so insanely gifted. When the braid finally released and the straight hair fell in barely waved lines, Val stroked it. His fingers dug deep to the scalp and slid outward, a touch so casual but more erotic than sex had been with Kelly.

Trist closed his eyes and leaned into the comforting touch. Indulged in the contact he craved so deeply and rarely found. When the touch grew more steady, more focused, he leaned forward and kissed Val again. The lips parted for him, accepted him and he stayed as gentle and sweetly tender as the strong fingers untangling his hair.

"Don't come, not yet." Trist warned before he began kissing Val's neck. He hadn't been lying to Eshe, he wanted to lick Val, bite him, kiss him. There was just something to the way the tan skin twitched at the slightest touch of his mouth to it, something to the taste of skin so seldom tasted, that made him want more.

"Tried to warn you."

Trist kissed lower, staying feather soft and teasing with the harder, rougher contact he knew Val craved. He nipped and suckled on collarbones, exhaled breath to cool the skin with a chill effect. His mouth found one tightly hard nipple and tormented it. Val stumbled from the onslaught of sensation and Trist had to hold onto the side of the man's ribs to steady him.

"Tell me you don't enjoy laying with men and I'll never ask you again." Trist whispered. He broke his words up into segments and licked the sensitive flesh in the breaks. "Tell me, you'll still find pleasure tonight, but tell me and I will tell everyone you're not into me. Deny it to me now." He sucked so hard that he drew the pebbled flesh into his mouth and Val swayed, his hands going back to slid through Trist's hair.

"I..." Val forced out. "Trist, I..."

"Say it." He demanded.

"No woman's ever made me feel like this." The confession shook him almost as much as the tormenting pleasure.

"Do you like cock?"

"Oh, God, yes."

"Tell me, do you like sucking cock?"

Val moaned.

"No, not any cock." Trist licked the other nipple and started torturing the other side. "Do you want to suck my cock, Val?"

"Yes." Val whispered without thinking.

"Lick it, nip it, swallow me whole when I've come?"

"Please." He begged.

"There's more though. I've seen it, I've seen how Matt fucked you. How you'd moan and beg him to shove it deeper. You're very slutty, it was so sexy to see, Val. Tell me, tell me you liked it." He covered the bared chest with kisses.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"I..." Val moaned. "I liked it."

"Liked what, say it, Val, I want to hear you say it."

"I liked it when he... oh God, when he fucked me."

Trist stopped raining kisses across Val's torso and stood to meet the taller man's lust fogged eyes. He slid a hand gently across the gasping face. "I give you permission to like it when it's my cock in your ass. It's okay to enjoy it."

Val sobbed, his eyes went shut, his hips bucked forward. "Please, oh, please." There was no doubt he was sobbing, just no tears were falling.

Trist kissed the sweat dampened forehead. "Soon, just remember, don't come, not yet." That was the only warning he gave before wrapping his hand around Val's neglected length. As the contact was made, Trist saw the other man's eyes flutter up and his knees gave out. Val didn't quite faint, but it was close.

Trist gathered the limp body against his own and directed it to his bed. Once there, Val tumbled gracelessly across the covers. He followed and half lay on the near frantic man, Trist kept at the gentle stroking. His fingers teased the head, pulled and stroked, and squeezed and even the smallest of touches had Val twitching and sobbing. Every movement, every desperate and needy sound, was like fire in Trist's blood. He increased the pressure, the rough demand of his touch, until Val was hitching for breath and blindly without shame thrusting his hips into the contact.

It was right there, on the brink of release, that Trist stopped. Val groaned and his eyes flew open. "Oh, please, please!" He begged but when he reached to provide the last few seconds of contact he needed, Trist stopped him.

"Don't!" He bent over the begging man and kissed him, letting the ends of his hair tickle across him. Val's hands let go of their death grip on the bed and held onto Trist, pulling the kiss tighter and deeper, begging without words.

"I..."

"What, dearest? Tell me?" Trist asked kissing the tormented face.

"I want to see you, please." Val pulled at the fabric that separated them.

"Nothing to see." Trist brushed Val's hair from his face but the fingers pulled tighter at him.

"Please, I need it, I need to see you, please, Trist."

"If you can refuse his begging, you're a stronger man than I ever was."

Trist cringed internally but agreed with Matt, there was no way he could deny such a request.
"You've seen me. We showered together."

"No, no, I, need to, I, God, Trist, Please? You're so amazing, please, let me see you?"

"Very well, but no laughing." He kissed Val again before sliding away just far enough to be within easy sight and quickly shimmying out of his clothes. Val's eyes slid over him, taking in the bandaged fresh cuts, the thin white scars from old cuts and how slender he was.

"God, oh, Trist. I've never wanted anyone like this." The words spilled out.

"And he means that, he desired me, but not as he does you."

Val's words and Matt's agreement, melted the last of Trist's worries.

"I want to taste you." Val whispered, pushing up to lean on an elbow.

Trist nearly came, Matt laughed at his surprised desire. "Not now, later. Tonight, you're supposed to lay back, close your eyes and enjoy yourself." That and if Val's mouth came anywhere near his weeping length that would be all they wrote.

It was then that he remembered he didn't have a condom. Gavan most likely did but that was across the apartment and he'd have to tear the room apart looking for it, his mind was too scrambled to see where they might be kept. He hadn't planned on going so far with Val, he hadn't expected Val to want to go so far.

"The only person he's ever been unprotected with was me, and I with him. He's clean and you're clean. Ask him." Matt paused. "No, tell him, he'll enjoy that more."

Trist slid along Val's body, skin, bare and exposed, slid against skin and made them both moan in need. Val kept arching into the soft touch, clinging to it and Trist could have spent days just fulfilling the taller man's need to be touched and still Val wouldn't be sated. He rolled them together with Val below him, one of his knees shoved roughly between Val's legs forcing them to part but he paused.

"Val?" He stroked the tormented face, brushed hair back and trailed fingers across lips that tried to draw them in to suck on. "Lovely?" He kissed the side of Val's face. "I hadn't planned on seducing you so far tonight. Prudence says we shouldn't go further because I didn't fully plan and am caught unaware."

Val's mind refused to make sense of the words but the meaning, that they weren't going on, sunk in. He moaned in need and regret and struggled to open his eyes and find the words that would change Trist's mind.

"Shhhh, it's okay my beautiful, beautiful Valentine. Shhhh, prudence be damned. I'm going to fuck you, it's going to be me touching you, nothing's going to be between us. I'm going to pry these legs apart and take you so hard and use you until I come in you." Val's legs tightened around the thigh that had them split but his head fell back and he moaned.

"Told you."

Trist slid away, pulled his knee from Val's leg and eased across the sweating, moaning body to the edge of the bed. It took a few moments for Val's mind to process that he was gone but when it sunk in, his eyes opened.

"Trist?" His voice was raspy, broken but at the smile Trist gave him all words fled.

Val's eyes tracked him as he circled the bed and opened the drawer on the side nightstand. It was his toy box, things he'd bought over the years for his own pleasure or on whims that one day he'd be able to cuff a lover to the bed. The idea of Val handcuffed was delicious and he almost gave in but he wanted Val free and writhing too much. So many wicked thoughts were inspired by the items in his private drawer but the only one he brought out was a small tube of lube.

He twisted the cap off and squeezed some of the gel onto his fingers, Val's eyes watched everything. "Put your feet flat on the bed." His voice alone made Val shivered, God, Trist nearly came just seeing that.

Feet were raised and placed on the blankets but ankle touched ankle and knee pressed to knee.

"Farther apart."

Val writhed and blushed red again and his drawn up legs slid a few inches apart.

"Farther." That earned him a few more inches. "Spread your legs wider, Val, show me how badly you want to be fucked silly."

Inch, by embarrassed, erotic inch, Val slid his feet farther apart. When he finished he was spread open wide, further then even Trist had hoped for and Val trembled on the bed as Trist just watched him without touching. He lay there, blushing, needing, his cock hard and dripping with his desire, more turned on then he'd ever been and it was all from the feel of being watched while vulnerable.

A thousand dirty fantasies filled Trist but he was painfully aroused and he knew he was already teetering on the verge of release. From how Val was panting, from how his pulse made his cock twitch with each beat, his lover was as close. He gathered pillows from the bed and stood over Val.

Val was laying right on the edge of the bed, the mattress was high enough that his face was so close to Trist's groin. One little taste wouldn't hurt would it? He stroked his hand over his own cock and spread the small bead of gel across the length and pulled a small bead of come to the tip.

"Open your eyes, Val." He ordered and Val obeyed. The soft brown went wide at the sight towering over him. Trist leaned forward, aiming his cock toward Val's mouth and instead of Val pulling away, he licked his lips. "What would you like to do, Val? Tell me." Val's head drew closer, his tongue flicked out again but Trist caught a hand in his hair and held the man steady. "Tell me, don't show me. What do you want Val?"

The brown eyes squinted shut and the last of Val's pride vanished. "A taste." He whispered. "Please."

Trist turned the painful grip into a caress. "A small one."

"Thank you." Val moaned and his tongue darted out.

The hot swipe nearly buckled Trist's knees. Once, twice and again Val lapped at the head of his cock, circled it with hot pointed tip before lapping again in wide strokes across the hypersensitive head. Val was moaning, his eyes shut, his hips trying to find contact that wasn't there, his feet remaining firmly planted and widely spread. The sight, the way Val was moaning in the back of his throat, the exploding pleasure of the slight contact, it made Trist want to push himself all the way into that hot mouth and sex be damned.

He stepped back, Val whining in a clingy needy way. "Next time." Trist panted out. "Next time, love, next time." He was reeling. Sex had never been this good, ever and he knew it was because Val was held nothing back. Trist could reach out and plunder the man's mind, feel every memory, learn every like and dislike, feel all that had made Val who he'd become. Val wasn't just giving his body to be opened and exposed, he was letting go of everything and lay as mentally vulnerable as he was physically. That's why he was getting such a double echo of his own and Val's pleasure.

"One night still enough."

Fuck off! Trist hissed back and heard Matt's laughter. He leaned forward and kissed the hungry lips, Val parted his mouth and one of his hands held Trist's head in place.

"Please, Trist, please, fuck me." Val blushed redder at begging but he thought he might die if he didn't. Trist stroked his hair so gently and was panting, moaning, as much as he was now.

"How can I refuse?" Trist murmured against Val's mouth and slid away to move lower. As soon as Val understood, his knees fell widely apart once more. "Lift your hips up for me, Val."

There was no pause now, no shy uncertainty. Val pressed his weight into his feet and his hips rose up, cock jutting into the air like a banner. Trist shoved the pillows under Val's lower back and the top of his ass. He lingered a hand over the straining tops of the exposed thighs where they joined to hips and Val's entire body jerked in delight at the contact. A gentle pressure to one hip guided Val back down to ease now on the stack of pillows and the angle opened and exposed him further.

Trist trailed fingers up twitching inner thighs. He let his hand explore, finding spots that caught Val's breath, spots that made him shudder and moan and spots that simply exploded pleasure along both their nerves. He wished he wasn't so close, wished he had the luxury of lingering but neither of them would make it.

A lube slick finger trailed and found the tight, hidden spot. Val bucked off the bed at the light contact and Trist forced his hips back down onto the small tower of pillows. "Fuck, you're so sexy Val, you've got me aching so badly."

Val thrashed his head to the side and moaned.

"And you're so tight..." Trist let his finger circle, trying to sooth the desperate need. "You have to relax, I don't want to hurt you."

"Don't care, fuck me!"

The plea, so ragged and begging, made Trist shudder and his finger slipped past the tight ring of muscle far sooner then he'd wanted. Val groaned, pain mixed with pleasure but he wanted more.

"Careful, when he's lost like this, he won't care if you hurt him. He likes it rough anyway, likes a little pain."

It occurred to Trist that the only voice he heard was Matt's. Even his normal background noise was missing and it was just their broken breathing echoing in his head and Matt's lewd

voyeurism. Are you, fuck he's tight, are you blocking the others? He thought toward Matt and felt the other man's warm laughter.

"Not me, Val's doing that."

That's impossible.

"Not impossible, just improbable. Are you complaining?"

No, God, no. A second finger joined the first and Val was whimpering.

"More, more Trist, please, I can't..."

"You should hurry, he's too close."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I don't care! Please, need you, need you in me, hard, please, oh Trist, please."

He forced the third finger in and gauged that Val was stretching, slowly, but he was. "You're so tight, haven't you indulged yourself over the years?"

"What?" Val opened his eyes but the sight of Trist kneeling between his thighs, one hand fucking him with those long, graceful fingers, as nearly too much. He squinted his eyes shut again.

"You know, a hard dildo up the ass, butt plugs, or a good vibrator." He laughed at the tense confusion that came over Val. "Don't worry, dearest, another night." Another night, at that moment, both men wanted another night.

Trist curled his fingers and reached, that spot tucked so deep in Val's body was struck. Trist moaned, Val choked on a strangled sob. Again, Trist aimed for and found that spot and Val's legs spread wider. It was a tricky balance, the white hot pleasure was forcing Val's body to adjust quickly to the invasion but it also nudged him closer to the edge.

The fingers weren't nearly enough. Val tried to find words again, tried to find what to say to make Trist take him but with his entire body shaking from the pleasure, all he could do was whimper. When the fingers left his body he would have begged for the fingers again if he'd had words. Their teasing pleasure was better than the empty hollowness he was left with. He knew he was whining, whimpering, begging with needy moans and he knew Trist understood.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry love, you're still too tight, this is going to hurt." Trist whispered right into Val's ear as he slid on top of the taller man. The trembling length of Val's cock was brushing against his stomach as the head of his own cock jabbed lightly at the still too tight entrance.

"Don't care, please, please." Val clawed at the body over his, the smell of sex and Trist filled his mind. "Don't care, need... need so badly." One hand found Trist's ass and tried to force the teasing cock into his body.

Trist kissed the gasping lips. "So, just as I promised, baby, lay back and enjoy." He pushed forward and knew he was going to die. Or maybe he was dead already? Nothing this good could be real, pleasure this intense had to burn a body alive. Trist nearly came on the first long slow push inward but he couldn't stop. It wasn't until he was pressed tight against Val and could go no further that he was able to stop.

The only way he knew it all wasn't some delightful vision was from seeing Val's face. It had gone pale, the pain mixed with pleasure was too much. If it was a vision, there'd be no pain for either of them. That settled Trist down a little, he kissed the tense face and struggled to hold very still.

"It's okay love, I'm right here, it'll fade, it's okay."

Val opened his eyes and fell into the odd black circled green eyes. In this moment, everything was right. There was no guilt, no self loathing for being so weak that he not only enjoyed another man taking him but that he needed it desperately. All that he felt was how right it was, laying under Trist, lost in the burning tight pain and promise of blinding pleasure, everything was right.

"You okay?" Trist asked when he saw the odd swirl of emotion cross Val's face.

Val nodded and twitched his hips a little to distract Trist. He wasn't ready to think about the emotions he felt, let alone try to explain them to someone else. It worked. Trist's eyes went shut and he moaned, sliding slightly from the tightness and thrusting back in.

Pleasure exploded across both men. "Fuck!" Trist swore. "Aw fuck." And his body was moving without his control. Each thrust made them both moan, sweat dripped and rolled across their skin. Trist was mindless in his driving need, he had lost all hold of control.

"More!" Val hissed.

Trist shivered.

"Harder! Oh God, Please, harder!" Val begged and Trist complied.

Val's voice broke into keening moans. As their bodies slid against each other, it was teasing his cock with the ghost of real contact. He needed more.

"Bite him, scratch him, command him. Don't let him start thinking, keep him reacting"

Trist's mind was too far gone. He didn't even really know that Matt wasn't physically in the bed with them. "I can do that." He licked the side of Val's neck and made the man shiver. He pulled hair, he nipped at skin, he held Val's body in a grip that could leave bruises and the more he let go, the more Val let go.

Trist took a hold on Val's trembling cock and started stroking it. "Say my name." He demanded, hissing into the ear he was biting. "I want to hear you scream my name when you come." There was no time now, the world was ending. "Let me hear who's cock is fucking your tight ass!" He squeezed the flesh in his hand and Val bucked.

"Oh, oh God! Trist! Oh it's you! Oh Trist!" The last of his ties to sanity shattered and Val went mad with pleasure. He came, hard, moaning, begging with his lover's name on his lips and still he was being taken. As his body twitched and his hips bucked the final tumbles of climax, he was also still being taken so hard his body rocked with the force.

"Let go Trist, come in him, fill him, claim him as yours."

"Fuck yes! He's mine!" He groaned. "You're fucking mine, Val! Only mine!" His body exploded, his life and energy rushed out. "Fucking mine!" He threw his head back and came in endless, deeper, stuttering thrusts. "Mine." He growled as he fell, exhausted, to lay on the body below his.

Val shuddered at the hot release in his body, and the primal growling, really felt claimed. His arms wrapped around Trist's body, pulled the limp, spent man tight to him and petted sweat soaked damp hair back. "Yours." He whispered and shivered. If only for the moment, everything was perfect. "Just yours."

"Damned right." Trist muttered and licked the sweat from the side of Val's face. Unwillingly, his softening cock slipped from Val's body and it made them both groan in regret. Trist snuggled in

against Val, not caring about the sweat and come, needing to stay in contact with what they'd had. "Mine." He sighed as Val continued to pet his hair.

Part Sixteen

When he yawned and the hand stilled against his head, Trist glanced up. Val's eyes were drifting shut, lightly closing and lazily opening and it made him grin to see. "Don't sleep like this, we're all gunky."

Val tightened his arms around Trist. "Not moving."

Trist wiggled a little. "We're not sleeping like this, hang on." He had to squirm from Val's grasp but lucky for them both the other man was too spent to protest much. He hurried across to his bathroom and returned cleaned up and carrying a damp washcloth.

The warm washcloth stroked across Val's body and it made him moan again. The cloth felt rough to his overloaded skin but the sheer delight of just being pampered overwhelmed him. "Tha's nice." He slurred out. All across him, the washcloth dragged and left him feeling tended to and clean but it was when Trist snuggled back against him that felt the best. "Tha's better."

Trist let Val pull him close again, felt the tender kiss to the top of his head and smiled. Their legs entwined and Trist pulled a blanket over their nude bodies. Sleep tugged at him now, it seemed so easy to fall into it with silence still inside his head, so easy with that warm hand sliding across his hair.

There was something cold and sharp around his wrists, it was the only thing that broke into Trist's darkness. There were angry voices around him, male, deep, full of command and authority and he struggled awake to hear them. There were men in suits but their faces wouldn't swim into focus and as much as he tried to focus on the words, none of it made any sense.

A small part of Trist's mind knew it was a dream but that didn't stop him from near panic when the cold touch around his wrist came into focus. Shackles, handcuffs maybe, but shackles, he pulled and screamed against them, cursing in rage at being confined. Bad things happened when he was restrained, people shot him full of drugs and left him helpless and alone. He screamed and pulled but the metal only bit into his flesh and added hot slick blood to the mix.

Someone hit him, hard, and his head snapped to the side. They wanted him to be quiet, wanted him to be good. Trist struggled to obey, knowing he was whimpering now more in fear than pain. There was something he'd been doing, he groped for how he'd wound up shackled being shouted out and hit. He'd been with someone, helping someone with a dead loved one.

Violet.

He'd been with Val. He'd been helping Val and now he was chained up, trapped. Trist struggled to force the dream to make sense, struggled for understanding.

They had Val too.

Val was expendable.

Trist forced his eyes open again, forced them to focus and see. The men around him blurred away but he saw Val, knocked down, bleeding. The man was so angry, it rolled from him in waves. He wanted to shout at Val to stop fighting, to give in but even if the dream Val could hear him, Trist knew he'd never listen.

A gun, cold, black metal, dull and deadly, glinted for a moment and Trist was screaming again. Val snarled, he was shouting, saying something that Trist couldn't hear. The gun went off, everything slowed down. The shot was like thunder, it exploded in his ears, shattered his eardrums in its violence. In the new sluggish order, Trist could almost see the bullet traveling. He saw Val's eyes go wide and everything went back to normal speed. Trist screamed as the smell of blood floated on the air and Val fell, slumped, dead.

Val was dead, Val was dead because of him. Val was dead. Trist screamed, mindlessly, no longer caring if he dislocated his arms pulling at the shackles. It didn't matter now if he made a fuss and they killed him to. Val was dead. He'd helped him and now Val was dead.

Shockingly hot hands gripped his shoulders and shook him. Trist was sobbing, screaming, with the taste of Val's blood in his mouth but hands, alive and warm were shaking him. A voice slid into his mind, Val's voice, calling his name and the nightmare shattered.

His eyes were open but sight and focus returned. The nightstand lamp was on, he was in his own bedroom. His hair was loose around his shoulders, he was naked and Val was very much alive and shaking him to wake him from then nightmare. Trist sobbed again, shaking, overwhelmed and threw himself against Val.

"Shhh, it's just a dream." Val whispered and petted the trembling body he held close to his own. "Just a dream, you're okay."

Trist dug his fingers in Val's shoulder. "No, no, it's... you... I... oh they..." but the words didn't come. He couldn't tell Val his dream, he knew the other man wouldn't understand. He'd dismiss it as just a dream. Trist drew a long, slow breath.

"That's it, breath." Val kissed the head tucked against him. "Wow, that was a doozy, huh?"

"I'm sorry, not used to my nightmares bothering anyone." He muttered, hating that he'd gone and spoiled the lovely night.

"You were screaming, want to talk about it?"

"No." It was pretty clear, help Val and he died. It was okay, he could do that, they only had this one night. So long as he kept it to one night, limited contact, he wouldn't do something stupid like help Val and get him killed. "I'm sorry." But he was apologizing for not being able to help more then for the nightmare.

"It's okay. Happens, right?"

"Yeah, fucking too often too." He sniffed and pulled away from Val long enough to rub hands roughly over his face. "God."

Val twirled a strand of Trist's loose hair around his fingers. "You should wear it like this more often, it looks nice loose."

Trist studied the other face for the joke that had to follow but saw only seriousness. Matt was right, one night wasn't going to be enough, Trist already wanted more. It was cruel and unfair, stay with Val and get him killed, leave him and he lives. There really wasn't a choice there.

With no warning, Trist surged forward and claimed a strong kiss. There was something hungry in it and Val fell back onto the bed with the slender man pillowed on top of him. He wouldn't question it, couldn't begin to understand how anyone could go from screaming in nightmare fueled terror to kissing him silly within moments. That was assuming he could think straight enough understand anything and Val doubted he could, Trist kissing him seemed to short out his mind.

Only, just when things were starting to look interesting, Trist stopped. He sighed and pressed his forehead against Val's. "You're awful, God, Val, you'd really let me take you again? I could, couldn't I? You make it very difficult to behave but I'm not going to hurt you. You have to be sore, you were like a animal and I wasn't very gentle."

Val reached up and brushed the falling curtain of hair back. "You didn't hurt me."

"And I'm not going to, we should get some sleep."

"No." Val pulled and Trist gave in and kissed him again. "Not sleepy." He muttered against the lips that so easily tormented him. "Not anymore, but... it's just... hell." Val slipped away and clicked the light off.

"Val?" Trist blinked, his eyes always were slow to adjust to quick changes in light. He felt movement along the bed. "Val?"

Strong hands slid up along either side of Trist's ribs, tracing the lines of his body. "Oh, fuck, Val." He sighed at the bold touch. He could deal with darkness if it allowed Val to touch him. It felt so good he almost forgot about how disgustingly skinny he'd grown.

"Shh, I..." The hands faltered and the words wouldn't come. Val knew he'd lose his nerve if he had too many reminders this was real. He needed to pretend it was another dream but a dream he wanted.

In the darkness, Trist nodded and shut up. Or tried to, because the lightest touch of Val's hands on his body made him need to curse. Those hands traced his torso, crossed his stomach, glided over his hips. Val was mapping him with touch, like a blind man learning a face. The tips of Val's fingers dragged across his half awake cock and it twitched into life. There was no stopping the moan the light contact caused.

It was okay because Val shut him up with a kiss. It was tentative and shy. Trist parted his lips and did his best to not kiss back because he knew if he did, he'd have Val rolled under him, taking control back. Trist didn't want to do that, if Val wanted to be bold, he'd try to be still and see where it took them.

The kiss was too brief and when Trist tried to touch Val's shoulder and encourage him, it made his lover flinch. So, he wasn't allowed to touch either. The rules were difficult but Trist would play along, anything to keep that shy mouth teasing his neck. There was a rusty, uncertainty to Val's mouth. It knew what it wanted to do but felt stiff and awkward remembering how.

The darkness soon was filled with their shortened breath. Trist's broke in muffled sighs and broken words that he barely turned into hissing soft moans. His arms kept rising from the bed to wrap around Val and he had to force them to be still. Instead, he raised them above his head and shook hands with his own wrists. It took Val a moment to understand what Trist had done in the dark but once he did the tense body sliding against his eased and Val's breath shuddered out in a relaxed sigh.

How long had it been since Trist had such a tender lover? Had he ever? He was normally fairly aggressive, preferring to top and stay in control and his list of past relationships was embarrassingly short. He'd only ever been topped by one other man, a short lived relationship because the fellow had gotten off on Trist being out of control and had provoked him into fits and episodes. Once lost in his own sight and skills, the man would take him, adding to the chaos and confusion Trist was swimming in. It hadn't been a pleasant relationship.

The others, well they'd been more fuck buddies than lovers and when they'd come together it had been for purely physical release. This, what Val was doing, wasn't about physical climax. Val

was a touch slut, he wanted to be touched, craved it and needed to touch in return. He'd been denying himself too long and now that he'd been given a few guilt free hours, was exploding with the need for physical contact. Even if neither of them came, the touch alone would have been enough.

Trist smiled in the dark. They'd come, if it came to it, he'd make sure. Until then, he'd behave and let Val reach him. It only hurt a little bit to know he'd never have this again. It really was easier to never have such a shy tender contact then to have it and be denied. He told his head to stop thinking about tomorrow and just be happy now.

Which was far easier when Val's mouth kissed down his chest and his fingers shyly brushed an already hard nipple. He had to bite his lip to keep from talking, he'd always babbled when turned on but Val made him worse it seemed. He did manage to turn his cursing oath of pleasure into a swallowed moan when Val bit him. It was cruel, to so gently touch his nipple right before biting it. Trist wanted him to be cruel again.

Far too soon for Trist's sake, Val moved on, kissing his chest, his stomach, circling his navel. One of Val's hands slid along his thigh and Trist's mind stopped, in the silence, for again everything was silent, his breath hitched in his throat. It was a tickling touch, tormenting with the promise of rougher, more demanding contact that Val didn't seem ready to give. It took Val tugging a little on the thigh he was tickling across for his meaning to sink in but when it did, Trist slid his legs apart. His hips arched up in the darkness but there was nothing there for his needing length to find contact with.

He really didn't know what to expect and he was ready to accept anything. Val didn't seem like the sort to want to top but if he did, Trist wouldn't complain. But, being logically ready for anything didn't prepare him for the touch of a hot, wet, tongue against his hip. It crept in kisses and nips over and before Trist could really understand, Val found his target.

"Oh!" Trist bucked up from the bed and Val's hands held him in place. "Oh, fuck yes!" He bite his tongue to stop the words but they didn't seem to scare Val away.

The tiny hint at Val's skills at fellatio were nothing compared to the real thing. Like all the other contact, Val seemed uneasy, out of practice but as he eased into it, the contact just became better. Val's tongue swirled and teased and bit by bit he bobbed more of the length into his mouth. Once, he went too far and choked, having to stop for a moment to cough.

"Sorry." He whispered softly.

Trist felt the embarrassment. He let one hand slid down to ruffle across Val's head. "Don't be." He whispered out but logical words fled because Val returned to his efforts, even more set on doing it right.

Trist had to pull his hand back above his head or else he was afraid he'd be forcing Val to finish, which was a line he didn't think Val was ready to cross. As the mouth teased him closer, Trist writhed and fought with himself to stay silent.

Val moaned.

"Oh fuck!" Trist cursed as the throaty sound poured into his body.

Val whimpered.

Trist nearly came. He felt it then the slight rocking of the bed and that only one of Val's hands was holding onto him now. Val was between his legs, sucking him like a treasured candy, jerking himself off. Trist would have done almost anything to have the light on, he wanted to see Val pleasuring himself. One day he would, he promised himself, forgetting for the moment that there

would never be a one day.

"Val, stop... I can't... oh fuck... I'm going..." Trist stuttered out, trying to whisper, trying to be as silent as he could but it sounded awfully loud to his ears.

Val didn't stop. His mouth never pulled away. To answer, he sucked harder, drew the trembling flesh tighter into his mouth and silently told Trist to come. Which he struggled not to but with another long moan from Val, did. His whole body trembled, shuddered, pleasure pouring from him, stealing his breath. It was something he wished he could have seen, Val swallowing his release, the look on Val's face as he found his own release with Trist's come in his mouth. The thought was almost hot enough to make him hard again.

They lay in the darkness, panting, breath slowing, Val's head pillowed on one of Trist's widely spread legs. One of his hands curled loosely over Trist's hip and from the spot or two cooling moisture that dripped onto him, Trist could guess which hand. He was grateful Val wasn't the sort to just wipe himself off onto the sheets, that always grossed him out.

"Thank you." Val finally sighed into the darkness.

"God damn, Val!" Trist chuckled, his laughter rattling where Val lay against him. "I'm the one saying thanks. Man, I should have nightmares more often." Only that reminded him what the dream had shown him and stabbed him with the pain of having to go back to casual friends.

Val nuzzled the thigh he was resting on before sliding away and off the bed. "Bathroom." He explained before finding his way by memory to the bathroom, still unwilling to turn on a light.

With Val out of sight, Trist swiped the spots of come from his hip and sucked the taste of Val from his fingers. Life was an unfair and horrible bitch and he was apparently her whipping boy. There was no blissful ignorance, not for him, not ever. As Trist swirled his tongue lazily around his own fingers and watched the shadow of Val move around inside his now lighted bathroom he knew he'd rather never speak to Val again than see the man harmed.

"Fuck, I hate my life." He muttered, pulling his fingers out of his mouth and loosing the glow from such a delightful blow job. Even when Val returned and spooned tight and naked against him, yawning like an innocent child in his ear, he couldn't shake the melancholy.

Part Seventeen

(sorry for the short chapter... Durn real life again... Figured something was better than nothing and this is all I found time for in two days! *sigh*)

Gavan prepared for the worst, the key turned in the lock and he was braced and ready for whatever awaited him. The apartment wasn't trashed. That was a good start. He took a few steps inside and spotted Val, sitting quietly on the sofa, reading. A few steps more and the apartment was quiet, too quiet.

"Hey." Val glanced up from his book and smiled. "Back sooner than I thought."

Gavan froze. "It's so quiet, where's Trist?" There was no music playing, no tv, no video games and no laughing, shouting, manic Trist, the place actually felt calm.

Val glanced down and nodded to the sofa. Gavan walked uneasily closer and followed Val's eyes, only to find Trist curled up on his side, his head resting on a pillow that was set on Val's

legs, asleep. Not just asleep, soundly asleep, deeply asleep, his hair loose and floating around his face, a blanket pulled over his body.

"Oh my God, what did you give him?"

Val shook his head. "Nothing." He set the book very carefully aside and soothed out some of the tangles of the dark hair. "Hang on." It took moving carefully, but Val got himself out from under the pillow and lowered pillow and head back down onto the sofa. Trist didn't even stir.

Gavan was still shaking his head as he carried his bag toward his bedroom. The bed was made, crisply, the way Trist made beds and again there was no chaos, no disorder, nothing was broken. "Okay so out with it." He asked as soon as the door was shut behind him. "Trist never naps, he hates sleeping. What did you do, give him warm milk and rub his tummy?"

Val nearly blushed. "No, he just didn't sleep well last night." He's woken up several times and found Trist alert and watching him. "So I started reading to him, he fell asleep. How was your weekend?"

"Fine until Wally got in on me about six months in the future and a year and God, I can't ever look that far ahead, you know?" He saw Val nodding. "That doesn't matter, tell me, how your weekend went? I'm shocked your still talking to me!"

"He's not that bad." Val shrugged, Gavan just stared at him. "What?"

"Buddy, you must be deprived of human contact or Trist really was on his best behavior." He sat on the edge of the bed and patted a spot next to him. "Now, tell me everything."

Val did blush, a little, but he sat down. He told Gavan the weekend but he didn't tell him everything. Trist had been melancholy the whole day, not the almost bragging exuberance Val had expected from him after tripping them into bed. For his part, Val was trying not to think too hard about it but he found his mind wandering into lewd little corners at the smallest things, like how Trist's mouth curled around the soup spoon at lunch.

"Wait, he took you to meet Eshe?"

"Yeah."

"He likes you."

"I'm used to being around people that see the world from different angles. That's all it is."

"No." Gavan shook his head and mentally tallied up what he was seeing. Trist, sleeping peacefully like a babe on Val's lap, Val now visibly more at ease, something had happened between the two. Just what it was, Gavan didn't want to guess but it had been good for both of the men. "He likes you. I'm rarely invited to go see Eshe. Wow, and he told you about running away? That's huge."

"He didn't make it feel that way."

"Well it is, he never talks about that. I," He glanced toward the living room and the sleeping man. "Look, I love Trist, dearly, more than my own brothers but he was way worse as a kid. Way worse. Until we were about eleven, we literally lived together. It was the only way he could function but when he'd flip out, I'd get blamed. I let him down, seeing me at Eshe's reminds us both of that."

"He didn't say anything like that, just that it had been difficult for you too growing up and your parents separated the two of you which led him to living with your grandmother and he ran

away.”

“Wow, okay, he really likes you.” Gavan narrowed his eyes. “Did you let him kiss you?”

“What?” Val squawked.

Gavan waved it off. “Doesn’t matter, sorry, not my concern, not my concern. Look, I’m not proud of it but I really resented Trist as a kid. By the time our parents separated us, I had an ulcer, a twelve year old with an ulcer. That summer, my folks broke our family’s ways and sent me away for a month to this summer camp in Canada. They talked about sending Trist to this camp for kids with emotional issues but they required all children be medicated and our Grandmother refused to have Trist on drugs, so he stayed home. I mean in a way, it’s totally my fault.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Yeah I was a kid too but it’s my job and well, there really needs to be two of me since Trist is like twice what he’s supposed to be. Anyway, his parents were frayed, and with me at camp, Trist just got worse and worse. He told me a couple of years ago what set him off but he’s never told anyone since.”

“I’m sorry?”

“He went nuts, totally stopped even trying to fight it. Most of the family thought he had snapped but really he just gave up. I sort of need to know why because if he does it again, it’s on my shoulders but he never wanted to tell me, not until recently. His parents are good people, they really are, it’s just, he’s not a normal kid.”

“What happened?”

Gavan sighed, he’d never trusted anyone with what Trist had told him. It was clear Trist really cared for Val and Val was a therapist, he’d obviously done some good just in a few days. It suddenly became okay to tell someone else and maybe find some absolution for his own childhood mistakes.

“Trist came across his mother, sitting in her bedroom, sobbing while on the phone. He could feel her grief and had gone to her to comfort her, he’s actually a really caring person when he’s not wiggled out. Only he stopped when he heard she was on the phone and he overheard her telling one of our aunts that she couldn’t take it anymore. He overheard his own mother saying she’d wished he’d never been born, that some days, she wished he’d just go away. That it would be easier on them all if he just vanished and how much easier everything would be without him.” He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “I mean that sounds awful.”

“It’s a natural reaction to a special needs situation, it’s human.”

“Yeah and she never intended him to hear her say it. I still don’t know if she knows he did but it had awful results on him. He literally stopped caring, stopped trying to be normal. Apparently it got really bad, there was talk of committing him and my parents refused to bring me home early. Which I guess is a good thing because I would have hated Trist if they had.”

“So they took him to live with your grandmother?”

“Well, not really, not right away. Trist flipped out, I’m told he was screaming and fighting and breaking things for hours and finally his father got a hold of him. He was only trying to restrain him, Trist just freaks out when he’s restrained, he can’t stand it, so it’s always a last resort. It made him worse, he was hitting at his dad, and well, his father just snapped. Started hitting him back, meant to just smack him but one hit led to another and he couldn’t stop.” Gavan shook his head. “He’s a good man, he’s been guilty over it ever since, still is, can’t even look Trist in the

eyes not that Trist sees them too often.”

“But it happens which is why respite care for fulltime caregivers is so needed. No one should be pushed to that point.”

“But Trist isn’t schizophrenic, respite care isn’t so easy to arrange for him and he was twelve. Anyway, it sent him to the hospital, his dad had broken his arm, his jaw, split his scalp open so he needed stitches. That’s my fault, I should have been there.”

“You were just a child yourself.”

Gavan shook his head. “Thing is, when our grandmother refused to let Trist go home and moved him in with her, I was glad. I was so totally grateful. I actually got to enjoy going to school because Trist dropped out. I needed that time, I mean I don’t think I could have stopped resenting him otherwise. It’s not his fault either but it was just so much easier to avoid him.”

“He said that it was a fight between him and his grandmother that made him run away.”

“Oh the two of them are awful. Both so stubborn, she’s trying to do what’s right and pass to him what’s worked for all the generations before him but he doesn’t work like them. And Trist, he never gives an inch, never compromises who he is for anyone. She wanted him to go back to school, Trist always got good marks but it was because he’d see the answers not because he knew them. And school was like going to a morgue for him, filled with so many emotions and futures and voices. It was like being drowned for him and she didn’t understand. That’s what they fought over that made him run.”

“School?”

Gavan nodded. “Yup. I’m sure it was more to it, but that’s what started it. Trist just didn’t care anymore. I mean, he knew running away would make staying focused so much more difficult but he did it, I couldn’t have, I’ve never be so brave. It was when they told me he’d run off and had no idea where that it really hit me that I loved him. I was really scared for him. Eshe finding him was more then just getting him off the streets, it gave him distance too. Suddenly he was in a place that drew others like him and he wasn’t alone and he didn’t have to listen to the whole, this is how it’s always been done speeches. It let me come over and get to know him, slowly, and him me and Eshe never got upset at his fits. This will sound odd, but Trist found a father figure in Eshe’s father’s spirit. It was a turning point for him, that place is where his adult life started. I can’t stress the importance of it enough to you and he took you there, shared you with Eshe.” He was shaking his head and wished he knew what had happened over the weekend. “Amazing.”

“Still, you’ll need to check the cut on his foot. He says it’s fine but it was pretty deep.” That was a safe topic, one he could speak on without blushing.

“I’ll keep an eye on it. I can’t thank you enough Val, I really can’t. Even with the fight, well, I feel so much better.”

“Good. Glad I could help. Well, I should go, I’m sure you’ll want time to unpack and relax.”

“You don’t have to, stay.”

Val shook his head. There was too much to think about, too much to avoid thinking about and now that Gavan was back he wanted to be alone. “Thanks but it’s okay. Some things were said about my sister’s death, from Trist and Eshe, I want to make some phone calls this afternoon.” He paused in the bedroom doorway. “I’m glad you had a good weekend and tell Trist...” tell Trist what? “Tell him I enjoyed spending time with him and both of you, don’t be strangers.”

Part Eighteen

(sorry for the short chapter... Durn real life again... Figured something was better then nothing and this is all I found time for in two days! *sigh*)

A sense of something missing started to sink in for Trist. It was small at first, barely a hint and not enough to disturb his sound sleep. Soon it became stronger and grew to the point where the nagging sense woke him, unwillingly. He sighed and yawned and stretched on the couch under his blanket but there was no Val. That's what had woken him, Val had gone.

He sat up and brush loose hair back from his face. Gavan was in the kitchen, mixing up pre-made dinner and he turned to smile at him. "Hey." Trist nodded, feeling glum but glad his cousin had come back.

"Why, hello sleeping beauty."

"Val left?"

Gavan nodded and stirred the pot boiling in front of him. "He did, said he enjoyed spending time with you and that we shouldn't be strangers. Thanks, Trist, I know this weekend couldn't have been easy for you."

"Sorry Wally spoiled yours with a fight." He yawned again, not really ready to talk about Val, and wrapped the blanket around his shoulders.

"He doesn't mean to fuss and a small fight couldn't ruin a good weekend. You should have seen that place, it looked like some movie idea of a bed and breakfast." He grinned. "We were surrounded by uptight straight couples that looked sick every time they saw us kiss."

"So, of course, you let Wally fuck you right in front of them." He padded over to the counter and clutched the blanket around him.

"Something like that. Hey, you're frowning, what's wrong?"

He just shook his head.

"Val looked different, more relaxed? Did you kiss him?" Gavan asked with his back turned smiling to himself.

"Something like that." Trist muttered out.

"Will the something be occurring again?"

"No. It was a one time thing."

"Does Val know it was a one time thing?" Trist had a habit of making choices and not telling or explaining them to anyone else.

"He knows." Trist was rubbing at his eyes again but closing his eyelids or rubbing at them never stopped him from seeing.

Gavan cocked his head to the side and now he was frowning. "You don't seem happy with that, I've never know you to not chase something you wanted."

"Well, maybe I don't want anything?" But even Trist didn't believe his words and he could tell Gavan didn't either. He felt tired, heartbroken, depressed and more than a bit of self pity. He wanted Val back in their apartment, with his dry sarcasm and wizardry in the kitchen. He wanted Val back in his bed with his amazing hunger to be dominated and his shy skills at taking what he wanted. The only out he had was to pretend he was okay with walking away, but he wasn't.

Val's phone was ringing and he almost let it go to his voice mail but he would have felt guilty doing that so he answered it. "Hello?"

"Hey you! Been calling for, geesh, days and all I get is your voice mail!" Lisa's warmth spilled across the line. "How are you?"

He sighed. "I've baked four apple cakes."

"Oh God, that bad!"

"I'm shipping you two of them, maybe three if I can fit them in the box, if you don't mind?" He glanced to the cooling cakes and the mounds of apple peels sitting in a bowl to the side.

"Mind? God, no. Inez keeps teasing me that we should get you to move out here or find a way to move closer to you just to get more of your baked goods. She'll be thrilled to have them, but, what's happened that you're peeling apples?" Her worry tinged her words.

"Nothing really, I," he sighed. "I'm thinking there was something missed with what happened to Violet."

There was silence on the phone for a long moment. "Val, I know it's difficult to accept this sort of thing, but it was just a shitty bad accident. No one likes to think that one mistake can change so much but it happens. You need to let it go."

"I made some phone calls, I'm going to get their autopsy records."

"Val, you don't want to do that. The things they say in those reports aren't meant for families to read."

He shook his head. "I know, I just, I need to do this. Just one last look over things and I can put it to rest."

Lisa sighed and Val could almost see her push her glasses further back up her nose. "Okay, but just, think about it before you read it, okay?"

"I will."

"So, what did you do for your birthday?" He voice bounced back up. "You did do something right?"

"I spent it with a friend." And that was a subject he wasn't sure how to broach.

"Might he be the friend discusses the other day?" She asked leadingly.

Val shuffled his feet and brushed spilled flour from the countertop. "Yeah." He finally admitted.

"And did you see if your toes curled?"

"Yeah."

"And? Did they?"

He popped an apple peel into his mouth and chewed on it. The tartness of the green skin was a refreshing touch. "Yeah." He finally forced out.

"Whoo hoo for you! Congratulations, Val, I hope you had a good time!" Her voice died off. "You did but now you're all twisted up and upset over it, aren't you?"

"It was just a one time thing."

"Still, that took a lot of courage. I'm proud of you."

He snorted at that and nibbled on another peel. "I'm not sure I am, not sure I'd call it courage or weakness."

"Is this another thing from your asshole uncle?" She snapped back.

"He was a good man."

"Yeah, you keep saying that but all I see is that his ideal of how to live has made you miserable. Let me guess, he frowned on being gay?" Her tone grew mocking.

"Frowned on all sex outside of marriage and not for procreation."

"Wow, I'm surprised we ever had sex with that nonsense in your head."

"Well, he frowned on a lot of things. He was a man of high morals and ideals."

"Val, dear, morals and values are good, sure, but not when they smother someone to death. I have an ideal of volunteering ten hours a month but I'm lucky to get five in most months and some months not at all. Doesn't make me a bad person for not living up to it. Ideals as high as your uncle set aren't humanly possible to achieve. If he cared about you at all, he'd have wanted you to be happy." Self righteous morality was one of her push buttons, had always been one of them. The first conversation she'd ever had with Val was over a debate about people so convinced they knew all that was right and wrong when no one could ever know that.

"Lisa, right after I went to live with him, he told Violet and I all these things that were sins. Told us that if we did them, that we'd never see our parents again in Heaven because we'd sinned so badly." It stung to say that, really, painfully, hurt.

"Oh, Val, I didn't know, you never told me that."

"I've never told anyone. I'm sure Violet did, she didn't believe him for a moment."

"But you did. Poor dear. That was unforgivably cruel of him."

"He just wanted us to grow up to be good people."

"Val! You are a good person! Who you sleep with, who you love, that doesn't make you a bad or good person, just makes you human." She sighed. "You are one of the best people I've ever met. What he told you is utter horse shit. Besides that, if your parents had lived, they would've wanted you to be happy."

Another peel disappeared and Val swallowed it hard, trying to push the emotion from his throat. "It was nice, Lisa." He started uneasily.

"Good!" She laughed. "When do you see him again?"

"I'm not, it was a one time thing, nothing more."

"That sucks, his choice or yours?"

"Both, things are... complicated." He twisted a peel around his fingers and it snapped with a sharp, green cracking sound. "So, what do I do now?"

"About?"

"You know, maybe not being straight?"

"Oh, well, I make a few phone calls and the local chapter of the Gay Club will be by. He'll show you where the best bars are, the best nightspots and where their secret meeting hall is. There you'll get a handbook called "So you like cock?" and learn the secret handshake."

"I'm being serious here."

"Sorry! Couldn't help it!" She laughed. "You know it might be easier if it worked that way. Honestly, Val, there's nothing to do except stop beating yourself up for it, or worse, running from it. Nothing has changed about you, you're the same man you always were, nothing changes. Well, except maybe you'll be happier and like yourself a little more."

The apple peel suddenly caught in his throat. "I like myself just fine."

"Yeah, and I'm Bigfoot."

Part Nineteen

Val spent the next day trying to stay busy so he didn't have to think. He went for a long bike ride until his ears were frozen and the cold air chilled his lungs. He lingered for hours shelving his books and pulling them to re-shelve them. He cleaned his apartment and sorted his laundry and still, by the time evening rolled in, he was left alone.

With nothing left to do, he dropped himself down onto his sofa and flipped on the news. He'd just settled into the daily dose of bad reporting when his doorbell rang. Val sighed, and hauled himself to his feet. No one every rang his bell unless it was a delivery and while he wasn't expecting anything, he didn't put anything past Lisa.

Only, when he pulled the door open, Gavan stood there with a wide grin on his face. "Hey!"

"Hello."

"You weren't at the bar."

"No, I wasn't."

"It's Tuesday, you're always there on Tuesdays. Evan, the cute college kid bar tender, he asked about you."

Val hadn't thought he'd been so regular with his habits to have anyone miss him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be, well, the games on and since you didn't come down to the bar, I brought the bar to you." He pulled a brown bag and a six pack of Irish red beer in amber colored bottles from behind his back.

"What?"

"Have you eaten yet? Trist as a client, he's touchy about who might over hear so it's better if I stay out of the way. You don't mind do you?" Gavan raised his eyebrows.

Val stood stunned for a moment before he managed to step out of the way. "Come in, sorry, been out of sorts today."

Gavan smiled wider and didn't wait for another invitation. "I brought sandwiches." He moved into the kitchen and rooted around until he found plates. "You weren't watching the game?"

"I forgot it was on." Which was a lie, he couldn't watch basketball without thinking about Matt. That was something he didn't need tonight.

The sandwiches unwrapped and Gavan knew something was going on. Both men were sullen, withdrawn and almost depressed, if it wasn't because they'd fought while he was away, the cause was somewhere more personal. He twisted the tops off of a couple of the beers, stashed the remaining four into the fridge and took beers and sandwiches into the living room.

Val flipped the game on and accepted the plate pushed at him. "Thanks, I wasn't sure what I was going to do tonight for dinner." He hovered for a moment, uncertain, wanting his solitude but hating it at the same time.

"I hate eating alone, wow, they're getting slaughtered!"

The balance tipped and a small smile touched Val's mouth. "Well, they suck this year, a group of midgets would do a better job."

They drank the beers, ate the sandwiches and groaned at the one sided game. It became more then that to Val, it was proof that maybe admitting he was gay really didn't change anything else. His life didn't feel any different, even if he wasn't actually gay but just, maybe, attracted to certain men. It didn't change who he was, not really. The game was still fun, the sandwich was still soggy but good and the beer just as refreshing. By the time the game ended, Val was pretty sure nothing in his life would really be different if he was gay.

"Man, they shouldn't have even bothered to show up!" Gavan sighed and downed another long swallow from his beer bottle.

"Well, if Andrews hadn't torn his tendon or whatever they'd be stronger. They're just counting on his three points too much."

Gavan nodded. "Stupid."

"Thanks." Val forced out.

He looked over his beer bottle. "For what?"

Val shrugged. "The sandwiches, the beer, for stopping in. I don't have many friends, certainly none that would just pop in for a game. This was nice."

"Well, I'm being purely selfish. You're the first person ever to not only be able to deal with Trist, to enjoy his company and, most shocking, someone he liked being around. That must make you pretty good in my book." He rolled the bottle around in his hands. "Besides, it's not like I've been beating friends away with a stick. Trist and I both are pretty isolated. And, well, you're fun to hang out with."

"Can I ask you a favor?" Val started slowly, not sure he'd be able to actually ask and half hoping

Gavan would refuse.

"Of course, if I can you know I will."

Val felt his face start to go red. "It's okay to say no, I mean, if you don't mind, I was wondering, could you kiss me?"

Gavan nearly inhaled his swallow of beer. He choked and coughed and slowly got the beer to go down the right tube. "What?"

"Never mind." Val felt his face burning up and knew he must be blushing bright red.

"No, uh huh, no way you can ask that and tell me never mind. I did hear you right, didn't I?" The sports casters on the television sounded a million miles away.

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"I just," Val sighed. "Trist and I... and Lisa says I should stop running and I'm not sure of anything right now and I wanted to see if... well..."

Gavan very carefully set his mostly empty bottle of beer down. "Trist has a way of making people face what they're hiding from."

That was a cold thought. Was their night together just some twisted means of Trist's to get Val to accept a truth he'd been running from? Oddly, the idea that their lovemaking meant only that to the slender man, shoved a small spike of pain into his chest.

"Okay." Gavan nodded. "I doubt Wally will throw a fit, even if he finds out. Unless you've changed your mind?"

Val shook his head numbly. "No, I want to see something."

Gavan slid across the couch to sit closer to Val and dared to reach up and brush some of the sloppy hair back. "God, the sacrifices I make for science." He grinned and leaned in, half expecting Val to pull away at the last moment.

Val didn't, Gavan's lips brushed against his and he melted. The idea of a chaste, soft contact dissolved and his lips parted. Only, the kiss was different then with Trist, this time he was on equal footing with Gavan. If he wasn't so shy, there was no doubt the kiss would be one of equals, unlike the consuming, commanding passion Trist and spilled into his veins from where their lips met.

He moaned and Gavan's other hand came up to cup the other side of his face. The kiss deepened, their bodies slid closer together. Somehow, Val found himself being lowered to the sofa, Gavan's weight pressing down on him and it felt really good. It didn't burn him alive like it had with Trist but there was no doubt his body responded to kissing a man far more then it ever did kissing a woman.

"Oh, God." Val sighed as Gavan kissed across his face, down to his neck. Their bodies twisted together, Gavan's leg slid between his own and it felt good. Val was starting to think that not only was he gay, but he might very well be a slut. All Gavan had to do was tell him to strip, tell him he was going to fuck him, and Val would let him.

Gavan sighed and tucked his face along Val's neck. "Oh, God, is right. Is this the something you wanted to see about?" He brushed a hand lightly across the obvious aroused bulge in Val's

pants.

Val arched up to the touch and his eyes squeezed shut. "Yes."

"I have a boyfriend." Gavan reminded himself. He'd been assuming that Val and Trist had maybe kissed a little but that Val was too dominate, too much a top and Trist's sulking today was because of that. Now, seeing how easily Val melted and wanted to be topped, he had to rethink about just what might have happened between them.

"I shouldn't have asked." Val forced the words out but noticed that he wasn't pushing Gavan off and the other man was making no movement to crawl off of him.

"No, I guess this answers your question?" Val smelled good, and he looked totally different when turned on. Gavan reminded himself that Wally would forgive an experimental kiss but not an experimental fuck.

He forced himself to crawl off of Val, to slid away, remove his leg from where it nested between Val's. It was a force of will and when he glanced over to where Val lay sprawled, legs spread, lips parted, eyes shut and obviously aroused, his will almost broke. "Damn, I've a boyfriend." He reminded himself again.

Val slowly pulled himself back to a sitting position from his sprawled out harlot pose. He was still blushing, he could feel the flush on his face. "I'm sorry."

Gavan slid over and pressed a quick kiss to Val's forehead before standing and stepping away. "Don't be, hope it gave you whatever answers you were looking for."

Val nodded, growing hotter at seeing the slight bulge in Gavan's pants. He'd done that, he'd made that happen and the idea that anyone found him so attractive made his nerves tingle.

"Well, since I do have a boyfriend and I don't think you want me to fuck you on a first date," Gavan teased but his voice shook at the idea of actually being able to fuck Val. "I should get home. See you Thursday? If not sooner?"

Val nodded again, unable to speak. His mind had frozen up and stopped functioning at the idea of Gavan taking him to bed. That was it, he was not only gay, he was a gay slut.

"Night Val!" Gavan tossed out and hurried out the door.

It shut and latched behind him and left Val alone in his empty apartment. He stayed on his sofa but laid back down and let one hand rub at his erection through the fabric of his pants. In his mind he replayed the feel of Gavan kissing him, the feel of his body pressing him down.

It was how similar Gavan smelled like Trist, how similar their bodies felt, that made Val ache and moan. Trist, who just the thought of what they'd done together set him on fire, was so similar to Gavan. In his mind, as he opened his pants and began to stroke himself in earnest, he thought about their kisses, about the feel of their bodies over his own. It was the thought of Trist, the taste of him in his mouth, that wrung moaning cries from him and had him climaxing.

One kiss and Val was jerking off on his sofa like a teenager. That left little doubt, he was gay and a slut and he wanted to be taken again. Consequences be damned, he wanted to be taken, hard, because the meager comforts of his hand no longer were enough.

Part Twenty

Gavan was thinking a cold shower was in order. He rubbed at his face and eyes, his lips, trying to scrub the feel of Val from him while he rode the elevator up. He was man enough to admit he'd held secret fantasies about the quiet man a couple of bar stools down. Half the Operating Room nurses giggled like teenagers whenever the distant therapist walked by, so Gavan wasn't alone. Being openly bisexual had allowed him to join in their twittering, and he'd never even considered the idea that it might ever go beyond twittering.

It had been a very odd week. Truly an odd week but he couldn't complain, it had to be even stranger for Val. God knew, Gavan remembered those first confusing days. He'd flipped through one of Trist's porno magazines while he was in college and been shocked to get a hard on. Not that Gavan hadn't ever been uncomfortable with homosexuality, Trist had been open with his preferences from the start, but he'd never considered it from a personal angle.

How much worse it would be for Val, someone who was obviously conditioned to refuse his desires. Val who'd spent a lifetime denying himself, trying to fit into someone else's mold of who he should be. At least Gavan had Trist to fall back on, he'd gone into his first encounter with a man fully informed and prepared. Val hadn't ever been able to even speak to anyone about what he wanted.

The thought of how lonely that kind of life must be almost had Gavan turning around. The things he could show Val, the things they could do, well, the idea made him shiver. It left him with an itchy sense of desire as he turned his key and opened his apartment door.

"Hey! I'm home!" He tossed his keys down and hung his coat up.

"Fucking dandy." Trist called from where he was slumped on the sofa. His socked feet were on the coffee table and an old B horror movie played across the tv.

"How'd it go with the client?" He asked, pulling off shoes and forcing the teasing memory of Val's kiss from his mind.

"It was delightful, as always."

Gavan crossed over to the sofa, surprised Trist was still depressed. It wasn't like him to have any single mood last for too long. He stopped and frowned. "Are you drinking?"

"I'm high on red wine, baby!" Trist raised the glass and downed another big swallow. "It has sentimental value." He mumbled into the glass.

"You've had half the bottle!" Gavan pulled the bottle from where it had been tucked between the arm of the sofa and one of the cushions. "You know better than that."

"What fucking difference does it make." He batted away Gavan's efforts to pull the glass from his hands, ended up chugging the last swallows and letting his cousin pull the glass from his hands.

"It makes a big difference. God, you're watching a horror movie too. You'll never sleep tonight."

"I'm not a child!" Trist shouted back. "I'll get drunk if I want to and this fucking piece of trash is a comedy compared to the God damned horrors in my head!"

Trist being angry wasn't odd but this time it felt different. It didn't feel self directed, didn't feel channeled from someone else, it felt fully aimed at and based in Gavan. He frowned as he re-corked the bottle of wine and put it away and set the glass in the sink.

"Why are you pissed at me?" He tried to keep his frustration from his voice. "I just walked in the door, you could cut me some slack."

Trist stood up, his head pounding, the voices surging. He wanted to be alone to pout or cry or drink until he passed out. "How much slack do you want? Enough to fucking hang yourself with?"

"What's going on here?" Gavan slipped in and stopped Trist from disappearing into his room. He reached out to try to turn Trist down a little but he found little of the oddity coming from his sight. For how drunk he was, he was fairly stable.

"I don't want to talk about it." He tried to step around his cousin and found his way blocked again.

"Sucks to be you. There's no way you're going to be a bitch to me and walk away without at least explaining what I've done to deserve it!"

Trist frowned, his face screwing up with hurt and anger. "You fucking kissed him! God, damn it Gav! How could you!"

Gavan took a step back. "You saw that?"

"Fuck yes, Val moaning, you slobbering on his neck, fucking traitor!"

"Wait a moment here, he asked me to, not that it's any of your concern!"

Trist tossed his hands up and muttered under his breath. He paced away and started walking four steps in one direction before turning around to pace back four in the other.

"What happened between you two?" Gavan asked carefully.

"It doesn't matter, it's not going to happen again!" There was pain in Trist's voice before he buried in under anger again. "Shit, Gavan, just leave him be! Have some mercy on me!"

"I don't understand." And he didn't, but he was used to not understanding and having to ask.

"Look at me!" He brushed a hand across his body. "Fuck, Gavan, it's not like I have men lining up to date me! It was bad enough when you paraded your cute little cheerleaders around, all snuggly and happy but when you came to me thinking you were bi, was I ever anything but fucking supportive?"

"You've always supported anything I've wanted to do." He started slowly because Trist really did try to be as little of a burden as he could.

"Not once, not once in all these years, have I said fucking word one about what it's like to see you with a man. I want you to be happy, I'm not that fucking selfish but God, Gavan, no one is ever going to look twice at me! No matter what, I'm never going to have a happy ever after with a house and a dog and white fucking picket fence and two and a half kids! No one is ever going to love me, or want to fucking be around me!"

"That's not true."

"Oh it so is!" He moaned back. "I know it. It's just, Gav, he actually looked at me. He actually saw me and didn't turn away!" Trist hated that tears welled up but he was too drunk to stop them, his emotions were always too close to the surface. "I can't have him, I know that, I do, I fucking do but God, please, I can't see you with him!"

"It was just a kiss."

"Fuck! I'm not stupid, I know what kissing him is like! Please! He'll find some nice, fucking sane man to start a relationship with but please, Gavan, please, not you! I can deal with how men look at you and know no one is ever going to look at me the same way. I can deal with how they

resent me, how much of a fucking bother I am to you. I can deal with Val fucking someone else but it'll kill me to have to see the two of you all cute and fucking content together. I can't stand it. I just can't!" He was sobbing now, broken hearted over a man he really barely knew.

Gavan approached carefully, he'd never seen Trist get upset over anyone like this. Sure, their grandmother could always make him cry or rage but this was different. This felt like bitter, painful jealousy and he'd never seen Trist that way.

"If you feel so strongly towards him, you should pursue it." He caught the tense shoulders and stopped Trist's pacing.

"I can't!"

"Of course you can. He likes you." That only made Trist's face twist up more, as if Gavan had turned the knife. "You know you could have him but you're not chasing him. You're never going to have a relationship with anyone until you take a chance."

Trist closed his eyes and pulled on the steady stabilizing force that was Gavan. He shut off the anger, the hurt, the self pity. It was the way of things, he was used to being the one left drawing the short stick. Systematically, he shut himself down as much as he could because he knew what he had to do. When he spoke again, his voice was steady.

"Please, Gavan, please, all I ask is that you stay his friend and nothing more. I can stand not having him but I can't stand watching you have him."

Part of him wanted to snap that he'd date or fuck who he wanted, but he saw the buried hurt in Trist's eyes and he just couldn't. "I've got a boyfriend." Gavan smiled softly and ruffled the unraveling braid. "I'm happy with him and yeah, Val is hot and he's fun to kiss but I'll keep us as friends. Okay?"

Trist nodded, feeling a tension he wasn't sure would ever ease, let go a bit. "Thank you." He was breathing more normally too.

"Welcome, still think you should try it with him."

Trist just shook his head but he let Gavan pull him into a hug.

"You done being pissed at me?"

He clung to his cousin. "For now, if you behave."

Gavan tugged on the braid. "Come on, brat, let's watch the end of your movie." Now he really, really wondered what had happened while he was gone but he was certain neither man would ever tell him.

Part Twenty One

Val was grateful he'd agreed to meet Maria over morning coffee. He'd slept uneasily, the bed feeling oddly too large and too empty to be comfortable and he really didn't want to think about why. He was more than ready to leave to make his appointment.

The bus ride kept him busy, watching people, watching the landscape slide by in the cold morning light. For some reason, Maria wanted to meet him at a coffee house across town from the morgue. It wasn't even close to the small single family home she owned with Edward, her artist husband. On the phone, she'd made no explanation as to why she'd picked such a distant

place but the hour was early enough that they could have a cup of coffee before she'd have to get to work.

The shop turned out to be nice, smaller, and friendly. It was locally owned, not some over done chain store, and the place smelled wonderful. The hot, scented air wafted out into the cold street and the morning rush hurried in and out. Val found Maria near the counter, reading a newspaper. Her black hair was pulled back to fall in waving tumbles down her back and again, he admired her strong beauty.

"Sorry I'm late." He started as he pushed closer around the crowd.

She glanced up and smiled. "Val!"

Before he could stop her, she'd pulled him into a hug and kissed the side of his face. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, fine, and you're not late, I got here early." She pushed a paper cup filled with coffee at him. "Come on, let's go where we can talk."

He nodded and followed but she didn't go to a table. Instead, she led them around the counter and back to an office. The door closed automatically behind them.

"Are we supposed to be here?"

She smiled warmly and dropped into a chair. "My brother owns the joint, it's okay. You look well, have you and Kelly set a new date yet?"

Another person he was supposed to have remembered to call. "Not really."

"What's happened?"

"She, sort of, left me." He sipped his coffee to make it easier to say.

"Oh, Val, I'm so sorry. If you're really single again, you should call my baby sister. She's a bit of a firecracker but you'd like her. She's an English major. Stop dating those prissy white women and date a Latina this time, do you some good." She smiled to take the sting out of the words but cringed because Edward had been right, the marriage was never going to happen.

Val shook his head. "Thanks, but, I've some things to sort out. Things I've been avoiding dealing with for too long, I'm going to take some time off." If time off meant begging another man to take him, use him, fuck him, sure, he was taking time off.

Maria leaned over and patted Val's arm. "Good, get your head straight. The offer stands though, call me if you want to meet her."

He managed to smile a little. "Thanks, Maria. How's Edward and Missy doing?"

"Fine, Edward's busy as always and Missy is doing wonderfully." Now it was her turn to glance down. "Val, about what you asked me for?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not comfortable doing this."

"I have a right to see their results."

"Oh, I know you've the right but, have you ever seen an autopsy, Val?"

"No, but I know what occurs during one."

"It's not something a family member should see. It's graphic, ugly, you won't ever get the pictures out of your mind. I don't think you should be doing this." She pulled the file from her case but held onto the thick envelope.

"I need to do this, Maria, I just need to make sure nothing was missed."

"Why? Tell me why?"

He opened his mouth but saying the psychic that he'd babysat all weekend mentioned something being wrong didn't seem like the smartest thing to say. "I need to do this to let it go. She'd do the same for me."

That got the folder from Maria's hand to the top of the desk. Her hand stayed on it. "I still think it's a bad idea but I owe you way more than this. What you did for Missy, that was magic, I can't begin to repay you." She slid the folder over to him.

"Thank you Maria."

"No, don't." She held up her hand. "Don't thank me for giving you nightmares. I just hope you find some peace when you're done with this. Missy wants to know when you'll be finally accepting another invitation to dinner? She misses you, we all do. You know, you're welcome at our house any time."

He nodded. "I'm sorry, I just haven't been feeling very social lately."

She patted his shoulder. "Understandably. Tell me, you didn't ride your bike over here in this cold, did you?"

"No, I took the bus." He pulled the yellow envelope tight to his chest.

"Want a lift back?" She glanced to her watch. "I should have time."

"I'm fine. Thanks for the offer and seriously, thanks for getting these files so quickly."

"You're welcome, and Val? I'm sorry about Kelly. She's a fool to let a good man like you get away."

He tried to smile and nod and take the compliment but it fell flat. His only hope was that she would see it as the grief over the broken relationship and not guilt over the truth of things.

Safely back in his apartment, Val made breakfast and eyed the sealed folder sitting on his counter as if it were a dangerous animal. He wanted to open it, wanted to dive in and be cold and scientific about it but that was easier said than done. Food was a good way to stall, and coffee afterwards.

An hour later, as he hung over his toilet retching breakfast back up, it no longer seemed like a good idea. Just sorting the papers, sketches and photos out into piles and sections had been enough to turn his stomach inside out. It would have been easier to shove them back into their envelope and forget following the crazy hunch from people that had to be crazy. Val wasn't one to do easy things, he washed his mouth out, brewed some settling mint tea and carefully sat down to read.

It became easier when he started thinking of the reports clinically. The damage reported, the broken bones and torn flesh, didn't belong to Violet but someone else. Easier didn't mean easy

and over the course of the next two days he became ill several times. There was only so much he could stomach seeing and reading and he happily took breaks away from the reports. Even while he was studying them, he found excuses to step away. He wasn't medically trained and while his knowledge was greater than most people's, he wasn't expert. The formal terms used in the official reports required a great deal of cross referencing and research for them to become something Val was able to understand. Generally, the picture the long terms painted was a grim one.

By late afternoon Thursday, Val had a pretty good idea of what it was in the report that he had been sent looking for. There was only one logical conclusion, if what he was reading was correct and the conclusion wasn't one that brought him any comfort. It was too much to accept so the only proper assumption was that the report was mistaken, and he'd been sent to see the mistake was corrected before others one day came to the same conclusions he had.

There was only one way to know which it was, and that was to go back to see Trist and ask him. It should be easy, he was comfortable around the scattered man. The fact that they'd slept together shouldn't change anything. It had been Trist's idea to look into this in the first place. They were comforting lies and Val was good at accepting comforting lies.

It took two tries, his finger hovering over the button but refusing to push it and ring the bell, before he gained the courage. Inside the apartment, he heard the bell ring and he almost turned to return to the safety of the elevator and his own apartment before the door could be opened. He was just about to leave, instead of ringing the bell again, when the door was roughly pulled open.

"What?" Trist snapped, his hand rubbing his eyes but when he glanced up to see Val standing in his doorway, the sharpness dulled. "Oh."

All words left Val's mind. Trist was wearing loose black pants and bright red fuzzy socks. He'd pulled on a purple t-shirt with an oatmeal colored sweater that was easily four sizes too big for him over it. There was a line of tension between the odd eyes and obvious stress in the line of his shoulders.

The sight of the slender man stole Val's breath, robbed him of all skill to even think. All he wanted to do was tumble forward and bury his face against the other's body. He just wanted to touch Trist again, if never anything more, just a soft casual touch and for a moment he thought he saw the same want in Trist's eyes. He must have been mistaken because the softened warmth fled and was replaced by cold annoyance, a look Trist expressed well.

"Hello." Val managed to force out. "Mind if I come in?"

Trist made no move to open the door more or step aside. "Now's not a good time."

"Oh." Val glanced down and wished he had run. "I'm sorry, I didn't think, you have a client. I'll be back later."

"No client." Trist shook his head. "Just busy. What did you want?"

"I... well, you were right. I got their autopsy reports, there's something odd in it."

"And what's this have to do with me?" He arched an eyebrow and tried to look bored.

"Well, I was hoping, thinking, you'd like to see. Maybe it'll make more sense to you than it does me."

Trist glanced to the papers Val clutched. "I don't have my appointment book memorized, call me and we'll set up something. Though, I have to admit, I'm booked pretty full for the next month or

more. But I'll keep you in mind in case there's a cancellation. Why don't you call me, I'll pencil you in."

The annoyance was plain in the tone that washed over Val. He suddenly felt incredibly stupid. Gavan had tried to warn him, Trist did things he thought other people needed. The time they'd shared had simply been about that, there was nothing truly personal about it. He was a fool to assume it had meant anything and now, here he stood, assuming too much and being a nuisance. No one liked a one night stand that didn't properly fade away.

The reality was like a fist to his stomach and Val actually buckled a little under the pain. He felt himself blushing as he nodded his head vigorously. "I'm sorry, I misunderstood."

Trist waved a hand. "It's okay, happens all the time. Should I pencil you in?"

Val shook his head. "No, no, it's okay. I'm sorry, I just, it's just I thought what with us and I'm sorry. I took it to be more than it was, apparently. I won't bother you again." He ducked his head and hurried down the hallway, needing with near panic desire, to reach the safe haven of his own apartment.

Trist watched Val hurry away. He shut the apartment door to keep from following, to keep from begging forgiveness. Being cruel and cold may be something he was able to fake well, but all he felt at having to push Val away was pain, deep, cutting pain. For as much as seeing the confused, self hating embarrassed expression Val had worn as he'd turn to go hurt Trist, knowing Val would be killed if he helped him hurt more.

He slid down the closed door and hid his head in his arms. "I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry!" He whispered out but knew that even if Val knew his reasons, there was no forgiving how horribly cruel he'd just been. "I won't lead you to harm, I won't!"

Part Twenty Two

Gavan balanced the pizza on his fingertips as the heat seeped from the box to burn them. He'd rung Val's doorbell once but there was no answer, he rang again and waited. Just when he was starting to think that maybe Val really was out, the door cracked open.

"Val?"

"Hey."

He tried to peer around the cracked door but Val was effectively hiding behind it. "Pizza, pizza!"

"I'm sorry Gavan, I'm really not up to company."

A lifetime dealing with Trist's random moods had made Gavan pretty well in touch with people around him. He didn't need to see Val clearly to know the other man had been weeping. "What's happened?"

"Nothing, I'm just, I..."

"I'm coming in." That was all the warning Gavan gave before pushing the door open and letting himself in. As soon as the door swung out of the way, all doubts as to whether Val had been crying fled. The man's eyes were red, his nose too and his shoulders sagged under an unseen weight.

Val stumbled back and let Gavan in, shutting the door behind him. The younger man didn't

pause, he moved right to the kitchen and dropped the pizza box down before turning and coming to face where Val stood, hands folded over his chest, wishing he were invisible.

"Now, what's happened?"

Val shrugged. "Nothing, I just...I'm tired."

Gavan dragged Val over and nudged at him until he sat down at the kitchen counter. "Not buying it, what's going on?" He dug in cabinets he was almost used to rummaging through to find plates.

"I don't know, I just started crying and couldn't stop." He dropped his head into his hands and pushed the tears down. He refused to cry in front of anyone.

"What'd you do today?"

"I've been going over my sister's family's autopsy reports."

Gavan slid a plate of food in front of Val. "No wonder you've been upset."

"I didn't cry like this when it happened. I don't know why I'm crying now." But he did, he knew, he'd been okay until he'd seen Trist.

On the counter was the stack of papers that could only be the autopsy results. Gavan put his hand on them and slid them away. "You shouldn't be looking at these but I guess if it's let you grieve, it's okay."

"I found something odd in them." It was easier to push the tears away if he could force himself to think logically.

"Oh? Did you show Trist yet?"

That brought the grief right back up to choke him. "No, he suggested I make an appointment." And even Val could hear the bitterness in his voice.

"That's odd, not at all like him either." Gavan frowned and tried to figure out what it was he was missing. "He's normally willing to help anyone we know, he almost feels he has to most times."

"Well, he might feel differently about me. This weekend, he and I, well..." Val knew he was going to blush and suddenly wished he was crying again. "We did some things."

Gavan nearly choked on his crust of pizza. "What kind of things?"

Val did blush. "It doesn't matter it's just, you can't expect things to not change. I can understand that he doesn't want to see me again."

"Wow, okay, well, tell you what, I'll talk to him. I'll try to figure out where his head is. You might have just caught him at a bad moment."

"It's okay, it really is."

"No, it's not. I don't care what he was thinking, it's unforgivable that he made you cry."

"He didn't, I just..."

Gavan waved it off. "Don't worry, I know how to be subtle. Don't you worry about Trist, I'll straighten him out." It seemed impossible that Trist had been nearly distraught at having to see Val with him only a handful of hours before and now somehow was harsh enough to snap Val's

control and make him cry today. It would take a lot of looking into and Gavan didn't plan on backing down.

"Gavan, I,"

"Stop it, eat. When you're done, show me what you found. I may not be a doctor but I'm no slouch either."

Val eyed the pizza slice with concern, uncertain if his stomach would accept food but he did need to eat. "Thanks."

"Welcome."

Once Val had forced a slice of the pizza into his stomach and made sure it stayed there, he was pretty sure his spat of weeping was over. He just felt exhausted now, like an old cloth wrung out and over used. It was too much, it really was all too much. Even he knew it wasn't Trist's rejection that made him cry, but the combination of everything. Trist had just been the final straw.

"How did you get this file?" Gavan asked, sorting out the reports and amazed at the detail.

Val glanced over from where he sat on the sofa, banished now by Gavan's orders. He was unable to see the papers being spread across his counter top and for once, he was grateful. "I've a friend who's a Medical Examiner. She owed me a favor."

"Did she sign off on this report?"

"No, she was on vacation when," it was still difficult to say. "When the accident happened."

"Do I even want to know what you did to get an ME to owe you a favor?" Gavan asked as he scanned the reports and the pages Val had marked.

"It's no real secret. Edward, Maria's husband, is an artist. He did some freelance work for the firm Kelly works for, they became casual friends. When they had a cocktail party we got invited."

"And you got dragged along."

Val nodded. "Surprised that I'm not the cocktail party sort?"

"Completely."

"Anyway, when I made an escape to the bathroom I heard their daughter crying. She'd had a nightmare so I offered to get her mother, she said not to."

"How old was she?"

"Seven."

"Huh, didn't picture you as the sort good with kids."

"I do well enough. I don't talk down to them, most kids respond to that. Anyway, I stayed with her until she'd settled down, listened to her talk, read her a story, the works but she got back to sleep. Only, when I turned to leave, Maria was in the doorway. Apparently, she'd been listening for a while. Missy had been having night terrors, not wanting to sleep, the works. Maria called me the next day, after talking to me, Missy had slept the entire night through, asked if I'd come by again. So I did and we eventually got it cleared up. Wasn't a big deal, but Maria made it into one and I'm not to proud to call on that."

"Hmmm well, I'm glad she wasn't the one to sign off on this. They really did a half assed job here, Val."

He stood up to join Gavan. "What do you mean?"

"Stay there!" He frowned until Val sat back down. "Good, you've been staring at these pages too long, let me do it."

"Fine, what do you mean?"

"Well, they did everything right, they just didn't follow through. Here, what you've tagged, you're right. They did the tests on the water samples from their lungs, but they sent the adults in first and got the results back first so I'm guessing they didn't even look over the results from the kids. Most likely, the police didn't either."

"I'm right though, aren't I?"

"Fluoride? Chlorine? Whoo, yeah, not found in river water. I'm sorry Val but it looks like your niece and nephew were already dead before they hit the river but they did drown."

Val was glad he was sitting down. "Someone murdered them, that's tap water."

"I'm sorry."

"Why would they? Why?" Val shook his head. "Violet and Navef loved their kids, they were happy together. Not just pretend happy, really happy together. She used to say that every year got better and better. Why would they drown their own kids?"

"I don't think they did." Gavan started carefully.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the volume of river water found in Navef's lungs is really low, really low but they ruled his death drowning. He was found behind the wheel but it doesn't look like he was alive when the car went into the water."

"So, maybe he had a stroke or heart attack, something sudden?"

"No signs of it here. There's trauma, most of which occurred before death but other wise he appears in good health. I'd want a doctor to look over this, because I'm not a forensic nurse at all, but I see a lot of trauma. I think it's a fair bet he was suffocated but there wasn't enough water in his lungs to indicate drowning."

"Both him and the kids were dead before the car went off the road?"

Gavan shrugged. "I'm not a doctor."

"What about Violet?"

"Val."

"What about her?"

"She drowned. It's pretty obvious."

"If she was alive when they went in the water why didn't she get out?"

"Well, Val, these wounds, they're pretty severe. Both hands broken, both legs? Even if she'd been conscious, I doubt she'd have been able to free herself."

Val fell forward, his arms rested heavily on his knees and he rubbed at the back of his neck. He doubted he'd ever be able to remove the mental image of Violet trapped in a car, helpless, slowly drowning. "God, the wounds, from the crash?"

"Maybe." Gavan said softly.

"Or maybe not?"

"Or maybe not. Either way, Val, things don't add up here. There's burn marks on both her and Navef that I can't tell you what from."

"The small round spots?" He'd seen them in the report, two or three sets of paired round burn marks on their sides, their necks.

"Yeah. You should take this back to the police and get them to look into it again. Something's not adding up."

"Maybe it's just a poorly done report?"

"Maybe but even if they didn't tie it together properly, the cops should have caught it. It looks like they saw, river water in lungs, car off road, and rubber stamped it as accidental. Maybe it is, but well, if it's going to bug you, can't hurt to ask them to look into it again." Gavan started stacking the papers back together and he slid them into their envelope. "Until then, don't look at this again. You're not doing yourself any favors."

"Well, I won't look at it again until I talk to someone else about it. Deal?"

"Deal." He came around and dropped on the sofa next to Val. "Now, distractions are in order, let's see how much of a blow out the game is tonight."

Val agreed and they watched the game but his mind wasn't on it and he was pretty sure neither was Gavan's. The more he learned about how Violet died, the more questions it seemed to raise. Not the least of which was why something obvious to a therapist and OR nurse would be so easily missed by people that did this sort of thing for a living.

Part Twenty Three

"What the hell is wrong with you!" Gavan called out as he let their apartment door slam shut behind him. He was balancing the pizza box on one hand while he scanned for where Trist was hiding.

"Should I make a fucking list?" A pathetic voice floated back. "Or would you like me to draw you a picture?"

He slid the box across the counter, knowing Trist would eat or not and no amount of fussing would change his mind. Trist wasn't watching tv, he was curled up under a blanket in one corner of the sofa. It appeared he'd been there for a while as his glass of iced tea was empty and Trist had the settled in to hibernate look about him.

"You told Val to make an appointment?" He flicked Trist's have buried head as he moved past to plop onto the sofa.

The blanket crept higher over Trist's head. "Seemed a good idea at the time."

"You really hurt him, you should apologize to him. He thinks you don't like him because of what you two did."

That got Trist to sit up. "He told you?"

"No, but you're going to tell me. What's going on? Just what happened between you two?"

"Gav,"

"No, not this time, you're going to explain why you're fucking around with his feelings. You'd better be able to explain cause if this is all some game to you, so help me Trist..." Seeing Val with a tear blotchy face wasn't right, it felt against the natural order of the world.

"I slept with him." Trist let the words drop as if they were too heavy to carry further.

"Sleep sleep or sleep sleep?" Gavan asked, adding tone to make one mean an activity with snoring and the other with moaning.

"I'm this close," Trist held his hand up, index finger barely an inch from his thumb. "To falling for that man. I almost like who I am when I'm around him and Gavan, when he touches me, everything goes silent."

"You're able to focus that much?"

"No, Gav, it's not me, it's him. I don't think he knows he's doing it but he does, I, fuck, he's amazing." He sighed and pulled the blanket tighter around his body.

"Then why are you doing this? You're making both of you miserable."

"I had a dream." The tone was cryptic enough that there was no doubt what kind of dream and if it was a good one or not.

"And?"

"If I help him, he'll get killed. I can't do that, I can't be the cause of that! I can't! I'd rather have him hate me and be alive. You know me, if I'm around him, I'll help him. I can't not tell him something I see." He hoped that would be enough for Gavan to leave him alone.

"You can't know for certain that helping him will lead him there. You might be able to change things, make a difference? You've said yourself nothing is ever really written in stone." He wasn't sure if he could tolerate both of them pining for each other.

"I know Gav, I know, with this I do."

"You're using this as an excuse."

"Fuck right I am!" He snapped back. "Rude of you to point it out too!"

Gavan just smiled.

"Look, I can't do it. I know what I am, I'd rather push him away then have him dump me in a few months. I don't think I could stand that. So, yeah, I'm being a coward too but it's meant in the best of ways. Happy? I was feeling like shit, now I feel lower."

"You're being an idiot, you know that right?"

Trist frowned and borrowed deeper into his misery and blanket. "Maybe but I can't be the cause of his death, I can't. Besides, he'll be happier with a normal person." And no matter how he tried to look at himself, normal wasn't a word that ever applied.

Gavan shook his head and flipped on the tv. "Idiot."

Friday was a waste of time, Val spent most of it running across town only to be ignored. The few members of the police willing to listen to him, quickly dismissed his concerns. At best, they recommended he speak to someone else who either recommended he speak to someone else or flat out told him he was wasting their time. Saturday hadn't been any more productive, the only difference was he returned to his apartment in the afternoon instead of early evening.

Val dropped his keys into the basket by the door without thinking, peeled off his coat and dropped the folder of papers on his counter. Before he could think about what to do next, his phone started ringing. He grabbed it and noticed the flashing light of his answering machine at the same time.

"Hello?"

"Hello? I'm trying to reach Valentine York." A steady woman's voice spoke over the line.

"That's me."

"Mr. York, my name is Linda Woods, I'm a nurse here at Bently Memorial Hospital. We've been trying to reach you for the better part of the day, I'm glad we were able to." Her voice stayed pleasant.

"What's this in reference to, Ms. Woods? I'm sure whoever is covering for me told you I'm on vacation this week."

"Excuse me?"

Something cold settled into Val's stomach. "I'm a therapist on staff at Harbor Mercy but this isn't related to that, is it?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. York. There's been an incident, you are the listed as the emergency care giver for Tristram Maddocks, aren't you?"

Was he? Val wasn't sure. "Yes." He heard himself saying but nothing felt right.

"Good, if you could come down here, we need you to sign some papers and we could use some help locating next of kin."

"I'll call his cousin, he's Trist's next of kin."

"Gavan Maddocks?"

The cold turned to ice. "Yes."

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but Gavan Maddocks' been injured. The two of them were brought in to the ER last night."

"Where can I find you? I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Val wasted no time with thought. As he pulled his coat back on and dug his keys back out, he

was out the door and rushing down to grab a cab. There was no debate about taking the bus, time mattered. His heart pounded in near panic under his ribs and too much of the calm, steady nurses voice reminded him of the call he'd received about Violet. They'd asked him gently to come to the hospital, told him there was an accident, told him it had been serious. No one had mentioned that they were dead until he was actually at the hospital. He couldn't stop that fear from settling into him now.

The taxi ride was too long, Val bit his tongue to keep from yelling at the driver to go faster. When they'd pulled up outside of the hospital, the only other one in the city, Val tossed the money at the man and hurried out. He'd been to Bently before Violet's death but that had been for work and the day he'd come here for her had blurred into a hazy mash of grief and shock.

Still, he managed to find Linda Woods, the ICU nurse that had called him, with little effort. She was a soothing woman, dressed in scrubs covered in cheerful prints with hair that swept back in set waves. Val spotted her name tag and approached her directly.

"Ms. Woods? I'm Valentine York, we just spoke?" He offered his hand as he came closer but found his eyes darting to the beds hidden behind curtains and glass walls.

"Mr. York, thank you for coming by so quickly. Has anyone spoken to you yet?"

He just shook his head.

"Gavan's right this way, I was just on my way to check on him." She smiled and walked away toward one of the sections of beds.

Val followed, stunned and mute. The nurse pushed a half pulled curtain all the way back against the wall and Val stopped following. Gavan lay there, tucked into the too white sheets, wrapped in bandages. A breathing tube was down his throat, an IV dripped into his body, his eyes were tapped shut.

"What happened?" He heard himself whispering as the nurse moved to collect the information from the half dozen machines all hooked up to the still man.

"He was shot, last night, while out with his cousin."

"Shot? How seriously?"

"Quite, the doctors weren't sure he'd live to see the morning but he's tough and a fighter and doing okay. It's still touch and go. We found the paper stating you held emergency legal guardianship to both of them and have been trying to contact you since. We've some paperwork for you to sign." She finished making notes on the charts and dropped the folder back at the foot of the bed.

Val followed the nurse back to the central station. "What happened?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I can have a doctor explain the surgery to you."

"Is he going to be okay? I mean, he looks so..." He glanced back over his shoulder.

"He lost a lot of blood before the paramedics arrived. The bullet collapsed a lung, nicked his heart, but the surgeons were able to repair the damage. Right now, he's sedated and resting. He's going to need his strength, this was a major trauma, a difficult surgery and with the blood loss. With a bit of luck, he'll be fine." She smiled comfortingly.

There wasn't anything he could do for Gavan. "Where's Trist?"

"I should have someone from psych speak to you. That's one of the things we needed your signature for, Tristram needs to be committed, at least for the short term and we need to know what medications he's currently on."

Val glanced back to where Gavan was lost in his sea of equipment, looking pale and weak on the bed. "I'm going up there."

"Sir?"

"Now, I'm going up there, right now." He shook off the nurses arm and pushed his way to the bank of elevators.

The psych ward was, by it's nature, a secure floor. He could only go so far before having to be let in, swiped in, or invited in. Luckily for Val he didn't have to wait long for help as the ICU nurse must have phoned up to watch for him.

This nurse was younger, prettier, but just as protective of her domain. "Mr. York?"

"Yes."

"If you'd wait here, in this room?" She pulled open a private waiting room door for him. A room used to inform family members of how crazy their crazy relation actually was. "I'll have a doctor meet you shortly."

"No." Val knew what he had to do and it didn't have any remote connections to waiting. He fished his Harbor Mercy ID out of his coat pocket and presented it. The two hospitals weren't quite in competition but it was well known that Mercy was superior in a lot of things. Mercy's psych services blew Bently's out of the water.

The nurse just blinked uncertain she'd heard the stern refusal.

"Tristram Maddocks is in my care and I'd consider it a professional curtesy to see him without delay."

"I'll have to receive permission from Dr. Fenderbach. Please, wait here."

"I'm attempting to be nice, Tristram is a special case, his care is complicated. I must see him now." Val took a step forward and used his height to look down on the shorter woman.

"Mr. Maddocks is currently in a quiet room, he can be brought to you."

"Take me to him, now." He flipped his id around his fingers. "Please, don't make me call my supervisors." It was well known that Mercy had the better psych staff because the doctors were absolute hard asses, which they were, and because they were fiercely protective of their therapeutic staff members.

The nurse eyed the id and weighed the amount of trouble she'd get into if her boss was chewed out by Val's boss. She sighed. "Alright, I guess it can't hurt."

There was a different smell to psych floors. Val always noticed it and oddly enough, felt comfortable around it. There was something to the scent, something of panic or confusion, isolation and antiseptic that made him feel like he was in a place he could control. The floor here was smaller then the one Val worked on, older too with heavy doors that screeched when open or shut to the smaller semi-private rooms and to the smaller still isolation rooms.

The door they stopped in front of was unusually silent and as the nurse turned a key she wore on a chain attached to her body in the lock. The door slid inward and she frowned. "This isn't right."

Val pushed the woman aside, none to gently and stopped in the door way. Trist lay, curled along the far corner, naked but for the straight jacket he was strapped tightly in. His pale, slender legs were drawn up and they were mottled with red, purpling bruises. Anger swelled into Val and the look he gave the nurse was enough to make her step back. He stepped out into the hall and found a shelf stacked with sheets near a nurses station.

"I want to know what medications and in what dosages you've put him on. I want him released, now. If I'm not leaving this hospital in the next ten minutes, I'm calling the fucking police, do you understand me?" He snagged several of the sheets and pushed past the stunned woman.

"But someone should have checked on him, he was fine when I left last night."

Val glared at her. "Do you understand me?"

She nodded. "Yes sir."

That was all he needed to hear, his attention fully turned to Trist. Val approached the huddled, sad form carefully but there was no panic or violence in the half opened eyes. In fact, Trist gave no indication that he was aware of anything around him. Val soothed a hand over his tangled, sweat soaked hair that fell loose since they hadn't allowed him to keep the band.

"Trist?" Nothing, not even a flinch. "Let's get you out of this thing." Val started pulling at the buckles that were fastened on the borderline of too tight and one by one freed Trist from the restraining canvas. Even once he slid the jacket off the slender body, Trist didn't react, his eyes didn't even flicker to see who was handling him. Val quickly wrapped the blankets around the bruised body. "I'm here, Trist, I'm here, don't worry, we're getting out of here."

Part Twenty Four

Getting Trist clothed into blue green scrubs and into a wheelchair took a frightfully small effort. The slender man moved when guided to but not on his own and through it all, he gave no indication that he was aware of anything. The bruises, the few scratches and cuts Val found, set a burning anger into him that had him snapping at nurses and doctors alike. They tried to get him to sign Trist into their care, he refused. They tried to talk him into having Trist restrained into the wheelchair, again, he refused. Even the nurse that walked him down to the ER exits who tried to help push the chair and unresponsive man, Val pushed aside.

Val wasn't entirely sure what he was doing, he just was reacting, moving. He knew he had to get Trist out of the hospital but he wasn't thinking much further ahead than that. It wasn't until they were down to the ER level that Val knew what he had to do.

The man that walked by was one of the better paramedics Val knew. Dark hair shaved military short and going white at too young of an age, Tom had seen more horrible things than most men really in the military. They'd become casual friends when Val worked with Tom's suicidal younger sister a few years back.

"Tom!" Val called out and the dark head spun around.

A smile, bright and dazzling broke the medic's face, it was the smile that got the man so much attention from the fairer sex. "Hey Val, what're you doing over here?" But his eyes slid to where Trist was slumped into the wheelchair.

"Are you heading over to Mercy? I need a transport."

Tom's smile slid away a fraction. He took in the flustered nurse and the raw anger in Val's tone and face as much as the patient being wheeled out before he nodded. "Sure, rigs out here. I don't think Jerry'll mind at all." Tom came over and brushed the nurse aside and took pushing the chair away from Val.

Val paused near the ambulance bay doors and turned to the nurse. "My lawyer will be in touch, you'd better figure out how a helpless man was beaten under your care." He didn't wait for her answer, just gripped the medical records closer and followed Tom into his ambulance.

There was a pause while Tom spoke with Jerry, a cute blonde woman in her late twenties. It was obviously Jerry's day to drive and she tossed a few glances toward Val and Trist before nodding and climbing in behind the wheel. Tom took over and Val let him, it was the medic's world and his say was law, but as the ambulance pulled away, heading from one hospital to another, Val found himself with nothing to do.

"Friend of yours?" Tom asked as he ran a few routine checks on Trist. The moment they'd gotten Trist onto the gurney, the man had curled up again.

"Yes, his cousin is an OR nurse at Mercy, he's been shot. I'm going to have him transferred over as soon as he can be moved." That was a must, Gavan would get better then the best care. A hospital always took care of their own.

"Psych patient?" Tom asked nodding to Trist.

"It's complicated, his care is specialized, Bently screwed up." He watched Tom carefully checking the still form for broken bones. "Anything?"

Tom shook his head. "Nothing obvious but someone worked him over. Mercy will take care of him." Tom soothed the tangled hair for a moment, tender with patients so obviously in need.

"He's not staying, I just want to make sure he's okay before taking him home."

"You know, I heard something from last night. Two white males, one was shot the other was catatonic. Meg and Alan were on the call."

"I haven't heard anything yet."

"Apparently the one shot up was pretty bad, how's he doing now?"

"He's going to be fine." Val knew he was being wishful by saying it but it was okay. Gavan would be fine, end of story, because there were no other options.

Val wished he was like Trist and a nail biter or, maybe, that he'd started smoking to be a rebel as a teen. Either habit would give him something to do while waiting for Dr. Steve Watchson to finish his exam on Trist. It had only taken a moments consideration to agree to Steve's request to keep Trist sedated while being examined, Val figured it would be easier for Trist to be totally unconscious instead of in the near comatose haze he appeared to be in.

He'd kept himself busy for the first hour with mindless tasks. He'd spoken to Gavan's co-workers in the OR and arranged for him to be transported to Mercy as soon as possible. There was the issue of Trist's personal items, bagged up when he'd arrived at Bently. Val dug in them to get Trist's set of keys out, to check to make sure wallet and watch and such were not missing. It was all little things and they were almost enough to fill the time but not quite.

It'd left him pacing in a waiting room, the lighting low and sedate, wishing he could bite his nails in nerves.

"Val?"

"Steve." He spun around at the soft spoken doctor's entrance. "How is he?"

"We're taking him down for a scan, just to be safe, but he should be okay."

The breath Val hadn't known he was holding rushed out. "Good."

"You're his legal caretaker?"

"Apparently." Val fished the paper out of his pocket. Notarized and signed by both Trist and Gavan, a copy had been on both men. It gave Val proxy to make choices for either of them in an emergency. The trust they'd placed in him was shocking.

Steve waved off seeing it. "As you requested, I checked him over. I documented everything, Val, they beat him after he had the straight jacket on. There's bruises from where the buckles were pressed into his skin. There's a cut on his foot, it's several days old but I cleaned it properly and glued it shut, it'll heal faster now and I had to put three stitches in a laceration on the back of his head. He was mildly dehydrated but we've fixed that with in IV drip and his body temp was low but he's warmed up now so there's no worry about that. There doesn't appear to be anything broken, the scan will confirm it though. His pupils are reactive, or as reactive as they should be with the sedatives in his system." Steve smiled gently but Val stayed tense. "I checked him for sexual assault."

The idea hadn't even occurred to Val but the mention made his heart freeze. "And?"

"Negative, however, there's evidence of scarring from a previous incident. It was medically treated but there's no record of it in his medical files, just thought, if you're his head shrinker, you should know."

Val's heart started again. "Thanks Steve."

"Anyway, it'll be a little while before he's done with the scan, I'll check it over right away and you can get him home. In the meanwhile, there's some police officers here, they want to talk to you about what happened. I told them, they had to wait until I was done with you." Steve smiled and let his eyes drag over Val a bit to intimately for it to be friendly.

If Val hadn't been so stressed and worried he would have blushed. "Thanks, Steve."

"When this blows over, you can buy me coffee to thank me."

"Sure." He nodded and ignored the implications of being hit on by another man.

The doctor left and the pair of police detectives joined the room. They were brief with what had happened, saying only that Trist and Gavan had been walking between stores across town and been mugged by unknown assailants. Gavan had been shot, though no one around had reported hearing a gunshot. They'd been called because of Trist's screaming, that had drawn attention.

"So, Mr. York, what's your relationship to them?" The one officer asked, the one Val had pegged as the good cop because it was pretty clear they pair had a well practice method of which one asked which questions.

"I'm..." What was he to them. "I'm a friend."

"You sure?" Bad Cop asked, frowning at Val's hesitation.

Val sighed and figured damn the torpedoes, cops would learn everything in time anyway. It was

always better to be honest right away so when they learned the truth it didn't make it suspicious. "No, we're friends but Trist and I are more." Were they? Did one night make them more? Val knew Trist meant more to him than just a friend, it didn't seem to matter now if Trist returned those feelings or not.

"He's your patient?" Good cop asked gently.

"Not really, my background helps dealing with him but Trist and I have been... more." He couldn't quite bring himself to say the word.

"He's your lover?" Good Cop asked.

Val just nodded. "Not formally, we're just friends."

They asked if there had been any fights lately, any troubles in their relationship and it made Val blush but he answered honestly as much as he could. They wanted to know where Val had been Friday and he'd told them he'd been in their own stations the entire day and at a local diner at the time of the shooting. They asked about Wally, if maybe Val was more than just friends with Gavan and maybe Wally hadn't liked the idea. On and on the questions came, questions Val hadn't even wanted to think about, let alone talk about, concerning what may or may not be between them. When the Good Cop let the Bad Cop know they were done, Val felt exhausted. Worn out by embarrassment, stress and nerves, he just wanted to get Trist home.

Trist's scan came back clean and Val was allowed to sign him out but getting him home was no small task. The sedatives were wearing off but Trist was still un-reactive. Stuck between trying to get Trist into a cab or begging help from another ambulance, Val took the ambulance. Fortunately, Gavan had a lot of friends all over the hospital and it wasn't difficult to find someone willing to help Val out.

Fortunately, by the time they reached their apartment building, Trist could stand on his own and if lead he'd walk so long as the person leading him was walked. The cold, evening air had Trist shivering as soon as the back of the ambulance was open but he went where he was led without trouble. In the elevator, Val slid his arm around Trist's waist when the slender man swayed. To his surprise, Trist turned of his own power and leaned against Val.

The small move carried a relief greater than the action and made Val smile slightly. He petted the tangled hair and pulled Trist closer. "It's okay, it's okay. You're almost home."

He took them to Trist's apartment, hoping the surroundings would comfort Trist and help shake him from whatever he was stuck in. It took a little experimenting to figure out which key on Trist's ring opened the door, all the while with Trist still pressed against him. Eventually he found the right key and the door swung open, Val flicked on the lights and kicked the door shut behind them.

"Here we are. Are you hungry?" He asked, knowing Trist wasn't willing or able to answer yet but hoping the normal questions and known voice would reach in to him. "I saw Gavan, he looks okay. They say he'll be fine."

He tried to step away from Trist but the man's hands rose and dug into Val's side. "It's okay, shhhhh, I'm not leaving." He wrapped his arms around the chilled body, shaking now from cold or nerves and stroked back and hair. "Shhhh, I'm right here."

They stood that way, barely a half dozen steps inside the front door. Val held Trist close to his body and soothed as he would a frightened child. Trist made no sounds, his hands relaxed, unable to continue to cling to Val, but he tucked tightly against the comforting warmth.

"You're dirty and you smell like the hospital. How about we get you cleaned up, then we can settle in and get some sleep. The hospital will call with any news about Gavan, so there's no point just staring at the phone." Val pulled away from the exhausted man and lead him toward his bedroom.

"A nice hot shower, hot enough to scald you, that'll do you some good. Then we'll take a nap. You'll feel better when you're clean and rested. Come on now."

He led Trist into his bathroom and turned the water on to warm up. It was easy to strip the clothes off, Val was pretty sure Trist was helping more. The signs were small but bit by bit, Trist was coming back. Val peeled off his own clothes and this time they both went naked under the hot water.

Trist sighed as the shower pelted down over him and the blank eyes slid shut. Another small sign but Val noted each one as he soaped them both up and rinsed both of them off under the spray. When he shampooed Trist's hair, the slender man started trembling and Val rinsed the soap from the straight hair taking care of the stitched wound and so that soap didn't drift into eyes. He quickly soaped his own hair and rinsed it off but when he glanced up, Trist's eyes were watching him. They still were blank but they were tracking his movements now.

Val smiled at the growing signs of life and got the water off. Getting them out of the shower and dried off was easier now then the first time. He was getting good at this. All the while he talked to Trist, random, pointless things but all said in a low, soothing voice. He got them into Trist's bedroom and dug out clean clothes for the other man, leaving Val unsure just what he was going to put on himself.

It was easy to get the clothes onto the unresisting man, even the shirt slid over bruised flesh easily. Still wearing the towel and nothing more, Val snagged the hair brush from the dresser top and gently brushed the tangles from Trist's hair.

"I don't think Gavan would mind my borrowing a pair of pants, do you?" The brush slid through the smoothed hair, flicking damp droplets free. "I'll be right back, let me run over and find something to put on." He dropped the brush back onto the dresser and left Trist sitting alone on the edge of his bed, still trembling slightly.

It felt odd, digging into Gavan's closet and drawers, picking out clothes to wear but nothing of Trist's was likely to fit. The man was just too slender, and while Val was taller then both men, at least Gavan was closer to the same size as him. He found a loose pair of flannel pants, a plain pair of socks and a t-shirt that was snug across the shoulders but fit well enough before he hurried back to Trist's room. On the way, Val made sure the apartment was locked and he grabbed the phone from the counter top.

"I have the phone in case they call. How about it? Want to try getting some sleep?" There were dark circles under eyes that looked sunken, there was no doubt Trist was exhausted.

Trist's head swung up to meet Val as he spoke. His eyes tracked and focused for the first time. "Val?" He whispered softly, uncertain of the reality of the situation.

Val hurried over and sat beside Trist on the bed. He brushed loose, wet hair back. "I'm here. Do you want anything?" He knew better then to make a big deal of the softly spoken word. Trist was setting his own pace, fast or slow, and Val was doing his part by accepting it.

Black rimmed eyes scanned Val, blinking rapidly. "You're real?"

Val leaned forward and brushed his lips across Trist's. It was a quick kiss but those were the only ones he was really comfortable with. "I'm real."

Goosebumps broke out across Trist's skin and he was trembling again, shaking. His breath caught in his throat as he gave a startled little sobbing moan. "Real." He repeated before pressing forward to bury his face against Val's neck. "Oh God."

Val soothed the damp hair and lightly held the shaking body. "Shhh now, it's okay, you're home, you're safe, I'm here. Are you tired?"

The head nodded against him and the mention of sleep forced a yawn.

"Good, let's lay down and get some rest, when you wake up, we'll get some real food into you. How about it?"

Again the head nodded so Val worked them both up to the head of the bed and got the covers pulled down. The same bed that they'd made love in, the memory alone sent shivers through Val, made his heart ache in emotions he didn't want to feel. Trist crawled stiffly, awkwardly under the covers but as soon as Val slid in next to him he was curling up against the warmer body. Val snaked an arm out and flicked off the lamp, leaving them in darkness.

He wasn't sure he could sleep, it was still early to be going to bed, but the stress of the day had Val feeling worn out. If nothing more, he would lay down until Trist had fallen asleep and then slip out into the living room. At best, sleep would claim them both and he'd be able to at least nap. Before he could drift off, Trist snuggled tighter.

"Please, let this be real." The twisted up, hoarse voice whispered into the darkness.

Part Twenty Five

Something tickled at Val's mind and forcefully pulled him up from a warm and sound sleep. He mumbled but whatever was nudging him from sleep didn't go away. With a sigh he cracked his eyes open and quickly squinted them shut again, the one lamp beside the bed was turned on. After the dark of the night, the dim glow seemed brilliant.

He tried again and pried his eyes open, this time, ready for the annoying light, he was able to focus. There wasn't much to focus on, except for the fact that Trist sat awake and hovering near by. The slender man was biting his nails and studying Val as if he wasn't sure what he was seeing was solid or not.

"Hey." Val whispered and saw Trist flinch.

The nail he'd been chewing on popped out of Trist's mouth. "Why are you here?"

Val was too sleepy still and too groggy to play word games. "Because the hospital called me and I didn't think you'd want to stay there."

"But, why are you being nice to me?" He whispered and couldn't meet Val's eye.

There was a seriousness to Trist's voice that Val was too groggy to match, he yawned. The question was too deep, too close to home. "Are you hungry? I can make us some pancakes?"

Trist studied the sleepy man still yawning and squinting before he nodded. "I'm starving. Val, I..."

"Food first, then talk." He muttered and rubbed his eyes, stretched his arms out and rolled to sit up. "Okay?"

"Okay."

Val scratched and groaned and staggered still half asleep into the kitchen. Coffee was in order, desperately in order, that was the first thing he'd have to do or there would be no conversation. He'd end up feeding Trist and falling back to sleep without coffee.

Pancakes were one of the foods Val could make without thinking. Which was good because the smell of coffee didn't do squat to shake the groggy sleep feeling from him. Even Trist's nerves glances and his continued chewing on his nails did little to shock Val awake. He just felt exhausted, worn out, needing sleep and rest and a very long vacation.

It didn't take long until he slid a plate of pancakes toward Trist, sipping on his own steaming mug. There was a moments pause before Trist dug in and practically inhaled the hot cakes, barely chewing. Val had only managed to down half his mug of coffee before the plate was pushed away.

"Want more?"

Trist shook his head no.

"How're you feeling?" He glanced to the clock on the wall. It was nearly four in the morning, he doubted either of them would get back to sleep tonight.

"Better." Trist glanced away. "How's Gavan?"

"Alive, they think he'll be okay."

Trist deflated, all the strength pooled out of him and he dropped his head into his hands. "God, I, they kept saying he was going to die because of me. I couldn't, I, it was to much. What day is it?" He pulled his head back up.

"Saturday, well, Sunday now."

"Only a day, it's only been a day. It felt like weeks."

"Trist, what happened?" The police had asked to speak to Trist, Val had stalled them. He really hadn't expected the man to come around as quickly as he had.

"I don't know, Val, my memory isn't the best. I, there were men and Gavan yelled at them and a gun and blood. I remember screaming but not much more." He glanced up and saw only earnest concern in Val. "I've been a real bastard to you, you should hate me."

Val shrugged. "Neither of us said it was more then what it was."

"There's very little in my life," Trist started slowly, picking words with care. "That I can count on. Most days it feels like if I glance down the sky will change colors when I'm not looking at it. For the most part, I know how this stupid sight of mine works. I pick things off of people, I hear voices, occasionally I've visions."

There was a pause, Val wasn't sure if Trist was looking for reassurance that he was being understood or if he was just gathering thoughts. "Okay."

"The visions always happen, always, unless something changes. That night, the nightmare I had, wasn't just a dream. I saw you being killed." Those were words difficult to force out, suddenly he felt embarrassed at sharing. "In my vision, I knew you were going to be killed because I'd helped you. Val, I, God, I'm sorry. I had to ignore you."

"But, why tell me now? Why not to tell me before?" Val felt a little light headed, it all was too much.

"It won't make any sense to you. I know when something is current or not, I know when a vision is still active, it has a different flavor inside my head. Things have changed, Gavan wasn't supposed to be the one that got shot. He did, things are different, you're different, I'm different." Trist drew lines in the left over syrup on his plate with the tines of his fork, anything to keep from looking at Val.

"So, why didn't you see that Gavan was going to be hurt?" Val set his coffee down, leaning closer to Trist now, letting some of his resentful hurt fade away.

"I didn't see it. I don't see everything! I'm pretty useless." He smiled weakly.

"Don't say that."

"Why? It's the truth. What's the point in having to deal with all this shit if I can't even see clearly enough to tell Gavan to make a right instead of a left. I try, I really do but it's never clear. It's not like I saw that if I don't help you Gavan will get shot and if I did help you, he'd be fine but your head would get blown off." The fork made scraping noises as the patterns continued to change.

"I thought," it sounded weak, vulnerable and stupid in his head but Val plunged ahead. too tired, too stressed to even bother trying to censor himself. "I thought you were annoyed at seeing me, that I should have faded away like a proper one night stand."

Trist's face twisted up, he knew he'd been an unforgivable bastard. "We should leave it there, you'll find someone who can make you happy, sooner or later. My life, well, it's not quite sane." He dropped the fork from his fingers and let it clatter to the plate.

Val slid the plate away, setting it into the sink. "My life is much too sane, I think." He whispered out, his back to Trist. "I enjoy being around you." He sucked in his breath and held it, waiting for the emotional punch to the gut that being so vulnerable had to create.

It wasn't fair! It was hard enough to be honest and honorable without Val practically throwing himself at him. "Val, I can't remember the last day. I feel sick from the meds they pumped into me and I'm pretty sure the only reason I'm not screaming and pulling my hair out now is because I'm still far too drugged. I can't even go into a clothing store to buy jeans most days without loosing it. Every time I have a bad fit, another bit of my mind snaps off and wanders away. I'll be mindless and drooling in a corner by the time I'm forty. There is no happy endings for me and you, you're amazing, you deserve a thousand happy endings."

It was easier to talk like this, with his back to Trist and not having to meet those raw honest eyes. "I've never been one to want a fairy tale and mental illness doesn't scare me."

Trist growled. "Damn it, Val! I'm trying to be noble here! I'm trying to do what's right! Because I can't fucking make it alone until Gavan's better and I can't fucking go live with my aunt either. I'm a selfish prick, if you let me, I'll take advantage of you!"

"Maybe," he was a fool. A total crazy, mad fool with no intelligence and he deserved whatever it brought him. He should just stay with his safe, quiet books. "Maybe it's not taking advantage. Maybe, I need you as much as you need me." He glanced over then and caught the startled, hungry longing in the odd eyes. "I'm lonely too and I'm tired of fighting, tired of being alone, of feeling empty."

"Val." The whispered name was a prayer, a hope deeper then any he'd be able to express.

"Come on, let's try to get some more sleep. We'll figure things out tomorrow. Would you like to

go over and see Gavan?" He dumped the half a mug of coffee into the sink.

Could it be so easy? Could Val just walk in and fit his life so seamlessly? "I can't, hospitals are too much for me. Could we call?"

"Of course." Val's feet paused. It had been so much easier when Trist was still hazy and lost inside his own mind.

"I'm cold, do you mind if I steal your body heat?" Trist was yawning now, his stomach full, his conscious eased and only the cold worried fear over Gavan pulling him down.

That resolved Val's uncertainty about just where he should sleep. If he was being honest, he slept a thousand times better when Trist was curled up beside him. "You don't need to steal it, I'll give it to you."

"Oh God, that's sickeningly cute, I might puke."

Part Twenty Six

Trist had fallen asleep with Val curled around him, spooned tight to his back. It felt perfect. He was safe, warm and sheltered, all feelings that were luxuries. Behind him, Val was practically purring in contentment. It took next to nothing to make the man happy and that made Trist smile too.

He awoke with the sun shining in and the clock by the bed announcing that it was after nine. Val wasn't wrapped around him any longer, instead the man was on his back, sprawled out, hair all messy, lips parted in sleep. He was beautiful and Trist wanted to be able to wake to see that sight every day, even if Val somehow managed to take up more than half the bed in the process.

The drugs were wearing off. His stomach no longer felt like fluttery lead, every bruise ached and he couldn't remember much of how he'd gotten beaten. There was a slow building sense of panic and dread and his mind was too scrambled to tell if it was coming from his sight or just from general anxiety. There was a pressing need to cry, he wanted to just sit down and weep now that he knew Gavan would be okay and Val didn't hate him.

He pushed the need aside and brushed the tips of his fingers across Val's face. The ghost of a touch pulled a muttered sigh from the man and put a small smile on Trist's lips. Val was a treasure, something rare and priceless, something too perfect to belong in his own fucked up world. He wasn't sure he could be selfish enough to keep him, knowing the misery and heartache that he brought everywhere with him.

For now there was no choice. Val was technically his keeper, the one in charge of both him and Gavan until Gavan was able to make his own choices. He hadn't known why it had been so important to get those papers signed but Trist had demanded it. The debate had been that Val was logical, close by, and more likely to think about their desires than their grandmother would be, or even their parents. Which was only a half truth as Gavan's folks were good people, he made a mental note to call both them and Wally today. Maybe it would be better if Val did that, he wasn't sure he could speak to either without cursing wildly.

There was a sense that Val had showered him last night but Trist could only remember it in a hazy half aware sense. It didn't change the pressing need to shave, brush his teeth and scrub his skin raw. Being hospitalized always left him feeling dirty, too much pain, too many dark thoughts, too much misery and it all seemed to stick to him. He was scrubbing his feet under the stinging spray of the shower when the door slid open behind him.

Trist jumped about a foot, startled. "Fuck!"

"Sorry." Val yawned. "Want me to come back later?"

As if Trist would refuse to let a naked Val anywhere near him. "No, it's okay, just, wear a bell or something." His heart was pounding now. Fingers gently ghosted over a particularly bad bruise on his side and Trist straightened at the touch.

"They really worked you over, it looks worse today."

"Feels worse then it looks, I'd imagine."

"Who hurt you?"

He shrugged. "Some orderly I guess, I don't remember." Which was only partially true, but he didn't like talking about how helpless it felt to be drugged, restrained and half crazy while being beaten.

Val shook his head as he reached for the shampoo. "I almost called the cops when I saw you'd been hurt. I wanted someone arrested."

Trist smiled and turned, glancing almost involuntarily across Val's naked, wet, very sexy body before leaning in and lightly kissing his lips. "That's cause you're the hero sort." Val actually started at the contact, as if Trist could be naked in the shower with the man and not, at the very least, kiss him. He laughed slightly.

"Sorry." Val muttered and felt himself blushing.

"Don't be, it's cute." He stepped forward and Val stepped back, Trist kept moving forward until Val's back was against the shower wall. "I warned you, if you'd let me, I'd take advantage."

"Trist..." Val sighed, trying to protest but itching to grab the slender man.

"You wanted me to take advantage, that's why you're here with me, all naked like and wet, sexy. God, if those fucking drugs didn't make it impossible for me to get hard I'd be fucking you senseless about now." Trist whispered against Val's lips, not quiet kissing him.

Trist may not be able to get hard, but Val wasn't having any difficulties. His mind shorted out. "Wait, Trist, wait, I need to know..." It was impossible to think with Trist standing so close, with his lips brushing his neck, licking the drops of water from the shower away.

"What, baby? What do you need to know?" Just touching Val made him feel better, more clean.

"Oh, God, I, Trist, is this, oh right there." His arms curled around Trist's waist of their own desire, needing to touch the man that had him pinned to the wall. "Is this, oh, I didn't want to do this, God."

"Say it baby, I want to know what you're thinking." Trist started nibbling on an ear, the scent of the last bits of lather that clung to Val's hair, strong in his nose.

"Then stop that!" He scolded and pulled Trist away from him, just a little bit. Only, having to look into those odd, open eyes, didn't make it any easier. "Is this just physical to you?"

It wasn't what he'd expected. "It would be easier if it was." He leaned in and kissed Val again. "You're going to break my heart."

Val frowned. "Vision?"

Trist shook his head. "No, just my fears."

"Odd, I'm frightened of the same thing." Val whispered, having to close his eyes to admit such a bald truth.

"So, are we done talking now? I'd like to blow you."

Val was pretty sure that every drop of his blood instantly pooled into his groin. He didn't even have the sense to moan, he knew his mouth fell open in shock but he couldn't seem to get it to go shut. A problem easily solved because Trist took advantage again and kissed him.

The kisses went lower, tormenting neck and chest but Trist was single minded. It wasn't like Val needed the foreplay, he was already fully aroused, panting, clinging to the smooth shower wall. It was what he'd wanted on during their night together, so unwind Val with his mouth. There was something powerful about kneeling in front of a man and licking his cock.

Trist was old fashioned. He liked being on his knees, there was something sexier about having to kneel and Val was the perfect height. His cock bobbed right in front of Trist's face, just begging to be tormented. As the hot water pelted his back, he slowly began kissing the tense flesh before him.

"Stop." Val whispered, almost too softly to be heard over the shower. The sight of Trist, kneeling, his eyes shut in delight, was too much. He let his head fall back against the cooler wall, his hands sliding along the damp surface looking for a purchase to either pull away or drive deeper into the mind blowing pleasure. "I can't, Trist, don't..." he sighed out but the slender man ignored his protests.

Even with how long it had been since he'd had a lover, Trist still knew how to take most of Val's length into his mouth. He bobbed his head, swirled his tongue, did all the little tricks he knew to drive a man crazy and delighted in the absolute and total silence inside his own mind. It made him feel almost normal, allowed him to focus on the moment, the sheer total perfection that was a lustful Val.

Trist held Val steady with one hand to his hip and let his other hand tease. Fingers stroked from base to head in the wake of long licks from his tongue. He tickled thighs as he sucked just the tip of the weeping flesh into his mouth. And, when he swallowed the length whole, one soap slick finger pushed tightly into Val's ass with no warning.

Val nearly came, a shuddering cry escaped him, his knees trembled. He didn't know what to do, the finger felt tight but perfect, he wanted, needed it deeper but to push back against it pulled his throbbing cock from Trist's extremely skilled mouth. He leaned here, shuddering, making hissing, gasping sounds of confused pleasure and without thinking he reached a hand out.

Trist had expected that, he pushed his finger in deeper and waited for Val's hands to claw at his hair. His head wasn't what Val was fumbling for, there was no rough desire to control the pleasure Trist was offering. Instead, Val's seeking hands pried at the hand Trist had on the curve of a hipbone. Confused, Trist released his grip and instantly Val's hand curled around his own.

It was so tender, so perfect, that Trist almost got hard. He felt the stirrings of desire deeper than he'd ever felt but his body was too drugged still, too battered to sustain an erection. No one had held his hand while he blew them. Men simply didn't do that, and yet, Val did. His fingers interwove around Trist's, connected them and with each tense flex or twitch Trist knew just how close Val was to finding release.

He forced a second finger into the too tight ass, knowing that it had to hurt and knowing that Val liked it to hurt a little. He sighed in happy contentment around the flesh in his mouth. His hand

gripped Val's as tightly as it was being gripped. They could have stayed that way forever, but Trist finally found that hidden spot. His fingers struck it forcefully and Val gasped. His body grew rigid, his eyes rolled up and his hips snapped forward as he tumbled without protest over the edge and into release.

Trist sighed as Val trembled against him, the taller man was barely clinging to the wall, still holding Trist's hand. He was putting even odds on Val not being able to stand on his own if he let go of his hand, so did what was fair and right and didn't let go. Instead, he stood and pressed a quick kiss to Val's lips before gathering him into his arms.

"Well, I think I know what I'll be craving first thing in the morning from now on." Trist sighed as Val actually snuggled against him.

It was too much, it felt too good. Val just fell against the battered, slender body when he was tugged away from the wall and curled up inside the circle of Trist's arms. His entire body was shaking like some brittle leaf and it took slow moments for it to dawn on him that here, hand in hand with Trist, locked inside his arms, he felt really safe for the first time in his life.

He tucked himself as close to the slender body as he could and didn't whine too much when Trist finally released his hand. It was a forgivable offense since Trist gathered up the soapy washcloth and washed them both off. Val let him, let the other man bath him, shampoo his hair, fuss over him and he just closed his eyes and let himself feel protected.

Part Twenty Seven

"I'm sorry." Val finally forced out and weakly tried to struggle out of Trist's sheltering grasp.

"For what?" Trist cupped water in his hand and used it to rinse the last of the soap from their bodies.

"You've had a horrible couple of days but you're the one taking care of me. I should be taking care of you."

Trist actually started to laugh. "You know, for such a smart man, you're a fucking moron when it comes to dealing with people."

"That's not fair, I..."

Trist ran his hands across Val's face. "All I mean is taking care of you, makes me feel better." He studied the hidden face and the uncomfortable vulnerability Val wore. "I never get to be strong, you make me feel strong." It was a feeling he needed right now.

"Trist,"

"God, I'm turning into a prune." He couldn't stand serious words now, too much and too little had been said. "Besides, I need to find a way to get you to call Wally and Gav's parents so I don't have to."

Val turned the water off, it was going cold anyway, and couldn't meet Trist's eye. "I can call them." He wasn't easy with the idea of being gay but the idea of being near Trist was an easy one to accept. If he could stay focused on that, he'd be fine. He was thinking too much about pointless, trivial things and too little about important issues. That was a luxury he couldn't afford, because no matter how Trist made him feel, he'd be blind not to see how frail the slender man looked.

For all the pleasant start to the day, it quickly spiraled downward. As the meds finished working their way out of Trist's system, he grew anxious, moody and unstable. The lunch Val made, soothing soup and sandwiches, was barely in Trist's stomach before he was lurching to the bathroom to vomit. The exhausted man sat on the sofa, pulling slightly at his hair and stared blankly at the tv while Val called the short list of family about Gavan and the long list of Trist's clients that had to be canceled.

"No, no everything's fine, Mr. Maddocks is just exhausted." Val lied smoothly to another near panicked client. "Don't worry, as soon as he's rested everyone will be rescheduled." That was the second concern of everyone he called, some people had waited weeks or months to be fit into the few hours Trist allowed for clients. "Certainly, I'll pass your concern on to him. Thanks for understanding." Val hung up and the last call had finally been made.

"How do you do it?" Trist asked but his eyes stayed on the television but too unfocused to really be watching it.

"Do what?" He moved to stand behind the sofa and gently pulled Trist's hand away from the hair it was obsessively plucking at.

"Lie so easily."

He'd never thought about it and the shock of being considered an easy liar stilled the hand he'd been soothing across Trist's head. "I don't..."

"Shut up, don't lie to me, too!" Trist snapped and pulled his head away. "I know better. Comes from lying to yourself for a lifetime, you lie so smoothly, so easily, you don't even see it. How long until you finally say you want to be with me only to have that be the lie?"

The sharp, paranoid anger didn't surprise Val, it had been popping up all day but this was the first time it had been directed at him. "Not all of us have the courage or luxury of your honesty. I'm trying."

Trist rubbed his hands roughly across his face and pulled hard at his hair. He growled a little in frustrated anger under his breath before he spoke. "I'm sorry, Val, I'm sorry. I'm trying it's just, this isn't easy."

"I know."

"This is why you should forget about me! All I'm going to do is hurt you. God! I'm such a horrible person, I shouldn't be allowed around people."

"Stop that, you're just you, don't be sorry for that. The hospital says they think Gavan will be off the ventilator tonight."

"That's good."

"Very good, about two days sooner then they'd expected. Wally's going to go sit with him tonight and his parents will be there tomorrow. They wanted to know if you'd like them to come stay with you too."

"Not likely."

"It was nice of them to offer." Val reminded him.

Trist just rolled his eyes. "Sure." His eyes darted behind Val and focused on the form standing

there.

Val noticed the shift in the restless, uninterested eyes, and glanced behind him. Nothing was there, at least, nothing that Val could see. "What?"

Trist just shook his head. "It's not fair." He spoke to the hovering form. "To him and me, go the fuck away."

"Trist?"

"Not you!" He snapped at Val. "Damn it, I can't do this now, I can't, I'm too scattered, it's not fair to gang up on me when I'm half crazy already! No!"

"Trist?"

The odd black ringed eyes snapped to Val, shifted quickly to the spot behind him and the tension melted from his shoulders. "Val, I can't refuse now, I'm too tired, I'm sorry."

"I don't understand."

Trist unfolded himself from the sofa, taking the blanket he'd wrapped himself up in with him. "You will soon enough. Indulge me so they shut up and leave me be."

"What?" Trist caught his wrist as he walked by and Val allowed himself to be tugged along behind. "Trist?"

"It helps to keep things a little separate, I don't do this outside of my office."

"Do what?"

Trist stopped and turned to glance at Val, the look on his face and in his eyes was sorrowful. "A reading of course."

"No." Val dug his heels in but couldn't quite shake the hand from his wrist.

"Neither of us have a choice in this. Have some mercy on me, they're not going to shut up until I do, they've been nagging me since I met you. Please, just let me purge this."

It was the lack of profanity, the exhausted lack of anger, that made Val give in. It didn't appear that Trist wanted this anymore then he did so he nodded and surrendered. The grip on his wrist was like a vise and short of actually prying the fingers away, Val had few choices left but to follow where he was lead.

The office was the only room in the apartment Val hadn't seen. Trist kept the door tightly shut and it made sense to Val. In it's own small way, it sealed away part of Trist's life, locked the full nature of his gifts into a single compartment and kept what had to feel like chaos from spilling out into his day to day life. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting, dramatic colors, blacks maybe with draped fabric and crystal balls, the reality was different.

Like the rest of the apartment, the office was finished in soothing, earth tones. Light olive greens and soft lavenders accented the shades of tan and brown, making the room feel soothing, welcoming. There were no mirrors, no draped lengths of fabric, no crystal balls, nothing at all like the image Val had in his mind. Instead, there was a simple, narrow table with understated, comfortable chairs pulled around it. Along the walls were short bookshelves but they didn't hold ordinary books. It appeared more a collection of folders, notebooks and journals then literary works. Sitting on the bookcases were candles, bottles of scented oils, diffusers, and even with none lit, the room had a pleasant comforting scent. The only concession to the entire psychic

image were a few small, but well crafted, drums in the corner and tossed in the opposite corner was a stack of large pillows and blankets.

"You looked surprised. What'd you expect? Chicken entrails?" Trist mocked as he moved to light candles.

Val just shrugged, unwilling to admit that chicken entrails wouldn't have shocked him.

"Sit." Trist ordered, waving to one of the chairs and taking one himself.

"What are we doing?"

He ignored the question and cracked his knuckles. The voices buzzed in expectant need in his head and they made him hurt. Normally, when he came in here, they knew to settle down but the background buzz only seemed louder this time. He drew a slow breath, feeling it fill down into his stomach, feeling the breath push back toward his spine, filling him. He let it out slowly, through his mouth, listening to the soft whooshing of it's release.

Trist clapped his hands together three times in slow order and placed his hands flat down on the table between them. "We're going to shut them up so I get some peace and quiet for now."

"I'm..."

"I know, I know, you're not sure you want to do this, tough shit. Look, I have little control over this. People come here hoping to speak to a specific person, I have no say over that. When the voices get too demanding, I need to get what they're saying out or it drives me crazy. Normally, I've no idea who it is I'm supposed to tell something to so I just fucking right it down and worry about it later but you're right here, there're getting pushy." He hated the cold fear in Val's eyes, the distant, tense way the man was holding himself still.

"And if I just run out of the room and tell you to shove off?"

"Then they keep picking at me until I'm broken down. Feel free to leave."

Val sighed and shook his head. "You know I won't do that."

"Yeah, told you I was a total bastard." He drew a breath. "Okay, your uncle, he's been pushing for days."

"Wait." Val's heart froze, this seemed cruel. "You mean to tell me you're able to talk to my dead uncle?"

Trist shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know if it's the left over energy from the dead or the actual spirit themselves. I don't know, I'm not a fucking priest. Sometimes I see them, sometimes I just hear them. You uncle, he's done both, pushy fucker."

"What's he look like?"

"I hate these games."

"Indulge me."

Trist balanced a pissed off Val and the lack of hot sex against giving in. "He's shorter then you, wore glasses and eventually bifocals, used to bitch and moan about them not lining up when he would read. He's not heavy set, but not stick skinny, for all his wordy preaching bullshit about control he had a sweet tooth for maple candy. He used to wear those stupid jackets with the elbow pads and dress pants and sweaters with ties under them. Brown eyed, dark haired, frown

lines and he doesn't smile often. He smoked a pipe but only on Christ, like Sunday nights or something freakish like that."

"Oh, God." Val whispered out. "I don't want to do this, Trist."

Part Twenty Eight

"Oh, God." Val whispered out. "I don't want to do this, Trist."

"It's only weakness that makes a man run away from a problem. Buck up boy, life isn't going to get any easier."

Val could literally feel the blood drain from his face, he knew he must be as white as a sheet. "What did you say?"

"Huh?" Trist blinked surprised. "Sorry, zoned out for a moment, don't freak out on me Val, it happens. You okay?"

He only shook his head but under the table his hands were clenched into tight fists.

"Do you want me to pass on what he's saying word for word?"

The thought of that made Val sick. "Paraphrase, please."

"He says he was an ass." Trist paused and sighed. "Well, you were! Just shut up or I'll shut up, you're lucky I'm doing this at all."

Val found himself glancing around the room, suddenly uncomfortable.

"Fine, look, he says he's sorry he didn't know the first thing about kids and didn't like them. It wasn't personal. He just saw that the whole fucking world was a little nutso and didn't want you going down the wrong path. He knew about the girl you lost your virginity to and was more pissed that you'd been drunk at the time."

"Oh, God."

"He wanted to talk to you about it, tell you that sex isn't something to rule you but that he understood you were a seventeen year old boy and were going to fuck around. Only, he dropped over cold dead before he found the balls to talk to you about it. He hates that his bullshit standards have fucked you up so much, says you need to just be happy. That so long as you're not hurting anyone, it's okay." Trist sighed and shook his head. "That's his big thing, he knows, he knows about Matt, about us, about that cold bitch that left you. The only thing he's upset over is that you've been torturing yourself because of him. Oh fuck this I doubt you'll believe this but he says he's proud of you and that he did love you and he's sorry."

Val sat, stunned and silent. There was little doubt that if he opened his mouth he'd snap and lose all control.

"Generally, you're supposed to take what they say and use it to forgive them and move on, but he's an utter ass so stay pissed at him all you want." Trist frowned at the unhappy, haunted look Val was wearing.

"Why him? Why not my parents?" Val would have given his left arm to have five minutes with his parents again. He was starting to understand why people paid such insane amounts to meet with Trist.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "They felt content when they passed, overlooking the whole, horrific, terrible fucking cave in thing. Generally, people that are happy with their lives, move on pretty smoothly. It's the miserable shits that stick around, or the busy bodies."

"Are we done?" Val managed to ask, wanting to escape and work on denial of what Trist knew.

"Not likely, sorry. I warned you. Speaking of busy bodies, I keep hearing Matt."

"Please, don't do this."

"I'm sorry." Trist was frowning now. "Look, he didn't mean to overdose, he knows how it was reported but he hadn't been trying to kill himself. He had a problem, says the only reason he stayed pulled together senior year was because of you. Says that's why he let you walk away after graduation, because he liked the parties too much and you didn't and he didn't want to drag his pony down with him. Fuck, I'm sorry Val, he says to tell you that he did love you, that you were the one." Trist frowned. "This is stupid but he's saying there can be only one, and Pony was the one."

Val gripped the edge of the table and refused to let any of the swirling emotions escape. "Please, no more."

"He says to tell you that he didn't mean to fuck you up even more. He didn't know the bullshit your uncle had fed you, didn't know his whole 'we're not gay this is just what men do together' line fed into all the shit that was already in your head."

"Tell him, I'll be keeping a watch over him until he's happy."

Trist shook his head. "No, this is plenty."

"Tell him!"

"Sorry." He said to Matt but aimed it at Val so the frightfully pale man across from him wouldn't suspect he was holding something back.

"Damn you! Tell him!"

Not now! Look at him! Trist thought back as loudly as he could and felt Matt fade away a little, which left only the last voice to be spoken. The least demanding or vocal but the most heart wrenching.

"Val?"

"No more."

"I'm sorry, there's only a little more."

Val sighed and hung his head, not wanting to make things more difficult for Trist but not wanting to hear any more.

"Val, your niece and nephew,"

"No, I don't want to hear this." He interrupted.

"Val, please, they were dead before your sister made it home. They were murdered, there were men in the house. I, oh, wow..." Trist's eyes glazed over but he scanned the room as he watched something only he could see. His breathing grew shorter, almost hyperventilating and

his skin grew clammy and flushed. "Uncle Val? Please, you need to listen, please." Trist spoke softly with a slight lisp.

The voice was different but Val heard another's over it. He stood up and pushed away from the table. "Stop this!" He shouted and the angry voice broke whatever focus Trist had been in. "Stop it! I don't want this! It's cruel!" He kept shouting, he just couldn't stop and he felt the scalding fire of tears and grief lurking behind the anger.

"Val?" Trist asked, confused at the outburst but not overly surprised. "I'm sorry."

Val held out his hands, palms toward Trist, begging in silent pleas for an end. He shook his head and hurried from the room.

He didn't really know where he was going, he just knew he had to move. It was too much, everything was suddenly too much and it all felt like it was falling apart. He froze in the living room, his mind shocked into stillness.

"Val!" Trist pushed from his office, panicked at the terrified look Val wore and more panicked at the sudden, stillness.

Val blinked. "I should go over and check on Gavan in person, make sure everything's okay." He had something to do now, he'd be okay so long as he kept busy.

"What? No!" Trist pushed forward and darted across the room. He snatched Val's keys from the counter before the taller man could reach them.

"Give me my keys." Val demanded, low and threatening.

It was like thunder, loud and echoing, to Trist's mind. Everything in Val was right there, building, being pushed down, building some more. He swallowed hard, knowing he was going to get the tar beat out of him, and hide the keys behind his back.

"Give me my keys, Trist."

"No." There was no defiance in his voice, just acceptance.

Val's hands bulled up into fists. "Give me my God damned keys!"

It would have been easier to stand up to Val's anger if he'd been caught in it too. Only, this time, Val had his rage so tightly wrapped around himself that it only lapped out in teasing touches to Trist's senses. He shook his head in denial and held tighter to the sharp keys.

"Give me my keys." Val hissed, darkly, taking a step forward, moving in slow, steps that dripped in rage and hate toward Trist.

"No." Trist whispered back and retreated as Val advanced. He wasn't really afraid. There was little doubt Val was going to, at the least, smack him around and Trist had accepted that. It wasn't fear he felt, just small, tight acceptance.

Trist's back hit the wall, there was no where left to go. He glanced down at could almost see the anger swirling around Val's body, lapping at his legs, cresting up to his shoulders like a surf breaking over rocks. It took courage to raise his eyes to meet Val's but he wasn't going to back down.

"My keys."

Trist shook his head.

It wasn't a shout, or a growl, but a sound that rose from deeper inside of Val. It wasn't loud, but it blocked out all sound, there was some element in it, the broken twisted pain buried as anger, that made Trist tremble at it's fierceness. Val's arm pulled back, drew back so his elbow was bent, and he lashed out. The loud smacking sound made Trist jump, startled like a cornered rabbit but no pain followed the sound. His eyes went wide, and drifted to the side where Val's fist had landed into the wall by his head.

"Oh, Val." Relief washed over him, making him breath deeper and try to still his thudding heart. The relief disappeared when he looked to Val.

The taller man was breathing as hard as Trist was, his eyes were half squinted shut but that didn't hide the pain in them. "Let me go." He forced out between clenched jaws.

Trist shook his head. "No, I'm not going to do that. You can't keep running, Val, you can't."

"I don't want to hurt you." He hung his head, his fist still tightly pressed to the wall.

"You won't." Trist dropped the keys and wrapped his arms around Val's trembling hand, the fist not pressed to the wall. "Come here." He tugged and pulled and slowly, Val followed.

It took some wrangling to get Val to cross the living room to the sofa, the man was stiff legged and reluctant to move, but Trist managed it. "Hit the sofa, it won't break your hand."

"I don't want to hit something."

"Bullshit you don't. Hit the fucking sofa!" He snapped back, yelling as loudly as Val wanted, needed, to.

Val's squinted shut and he shouted in tormented rage, he fell forward and brought his hand down into the soft cushions. There was a pause, the only sound being both of their strained breathing, before Val snapped and hit the sofa again. The cries that wrenched from his body were pure anger, pent up pain and they wrenched out of Val's body with brutal force. Every movement, every expressive sound, was hard won and the more Val surrendered to it, the easier it became.

"It's not fair!" He railed, on his knees, collapsed before the sofa. His hands were tearing at a pillow, straining to pull it apart and destroy something. "It's not fair! I can't take more, I can't!" The anger was fading, leaving quaking pain and sobbing grief. "I can't." Val sighed out, falling forward, struggling not to weep in front of Trist.

Trist hadn't attended school past the seventh grade but he didn't need to have Val's master's degree to know people. Emotion, life, memory, pain, those were his stock in trade and he knew better than anyone that pain, grief, pushed down and denied turned into depression or anger. There was no way Val could grieve until the anger was drained off, like lancing an infected wound. He merely had to push a little to tip Val over his own edge and then stay out of the way.

But there was a time when he had to step in and as Val collapsed forward, leaning on the seats of the sofa, Trist knew the time had arrived. He moved carefully to kneel beside him and rubbed a light hand across the tense, uneasy shoulders. Val flinched from the touch, pulled away, frightened at being undone further.

"Right now, you can't, you've had too much pain and grief. You're right, it's not fair but neither is it fair that you hurt yourself either. Grief is meant to be worked through, not buried and hidden. I bet you never really grieved for your parents." He kept rubbing light circles across Val's shoulders and slowly Val eased at the contact.

"Please, Trist, please, I can't fall apart." He wanted to push the gentle comfort away.

"Of course you can, I do it all the time. You don't think less of me for it do you?"

Val shook his head, his breathing starting to slow. "No."

"Then why think less of yourself? Shhh, baby, shhhh, I'm so sorry you've had so much dumped on you." He toyed a little with the slightly sweat damp hair. "I'm so sorry you've never felt safe enough to mourn."

With his face hidden in his arms and against the sofa, the first of the tears escaped. It was too much. It wasn't easy on a good day to stay in control, it became impossible with someone telling him it was okay to let go. Just knowing someone else knew the weight he carried and cared about it, broke the last of his restraint.

Trist felt the sob, shuddering and soul deep, in his hand that was tracing across Val's back. "That's it, let it go, Val, let it go. I'm so sorry you lost your parents, I know how much you loved them." That wrenched more hitching, stuttering grief heavy breaths out. "I'm sorry your uncle didn't know how to love you. I'm sorry that Matt, who did love you, didn't know how to love you back. I'm so deeply sorry that something bad happened to your sister and her family."

His hands twisted back up into fists but it wasn't from anger, it was from his struggle to keep from coming apart at the seams. "I miss them so much!"

"I know, sweetheart, I know." Trist petted the hair. "No wonder you don't let people close to you, but Val, that's not an answer. Let me love you, please?" The words spilled out and hung in the air between them. He knew he could joke them off, pretend he meant it in a lewd way, but Trist knew the truth. There was no doubt, no denying, he was in love with Val. It was okay, he knew it was okay, because he didn't require Val to love him back. That was a powerful feeling, knowing he loved even if it wasn't returned. He stroked the tense body that huddled in it's solitary grief. "Please?" Trist whispered again.

How many people had offered Val their sympathies in his lifetime? Too many for him to remember, really, far too many and it never did anything. He hated sympathy almost as much as he hated weeping but somehow, this time, from Trist, it felt different.

It wasn't superficial, Trist really was sorry. He really did understand. Someone knew the burden of pain, loneliness and grief he'd been carrying around, saw past his carefully built masks and the half truths and lies he passed to the world around him. Trist saw him, and made no excuses for what he saw, he just accepted and loved.

Love was a horrible word. Val wasn't ready for that word. Kelly had said she loved him and then tossed in his face that he wasn't capable of loving her in return. She'd been right, he didn't know how to let go and love. It wasn't fair to inflict that coldness, that lack of the simple skill of loving, on anyone. Loneliness pierced him, pulling new wrenching sobs from his chest and making his lungs ache with the need to hold in howling screams of pain and rage.

Only, Trist wasn't asking Val to love him. The meaning of the simple request was slow to sink in. Trist had asked permission to love Val, without asking Val to love him back. Even if his meaning was only as a friend, it was something Val needed desperately. He was drowning in grief, in isolation and suddenly Trist had thrown hope at him. He clung to it as surely as anyone drowning.

There was no answer to Trist's question, not in words. He sat, steady, trying to sense just what might be swirling about in the huddled man but found himself unable to reach past the pain and grief. There was a long moment of emptiness, of muffled sobs, quelled grief and Trist started to wonder if Val was even alert enough to have heard him speaking or aware enough to make sense of the words.

He did receive an answer. The muscles in Val's shoulders bunched up again, tensed as if waiting for a blow that never landed and it was the only warning before Val pulled from the sofa. He kept his head bowed so Trist wasn't able to see into the tormented face but when he opened his arms, Val tumbled against him.

They sat there, leaning against the sofa. Val buried his face against Trist's loose hair, tucked against the slender shoulders. Trist's arms enveloped him, concealed him from the world outside and he mocking lies that men shouldn't cry. Val dug his hands into the front of Trist's shirt and clung on for his life. There was no turning back no, the floodgates had been opened. Grief, old and new, raw and scabbed over, consumed him and he felt against Trist's unhurried strength and sobbed.

Maybe, Trist thought, he was a sick bastard to smile a little at Val's collapse. He couldn't help it, he leaned against the sofa, petting soothing touches across the shaking body, and smiled lightly. Val had spent a lifetime being told to stay in control, to be ashamed of his hidden tears, that now to have him let go and surrender was the most healing thing that could be done. He was proud of the man he held, as salt tears soaked his shirt, proud of the courage it took to give in, proud of the courage it took to take the risk and allow someone to love him.

"That's it, let it out, let it all out. We've no where to go, sweetheart." He kissed the top of the hidden head. It hadn't been a lie, what he'd said that morning in the shower, sheltering Val made him feel strong, needed, almost loved even. "Shhhh, it's okay, you just let it all out."

Part Twenty Nine

Val wept for a long time, clinging to Trist like a man lost and unable to simply stop. Even once the tears dried up, he was reluctant to move, to pull away from the sheltering warmth he was hidden against. Even torn apart and ripped bare, there was only so much he could express before everything started to shut down and leave him feeling hollow and cold.

"Thanks." He whispered as Trist tossed a blanket around his shoulders.

"Your butt has to be falling asleep, hop up on the sofa and I'll make us some cocoa." He ran a hand across the mussed up hair and smiled lightly at the swollen nose and red eyes.

Val didn't question, he just lifted himself up and slid onto the sofa. He pulled the blanket tighter about himself and kept his face lowered. The sofa did feel good, a real, solid comfort when too much of the world felt like pain. He felt tired, worn down, uncertain what to do after such a dramatic display of emotion.

"Here." Trist held the mug out toward Val and caught the uncertain glance. "Don't worry, it's from a mix, even I can nuke cocoa."

"Thanks." He muttered again and took the hot drink. He wasn't a cocoa fan but as he sipped at the heavy sweetness, Val found it to be perfect. "Trist,"

"Don't, just let it be. Okay?" He blew a floating marshmallow across the surface of his mug, a sugary boat lacking sail or rudder.

Val nodded and huddled over his mug.

"I've got this anime, you'll love it."

"I don't like cartoons."

"It's not cartoons, it's anime!" Trist didn't let Val think, he just popped the dvd in and settled back on the sofa. It was easy to lean against Val and by the time the first episode was over and the cocoa mostly finished, the pair was snuggled tightly.

Val was pleasantly surprised by the depth to the anime and the quality of the art. It was a solid enough distraction from his collapse that he clung to it but it was how Trist felt curled against him that would imprint into his memories something wonderful. It left him a little dazed, a little confused but when the cocoa was gone, he pulled Trist close and held on.

"Let me pop the disk out." Trist said as he tried to wiggle free, only the arms holding him didn't let go. He twisted around to glance up at Val. The look on his face was tight and twisted up. "You're thinking too much."

"I, Trist, I'm..." Val drew a deep breath and glanced down at the accepting man. "I'm not very good at this."

Trist wiggled and squirmed and managed to get turned around so he was leaning on Val's chest, hands draped over his shoulders, faces less than a foot apart. "Good at what?"

Val shook his head. "This, I've never been good at any of this."

"You aren't making much sense, dear."

"That!" He sighed. "You're so easy calling me such affectionate names, you just cuddle against me without thinking, this seems so natural to you! I don't know how to do that. It scares me."

He traced his fingers across Val's face. "Scares me too but you have to enjoy what you have while you have it. Life is too short."

"I've never met anyone like you."

That made Trist laugh gently. "And you ain't just whistling Dixie."

Maybe he should have been offended by Trist's gentle laughter but he wasn't, the easy life in the man was one of the things he was drawn to. "I'm not good with my feelings."

"Which is crazy ass ironic given what you do for a living."

"I've never had trouble understanding other people's emotions, just my own."

"We'll work on it. God knows, everything I feel spills out everywhere." He smiled gently and traced his fingers across the bridge of Val's nose before tracing back to tease his hair.

"It's just, this, I, shit..." Val glanced down, having to hide from the honesty. "This feels nice. I've never felt..." He tugged at Trist, pulled him so he was forced to lay full out over his chest. The weight felt good, the face that buried against his neck felt good. Val wrapped his arms around him and held on tightly. "This feels right."

"To me too baby."

"I don't want to let go."

"Good, cause I'm not going anywhere." He pressed his palm to Val's chest and felt how the heart below was thudding rapidly.

"Trist, I think, I mean, I guess I am."

"Guess you are what?"

Val closed his eyes and waited for the sky to fall. It was time to stop running. "Gay."

Trist sighed. "I don't care."

"What?" The startled shock snapped into his voice. He'd struggled and wrestled and tormented himself for how long and now Trist didn't care?

"I don't care. It's just a name, Val, it's just a label. So long as you're willing to lay here like this with me, as long as you let me do horrible, lewdly kinky things to you, I don't care if you say it or not. If it makes it easier for you, don't worry about the names." He was smiling now at the thought of dirty ideas.

"But," he started slowly. "I am, aren't I?"

That broke out more gentle laughter. "Oh, yeah, baby, you're more queer than a three dollar bill."

"That's not nice, I'm not..." that was as far as Val made it before his words stuttered off. Trist's hand was suddenly between his legs, teasing, stroking, taking him from uninterested to hard in a few light touches. "Oh, God."

Trist smiled as his hand teased. Val's entire body arched at the simple touch. All the background voices vanished and Trist felt his own body relax. "Val?"

"Hmm?" His head lolled back, his eyes were shut.

"There's something you should know?"

It was the seriousness of the tone that brought Val back. He forced his body to settle back to the sofa and his eyes open. "Okay."

"When you're turned on, and we're touching?" He shook his head. "You make everything go silent."

"What?"

"I don't know how, but you do. It's not like with Gavan, he can dim things down or turn it off completely but you, it just makes everything silent. I don't know how you're able to do it, but you are. No one other than Gav and my aunt have been able to do that."

"Okay." It made little sense while Trist was continuing to tease him.

"It's nice, real nice. I don't need the extra push to want you turned on." His fingers nimbly snapped open the buttons on Val's fly. "It's just a bonus to have silence in my head and just you to think about." He nipped a little at the neck so close to his face. "Just thought you should know, in case I flip out or something."

"In case you flip out, I'm supposed to what?"

Trist chuckled at how Val was trying to focus. "Fuck me."

"Oh God!" Val arched into the hand that was now inside his pants at the very idea.

"Sex between us, shuts out my voices." He nipped Val's ear. "Promise me, you'll use it to shut me down if I lose it."

"Trist..."

"Promise me, you'll use it to keep me sane."

Val's mind processed the idea. "You won't be able to agree." His breath hissed as Trist tightened his grip. How was he supposed to think with Trist's hand wrapped around his cock?

"Please, Val, please, promise me you will. I'm agreeing now, you won't be taking advantage, you'll be saving me. Please, promise me." He whispered against Val. He wouldn't be able to relax until he'd wrung out the promise.

"I promise." Val heard himself whisper. "Trist, please."

The drugs were wearing off. Trist felt himself stir to half hard arousal before softening again and a few moments later repeating the process. "Spirit is willing, flesh isn't yet." He sighed. "You're not going to be able to walk for a week once I can get hard again. I'm going to fuck you so hard, for hours. I'll take fucking Viagra if I have to. God, Val, there's so many naughty things I want to do to you."

The skilled, steady hand tormented his desire, knowing just how and where to touch. In some ways, Trist knew how to please him better than Val's own hand did. In his ear, echoing across his entire world, was Trist's voice, teasing, tickling, filling him. Val melted, all will that he had disappeared in the face of Trist's desire. It wasn't even really about release, it was the touch, the connection that built to climax that Val was finding himself addicted to.

Until Trist tumbled him over the edge and Val wondered what he'd been thinking. The fall, the release was way better than any building tease. As his body shuddered and stilled and the warmth of being held, of being loved, by someone as amazing and irresistible as Trist filled him, he thought himself a fool again. Nothing, not the teasing build up or the tumbling release, could equal the joy and beauty of the comfortable warmth of afterwards.

They lay snuggled together as Val's breathing slowed but it wasn't long until Trist slipped to the kitchen to wash up and return with a damp paper towel. Val still felt too lost in a happy haze to notice or care that Trist was making him presentable again. He yawned. "I haven't, I mean, twice in a day."

Trist chuckled. "Well, get used to it, the day's not over yet."

That surprised Val and stirred the smallest glimmer of lust in his blood. He shook his head and pulled Trist closer, letting himself go enough to kiss the other man, trying not to think about it too much for fear of losing his nerve.

"Well, now." Trist sighed.

"I need to call the hospital and check on Gavan and I need to get some of my things from my place. That is, if you want me to stay up here with you?" He suddenly felt very shy.

"Stupid question." He grinned.

Part Thirty

The phone was ringing when Val got the door to unlock. "Yeah, yeah, I'm coming!" He growled at it and tossed the keys into the basket by the door. He kicked the door shut and manage to snatch up the phone before the caller hung up. "Hello?"

"Mr. York?" A man on the other end questioned.

Val frowned. Only a handful of people had his home number and he knew all their voices. It wasn't Bently calling, he'd just gotten off the phone with them. Gavan was doing better than expected and he'd made it clear he could be reached at Trist's number.

"Yes?"

"If you want to know what really happened with your sister, meet me at the fountain in Weaver Park, tomorrow, six am."

"Who is this?" He snapped but the line clicked dead. He stood, startled, for a moment, staring at the phone but the phone was unwilling to provide any answers.

"No!" Trist shouted. "Better, fuck no! It's cloak and dagger bullshit!"

"Trist."

"Besides, what sane person is awake at fucking six in the morning." He was pacing, nervous, and chewing what little of his fingernails he had left off. "I don't want you to go."

Val leaned against the counter. "Well, I'm going."

"Don't!"

"Trist, she was my sister, somebody hurt her. Would you walk away?" There was little of logic in what he felt, just the burning desire to understand, to learn why.

"Someone shot Gavan, I'm letting the police do their good damn job!"

"The police don't care about Violet. I've tried that. Who ever called, they could be a crack pot but maybe they really do know something. I need to know."

Trist felt the anxious fear clawing at him but he pushed it down. It wasn't a vision, nothing had changed with his sight but it was from the rooted fear of being left alone. "Damn it!"

There was no hours of sex that night. Trist was nervous and pacing, twitchy, and even the news that Gavan had been taken off the respiratory early and was breathing fine on his own did little to lighten his mood. Val ignored him, he was good at ignoring things, and let Trist fuss.

As much as he liked making Trist happy, as much as making Trist happy made him happy, Val needed to follow any lead that might explain what had happened to Violet. Nothing in the entire of the world mattered like family and Val would cross fire and flood to find the truth. He doubted he'd be able to make that need seem logical and necessary to Trist, a man that ran on fluid emotion and profanity.

There was a small debate about where Val would sleep. At first Trist balked at letting Val join him in his bed and Val had merely shrugged.

"I sleep like the dead anywhere." Which was to say that Trist couldn't do the same.

"Damn it." Trist had muttered. "Fucking six am, can't believe I'm setting my alarm clock to five fucking am."

"You don't need to get up."

"Like I'm going to be able to sleep!" He snapped back and slammed the bathroom door behind him. He knew he wasn't being fair but he couldn't stop himself. Val's safety had rapidly become as important to him as Gavan's and with Gavan hurt, he didn't think he could stand to see Val hurt.

They'd slept, with Val wrapped around Trist but when Val work up several hours later, Trist wasn't in his arms. He cracked his eyes open, groggy and found Trist sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Hey?"

"Go back to sleep." Trist tossed over his shoulder.

"Lay back down with me?" The bed, his arms, felt empty.

"I can't sleep."

"Try again, for me?" He lifted the covers.

Trist sighed and slid back into bed, pressing his chilled body into the warm pocket of bed and blankets that Val occupied. He was certain sleep was impossible but it did feel nice to lay, snuggled, against Val's body.

"Val?"

"Hmm?" One of Val's hands snaked out and petted Trist's hair, the man hadn't braided it back.

"Don't go tomorrow."

"This isn't a movie, Trist. Nothing dramatic is going to happen. I'll show up, who ever the whistleblower is will tell me what he saw, maybe give me some files and I'll be home before eight." He kissed the nearby temple of the worried head. "Now, shhhh, try to relax."

Trist didn't think he'd be able to relax, let alone sleep, but the hand that soothed across his head lulled him. It was simply too nice, curled up together, Val's warmth chasing away his own chill, to fight the exhaustion that pulled him down. He drifted into lightly resting and then into sleep without ever noticing.

Val woke before the alarm and turned it off with three minutes to spare. Trist was tucked against his back, a warm length that was softly snoring. The sound made him smile almost as much as seeing the face, threaded with loose hair. He took a moment to tug blankets tighter around the limp body before moving smoothly across the bedroom to shower and shave.

The sounds of him in the bathroom didn't wake Trist, which Val figured was a good thing since he doubted he could deal with any drama so early in the morning. As he slipped across the bedroom, carrying his shoes for no real reason other than it felt quieter to do so, he saw the slender man was still curled up, mouth parted in a soft snore, as he'd been left. He paused in the living room to pull his shoes on and call the hospital just to check on Gavan but they reported no change, which was actually a good thing at this point.

There was time so he opted to ride the bus. Val had always liked the bus, it made him feel connected and part of something. It wasn't a habit he'd ever been able to really explain to Violet, she'd always tried to push him to get a small car but Val liked public transportation. He could sit near the back and watch people, watch their lives and interactions and somehow his own life didn't seem so bland.

The colorful display of human relationships and life was lost on him this morning. Things were happening too quickly and none seemed to hold any hope of resolution. Gavan would recover, the hospital was certain of that now, and once he was home, would there be a place for him with Trist? He was good in the role of caregiver, worrying about other people was something Val knew how to do but what would happen when that duty was removed? Would he have a place for Trist in his life without the weight of responsibility? Kelly would be home soon and she'd most likely be by to see him, she didn't believe in phoning, and he had no idea what to do with her.

All of the circles his mind raced in were just easy excuses to avoid thinking about Violet. They'd spoken nearly every day, and if not daily, no more than two or three would pass without a call. Even if it had only been for a few moments, he'd always known that her laughing warmth was open to him. Their uncle had once mocked their closeness, said they acted like twins, not separate siblings and that hadn't been far from the truth. Violet spoke up for him, he settled her down when anger at their lives and the world around them over took things. They'd balanced each other, finished each other's sentences and even called each other with the same ideas.

And now all of that was gone. It really had felt like half of his own soul was dead, maybe they'd been meant to be twins. There was a massive rift in his life that he was only now being able to map out safely. A rift too big to fill or avoid or ignore and touching the edges too deeply made him ache. That was one thing Trist had been able to do for him, the other man's strength and courage had allowed Val to try to grasp a hold of his own grief.

None of his thoughts were comfortable and they clouded over the simple pleasure of watching the people around him. It made the bus ride to Weaver Park pass both more quickly and far too slowly. The weight of his thoughts nearly dragged him down so deeply that when the bus reached the stop Val needed to get off at, he almost didn't notice.

The doors of the bus nearly shut on him, he'd delayed so long in getting off, but Val found himself outside of Weaver Park at six am, on the nose. He'd never been to Weaver before, not even on some of his longer summer bike rides. There were few trails for joggers or bikers and the older park had little quality equipment for kids to play on. It wasn't overly populated on the best of summer days and would be down right empty in the grey early morning February chill.

Val had heard rumors that the park was a different place at night. Filled with people looking for things. Some came looking to buy or sell whatever drug they needed to stop their hunger, some came to sell sex. Rumors had it that a lot wandered around Weaver Park after dark looking to give sex away. The idea held no appeal to Val, gay or straight, he was always too reserved, too caught in his own skin, to give in to the urge to let some nameless person fuck him. Lately, he'd heard rumors around the hospital that Weaver had attracted the sort that came to parks after dark looking to hurt people but everyone in Weaver was looking for something.

Even in the morning cold, Val was looking too. There could only be one fountain worth mentioning in Weaver park, a grand bronze ugly thing lined in bricks that only ran on the best of summer days. The park had been so poorly laid out that only one trail actually lead to what should have been the centerpiece of the park. Val had heard enough debate from local politicians and town hall meetings about what to do with the eyesore that was Weaver Park that he found the single trail with only a little searching.

He sniffed, the cold air making his nose run a little and pulled his coat tighter around him. It was a good thing Trist was tucked snuggly into bed, the cold would have the slender man shivering like a leaf. The thought of the man, curled around a pillow, put a stab of what Val only could guess was homesickness into his chest. He wanted to get this errand done and get his backside home and maybe curl back up into bed and snuggle with Trist.

He only passed two people. One was a man jogging, wrapped in spandex and with ear muffs on. The second man looked like he'd been out all night, selling drugs or himself, the fellow looked strung out and stressed out. There was a lost look to the man's eyes that pulled at Val, made him

want to hand out the memorized numbers to the local shelters. Maybe it was something of the real concern that Val felt that scared the fellow away, because before he could open his mouth to ask Val for money or a date, he dropped his eyes and hurried past.

The fountain had a man sleeping on a park bench. Wrapped in layers of folded newspaper against the morning chill, the man had most likely barely settled into sleep. If he was smart, and most that survived the cold winters learned to be smart, he'd spent the night awake and moving and would sleep in the mornings. He didn't even stir as Val moved by, showing that there was little police presence in Weaver Park, even with the sun waking up.

Val glanced at his watch, it was seven after six and there was only one other person sitting at a bench around the fountain. With uncertain steps, Val moved closer to that bench. The man sitting there had a paper raised, seemingly lost to the news in air so cold that their breath frosted. Val made out dress slacks and shoes expensive enough to get a body mugged in a place like this.

The man wasn't wearing a t-shirt that read 'whistleblower waiting for Valentine York', so Val moved toward him carefully. The man continued to read his paper, unaware of Val's slow stalking progress toward him. That was a good sign, no one wearing shows like those could risk being so distracted in a place like this unless it was an act. It made Val feel a little better about sitting down on the other side of the bench.

The man didn't even flinch. "Mr. York." The reader said, softly but not whispering and he didn't glance over.

Val now could see behind the paper. The man was white, average looking, ordinary. His hair was cut short and there was something to how he sat or the cut or style of his coat that made Val peg the man as someone in some branch of law enforcement.

Even though the spoken address wasn't a question, Val nodded slightly and answered. "Yes."

"Thank you for meeting me." The man continued to give a good impression of someone reading a paper.

It made Val glance around to see who might be watching to see the truth of the situation. "What's this about?"

"Like I said on the phone, your sister."

"What about her?" He pushed, uncomfortable with games.

"Mr. York, how much did you know about your brother in law?"

"What?"

"Were the two of you close?"

It wasn't the line of conversation Val had been expecting. "Close enough."

"Mr. York, I work for certain governmental agencies. What I need to ask you is of the highest of importance. Do you understand?" The man turned the page on his newspaper.

Val frowned. "I'm not sure I do. What's going on here?"

"Say your brother in law had ties to some," the man paused slightly to weight the word. "selective, closed, groups?"

"Navef was not a terrorist, that is what you're hinting at isn't it?" He felt anger rearing up at the idea alone.

"Those would be your words, Mr. York, not mine, but if he did have ties to these selective, closed, groups, it might be advantageous to national security to not fully investigate the circumstances surrounding their deaths. If, just in sheer speculation, another member of one of these selective, closed, groups were responsible for their deaths, it might be easier for an investigation to be conducted if a lack of interest were expressed." The man turned another page. "This is all in theory, of, course."

Val sat stunned, shocked and suddenly too cold and it wasn't from the air. "In theory." He heard himself repeat in a whisper, too used to answering any conversation even one he felt drowned in.

"In this theoretical situation, having a loved, say, a brother, prying open doors that for now must remain closed, could threaten the entire investigation. It would be in national security for that relative to step back and wait for proper channels to take effect." The man turned and looked cold, steady eyes onto Val's own stunned expression. "Do you understand, Mr. York?"

Val felt himself nodding dumbly. "Yes." There was something in the man's eyes that made him want to run home and lock his doors.

"I'm afraid this hasn't been very helpful in answering your questions, since this is all just theory, but thank you for coming down here to meet with me. You seem like a patriotic sort, I'm sure you'll weigh all that I've said very carefully."

"I will, thank you. I think I understand." Val nodded. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Just trust that we are aware of the truth in your sister's case." The man made the word 'we' sound serious.

Val felt himself shaking. "Thank you." He forced out and stood up. "I should go if I want to catch my bus."

"Thank you again, Mr. York."

Val was nodded like an idiot but he made his way around the fountain at a steady walk, not the dead out run he wanted to use. As he passed the homeless man sleeping on the bench, he thought he heard the man muttering softly under the newspapers. It made Val feel paranoid, suddenly worried the man was another official agent of some shadowy un-named government group. He circled past the man, pretending he didn't hear anything, and used the same care he would with a poisonous snake. His only thoughts as he hurried back down the path to the bus stop was to get home and make sure Trist was safe.

Part Thirty One

Logically, Val was able to step back from his own nerves and understand that he was being irrational. If he was his own client, he'd be able to say, in a steady voice, that he was being unreasonably anxious. He understood, intellectually, that with the loss of so many people he had cared for, that the reminder of the fragility of human life was simply pushing him toward a panic attack. There was no denying that he was starting to care for Trist and the phobic fear of loss had him creating a hundred horrible images in his mind and driving him to fidget on the bus ride home. It was pure separation anxiety, he was being controlling by thinking that his presence would hold anything ill from Trist.

Logic didn't still the unhappy thudding of his heart. He needed to get home, he needed to show

his unstable emotions that everything his logical mind had said was true. He needed to run fingers across Trist's hair and feel the tension he was carrying melt away. The bus traveled far too slowly and if Val hadn't clung with tooth and nail to the last of his logical control he would have gotten off and run the distance home.

The apartment building was still standing and looked just the same in the thin winter sunlight. The doorman sat behind his desk and nodded to Val as he went inside, everything was just as he'd left it, there was no reason for his panic. It gave Val's logical side a touch more ammunition with which to shoot down his irrationality. That didn't stop him from bouncing his weight from foot to foot in unease and he had Trist's apartment key out in his hand before the elevator doors could shut.

It was a good thing that the hallways were empty for their neighbors might have been pushed aside if Val had to circle around them to reach the apartment. He felt his shoulders unknotting at the sight of the door and he raised the key to the lock, and his heart froze and stopped beating. There was no sign of damage to the door, but when Val touched the lock with the key, trying to shove it in to open the door, the door slid an inch inward. He'd locked the door behind him and even if Trist had woken up and unlocked it, the door would have been latched shut.

In his mind he was seventeen again and finding his uncle's study door ajar. Val had been the one to find the man, laying there, dead. The memory chilled him and filled his stomach with lead. It was illogical, Trist wasn't laying inside dead. At worst, the man had fallen into a bad voice of vision and had wandered out of the apartment but most likely he'd just glanced out into the hallway and not pushed the door tightly shut behind him.

Val lowered his keys and pushed the door the rest of the way open. His eyes saw nothing out of place so he stepped carefully inside. "Trist?" He called out. "I'm back." But he didn't drop his keys on the countertop, he clutched them tightly in his hands.

He stopped, across from Trist's office door. It was ajar as well and that never happened. Trist always kept it shut and normally locked too. Val felt his breath freeze over but he crossed to the office. "Trist?"

The doorframe was splintered. Inside was a mess, the notebooks and journals lay scattered across the floor, the neat table was pushed aside, a chair lay on the floor. That was more disturbing to see than the broken in door, Trist was obsessive about keeping order in the apartment and Val had guessed he was doubly so with his office.

"Trist!" His voice was getting panicked now but he stepped into the office and checked the corners, checked under the pillows, checked everywhere and found no sign of the other man.

"Where are you?" He shouted, feeling the fear clawing at him.

The bedroom was next, but the door was open, undamaged but open, and inside was empty too. The blankets lay scattered, the pillows tossed off the bed but that wasn't unusual and Val didn't know if he should take it as a good or bad sign. Still, he gathered them up, checking even under the bed in case Trist had panicked from some voice and picked there to hide. The bedroom was empty, as was Trist's bathroom.

Val nearly ran across the apartment to Gavan's room. Hoping that maybe Trist was taking refuge there but inside was not only empty, it was undisturbed. He searched closets and bathrooms and found nothing. No note, no Trist, nothing and no clue as to where he'd gone.

It was the sound of his rasping, short, breaths that broke into Val's world. He was starting to hyperventilate. He'd be passed out on the floor, too lost to his own panic attack soon, if he didn't get control. It had been years since he'd had a panic attack, not since he'd read in the newspaper about Matt's overdose, before that, not since the day he'd found his uncle dead. It was

something he'd thought he'd outgrown, when he'd been able to hold it together when Violet had died.

"Think, think about it, think." He hissed to himself, in the center of the very empty apartment. "Think."

It took forcing several slow breaths to get his brain to function. When it did, he was snatching up the phone. It rang twice before the doorman answered.

"Yes?"

"Hello, this is Val York from 622. I'm looking after Tristram Maddocks from 854 while his cousin is in the hospital. Could you tell me if Trist has left the building this morning?" He actually managed to sound calm.

"No, sir, not on my watch."

"When did you come on?"

"Five, sir. Is there a problem?"

Five, so before he'd left and he'd left Trist in bed. "Maybe, I'll call you if I need your help but if you see him, don't let him leave."

"Of course, sir, anything else?"

"No, thank you." But his eyes were on the broken office door, uncertain if Trist had done the damage himself.

He hung up and tried to keep his mind working. Trist hadn't left the building, he was still here. Val could search all the floors, maybe Trist was sitting outside someone else's door, waiting to deliver another cryptic message to them the way he tended to do. Maybe Trist had slipped past the doorman in the comings and goings of the people headed out to work?

First thing was first, he had to go get the list of phone numbers Gavan had left him for the weekend. If Trist had wandered away, he'd have to call some of the folks on that list for help. He'd filed the list in his own apartment, so he'd have to go there first before searching the building. His mind whirled in circles, trying to think ahead to what could have happened and how Trist might have gotten past the doormen. While in the elevator he remembered the service entrance to the building, it wasn't a comforting thought but he could have the doorman check the security cameras to see if Trist had gotten away there.

The elevator crawled down the two flights and Val wished he'd just taken the stairs. In fact, it wouldn't be a bad idea to walk the stairwells, they were quiet sheltered places and a good start in searching for Trist. He'd pick up the phone numbers, start looking over the building and if he hadn't found Trist by the time he reached the lobby he'd start making phone calls from there. It was all very logical, with no need to panic, with no need for the cold fear that had curled around his spine.

Until he found his own apartment unlocked and he knew he'd locked it behind him. In fact, he'd double checked the door, knowing it might be a day or more before he came back down. Yet, when he slid his key into the lock, the door opened without him having to unlock it. It was unusual enough added into the mornings conversation in the park and Trist's disappearance that Val hovered outside, uncertain about going in.

In the end, the need to know what might awake him inside outweighed the fear of what he could find. He pushed the door open and found lights turned on. His sofa was pushed to the side and

there was an odd scent to the air. In his hand, he gripped his keys, jagged edges outward and ready to be used as a weapon. On his counter he spotted another set of keys, Kelly's set. The set he'd left up in Trist and Gavan's apartment.

Hope flared. "Trist!" He called out and rushed toward his bedroom. "Are you here? Trist!"

The bedroom door pushed open and Trist stood in it. He had pink rubber gloves on and was holding a scrub brush in one hand. His hair was tightly braided back, a few strands had worked free to tickle forward, but there was a flush to his face. As soon as he stopped in the doorway he smiled lightly.

"Hey, you're back earlier than I thought."

The relief was crushing. Val felt the color drain from his face and his mind froze in place with the sudden consuming sense of rightness.

"You okay? You look like ya saw a ghost." Trist asked, cocking his head to the side a little in the way that meant he was looking with all his senses. "How'd the meeting go?"

Val moved across his small living room and before Trist could react, gathered the man into a tight embrace. "You're safe. Thank God."

That only made Trist more confused, he let Val pull him close, let the taller man bury his face into his shoulder but he kept his damp, gloved hands off to the side. "Val? What's going on?"

"What're you doing down here? You scared me silly!"

"You left the spare set of keys, I'm doing what I always do when nervous, I'm cleaning. Christ, have you ever wiped down the back of your toilet? And the dust under the sofa, the bunnies had teeth." He tried to joke it off but Val only pulled him tighter.

"You're okay?"

"I'll be better if I can breath. What the hell is going on?"

Val forced himself to loosen his grip and step away just far enough to trace his hands over the confused face. He searched the eyes but found only sense and logic in them, not the wild, lost appearance he'd seen when Trist was having a bad day.

"You should have left me a note. What happened to your office?"

"What do you mean, what happened to my office?" Trist felt himself frowning and wondered if Val had hit his head while he was out.

"The door was kicked in and your books were tossed everywhere. When I came back and your apartment door was open and you weren't there I thought that something bad had happened. Then to find your office like that?" He shook his head. "You should have left a note."

"My office was locked, so was the apartment, I know it was."

Val shook his head and pulled Trist tight against him. The feel of the slender body, the hard lines of another man in general and the bony edges of this man in particular, made him feel better. The scent of Trist and bleach flitted up to tickle his nose and make him want to sneeze but he inhaled it deeply.

"It doesn't matter, you're safe, that's all that matters. I was so worried, I, God, Trist, I was so worried." That was it, Val decided that for the near future, Trist wasn't leaving his sight unless he

knew someone trusted was watching over him. It wasn't that Trist couldn't take care of himself, because it was obvious that even at his lowest points he found the will and way to survive, but it was because Val needed to know he was okay so desperately that it was a pain.

Part Thirty Two

Trist stood a little baffled but he let Val cling to him until the arms slowly lost some of their frantic grip. It was then that he stepped back. "You okay?" He finally asked but the fear was gone from Val's eyes.

"Yeah, sorry." The situation sunk in and he shook his head. "You're cleaning my apartment?"

Trist shrugged and pulled the gloves off. "You obviously don't."

"I do to."

He only snorted. "If you call this clean."

"Clean freak." Val shook his head and sat on the back of the sofa, he started rubbing at his eyes.

"Been called worse." He smiled a little. "Now, what's this about my office?"

"The door was kicked in, the books are everywhere. Didn't you do it?"

A cold shiver traced down Trist's spine but he shook his head. "No, I didn't."

It didn't take much to get them both in the elevator back up two stories and down the hall to Trist's apartment. Val had pulled the door shut behind him but he hadn't locked it, maybe not his wisest move but the building was secure. He hadn't been thinking too clearly in his panic to find Trist and some part of his mind had wanted to leave the door open in case Trist had wandered back.

It was clear from the unhappy look that instantly settled on Trist's face that things weren't right. Val kept silent and followed behind the slender man as he crossed to his opened office door. If he'd held any doubts that Trist hadn't been the one to kick in the office door, they vanished. There was no doubt that the sight of the splintered wood upset and shocked Trist.

"This isn't right." He said softly, trailing a hand over the sharp points of the broken doorframe. "Someone broke in here." He walked into the mess of his office. "Why would someone break in here? Why would they?"

The only warning Val had was Trist's sharply indrawn breath. He hissed and stumbled a little. The odd black ringed green eyes scanned the room wildly. His breathing came in hitching gasps and one hand rose up to half block his sight. Only, it didn't work, because whatever Trist was seeing wasn't in front of his eyes. Val wasn't sure how long he should wait, how long he should stay hovering to the background letting Trist experience whatever it was he was seeing.

The choice was made for him, Trist stumbled backward and tripped over him. He flailed about, smacking out at Val's supporting arms and gasping for breath. Val just held onto him tighter and pulled him from the office, struggling against the twisting, panicked body that didn't seem to know which direction it wanted to escape to.

"Trist, Trist! Focus on me, Trist, focus!" The body slowly stopped struggling, stopped its frantic thrashing. "You okay?"

Trist's sight cleared and he found his lungs burning in gasping sharpness and his arms being held safely to his body by Val's protective grip. He shook his head, unsure he was able to speak. It didn't matter, he was unwilling to move, not until his legs felt more steady and less like jelly.

The moment he thought he could stand without leaning on Val's support he pulled away. "I have to get out of here." He forced out between numb lips and stumbled to his bedroom.

"What?" Val asked but Trist had already staggered into his bedroom. "Trist? What did you see?" He received no answer but when he followed into the bedroom was startled to see the lost uncertainty gone and Trist moving with steady confidence.

From the back of his closet Trist pulled out the only suitcase he owned, a black square box on wheels, it was large enough to pack for a week and he'd never used it. The zipper was tight but he got the thing open and tossed it onto the bed. Before he could think about things and panic more, he was tossing clothing inside, trying to keep track to make sure he didn't end up with two dozen pairs of socks and no pants.

"Trist?" Val stood in the door with care, uncertain of how aware the other man actually was.

Trist stopped from tossing another handful of clothes into the case and glanced up. "They were in my office, Val!"

"Who was? You're not making any sense."

"I, God fucking bless, this is crazy." He paused and felt the way his heart was trying to pound an escape from his chest. Only, when he scanned Val's face, he saw only worry not the look of someone staring at a madman. "The people who shot Gavan, they were here, they were looking for me. I have to get out of here!" He turned back to the driving need to get things packed, diving into his closet to pull sweaters from hangers and stuff them in the case.

Some of Trist's panic sparked inside of Val but he knew if they both lost it they were in trouble. "Are you certain? I mean, how would they know where you live?"

"I'm certain!" He snapped back. "And how the fuck am I supposed to know how they know! They obviously do!"

"But you said you didn't remember who shot Gavan, or what happened?"

"I don't."

"Then you can't know for sure that this had anything to do with it."

"Fuck Val! I do! It was them! I can feel them, smell them, I can't stay here!" He shouted back and disappeared into the bathroom to gather toothbrush and hairbrush.

"We need to call the police then, if this break in was connected to the shooting they'll need to know." He tried to stay calm but wasn't sure if he was able to continue at it.

"Fine, whatever, so long as I'm not here." He threw the brushes and other toiletries into the case before making one last sweep over his room. A few more things were gathered and tossed into the messy pile before he flipped the lid shut and forced it to zip closed. It was only then that it occurred to him that he'd no where to go.

Val saw the suddenly lost expression cross Trist's face and understood it's source. "Don't worry, you can come stay with me until the police get this straightened out. Okay?"

"Thanks." He only hoped that it would be safe to do so. Something at the back of Trist's mind

warned that it wouldn't be.

It was two hours before the police showed up and almost three before they got around to being able or willing to sit down and talk to Val and Trist. Not that it mattered, Trist had moved instantly to hide in Val's bedroom, sitting in a corner with wide, frightened eyes and asked to be left alone to think. That had left Val alone to pace and fret and, ultimately, bake.

He'd just pulled the second batch of cookies from the oven when his doorbell rang but he already knew who it had to be outside. The building security, already aware of the delicate mental state of the residents of the Maddocks apartment, were going above and beyond to help. They'd guided the police to the abandoned apartment and pointed them to Val.

He pulled open the apartment door and wasn't greeted to the sight of two beat cop robbery investigating officers. "Ah, good cop and bad cop." He muttered and held the door open to the same detectives that had questioned him at the hospital. "Come in."

Bad cop paused. "Is that cookies?"

Val shrugged. "Oatmeal raisin, help yourself."

Bad cop moved to the counter to eye the line of cooling cookies. "You're baking?"

"Some people smoke, some eat, I bake, we all deal with stress differently." It didn't seem right his choices being questioned by a man that was happily snarfing several of the end results of the choices. "What can I do for you, officers?"

"We got word of the break in, do you think it's connected?" Good Cop asked as he moved closer to the cookies but obviously holding back from actually eating one.

"I don't know, Trist seems to think so."

"We still need to talk to him about the other night, is he coherent?"

Val glanced to the bedroom door. "That would depend on how you define coherent. He was recovering but this has him a little shaken up."

Bad Cop wiped crumbs from his fingers. "Mr. Maddocks is staying with you?"

"He will be, from now on."

"About, Mr. Maddocks?" Good Cop started. "How lucid is he?"

"You mean, is he nuts?" Val answered harshly.

The man had the good sense to look at least a little embarrassed. "How well will his testimony hold up in court?"

"It won't. He's had more diagnoses than a medical textbook, he's been in and out of institutions and by his own admission his memory of the shooting is spotty at best. But, remember gentleman, that Trist is rather like a savant, his hunches are usually dead on truth." He glanced from one police officer to another. "Still want me to haul him out here for you to interview?"

"Please." Good Cop answered gently.

Trist snorted from the bedroom door way. "No need, I'm here." He pushed past the men to reach

the counter and snagged a couple of cookies before moving to stand behind the kitchen counter to eat them. Very pointedly, he made sure the crumbs were dropped carefully into the sink but Val wondered if Trist had been more interested in keeping the counter physically between him and the cops.

"We need to ask you some questions about the other night, Mr. Maddocks." Bad Cop began slowly, as if speaking to someone of a very slow wit.

"I'm insane, not stupid." Trist snapped back, dropping the last half of his cookie to the countertop. Suddenly, it had lost its taste.

"What do you remember of the night you and your cousin were attacked?" The Good Cop asked gently.

Trist just shrugged. "Not much, we'd been trying to buy jeans but I don't deal well with people." His eyes glanced to the other cop and back again. "I'd stepped outside for some air, there was a guy or a couple of guys maybe, they seemed everywhere. I don't know, Gav shouted something at them, the gun went off but didn't make any noise. I freaked out."

"How many men?"

"I don't fucking know." He hissed out. "Look, Gavan is all I really have in this world so if I remembered I'd fucking tell you. I'm not fucking around here."

Good Cop held up a hand in a soothing way. "Were they white guys, black guys, latino?"

"You know everything I fucking know!" He was getting angry now and knew it was because they were simply grating on his already raw and frayed nerves. "All I think I know is they were nicely dressed. Shiny shoes. But hey, I'm a fucking nut job so that might have been in my head. The drugs the god damn cunt doctors pumped me full of didn't help with my clarity at the time either." He rubbed at his eyes. "For all I know, it was some homeless bum trying to steal the clothes."

Val narrowed his eyes a little at the defeated tone Trist was using. Added with the fact that Trist hadn't instantly told the cops that the same men had been in his apartment made a big picture of Trist being careful. He just wasn't certain why, since it had been Trist yesterday urging Val to leave the investigation into Violets death to the police.

"And this break in, you don't have any enemies? Anyone angry with you?" Good Cop prompted.

"I'm not miss congeniality in case you fucking hadn't noticed. Most people want to drown me a couple of minutes after meeting me. I've pissed off a couple of clients so yeah, I'm sure there are plenty of folks angry enough at me to break in and mess my shit up." He started biting a nail and wished the cops would go away, he'd just started to feel safe in Val's bedroom and needed to hide a little longer to regain his balance.

"Clients?" Bad Cop spoke up around another cookie.

"Clients, fucking echo in here." Trist snapped.

Val caught Trist's eye and shook his head a little. "Trist is psychic." And Val believed, and knew the cops wouldn't.

Bad Cop snorted. "So why don't you save us the trouble and just use your powers and tell us who shot up your cousin."

"Because it doesn't work that way!" Trist shouted back. "I can't see that!"

"So, what can you see? What kind of psychic are you? The sort that crawls out of the woodwork down at the station every time a kid gets snatched?"

"No profit in that, I'm the kind that can see that oh so cute and oh so underage hooker you fucked instead of busting, way back when you were a beat cop." Trist sagged against the counter top.

Bad Cop looked to Good Cop and shook his head in denial but both Val and his partner could see the shocked fear in his eyes.

"Are we done here?" Trist moved away from the kitchen. "You're giving me a headache with your fucking lies." He brushed past the cops and Val and slammed the bedroom door shut behind him.

Which left Val alone in the living space with two confused and upset officers of the law. "Well." He started carefully. "I warned you he was a handful. Trist doesn't go out of his way to endear himself to anyone so if you're looking for someone that's carrying a grudge, I don't know where to tell you to start."

"Actually, Mr. York," Good Cop started carefully, pulling his unhappy stare from his partner. "Have you seen these men?" He dropped a blur photo onto the counter.

Val glanced it over, three men in long dark coats, with short cropped hair and that was pretty much all he could make out. The image was fuzzy and black and white. "No, but this isn't much to go on."

"These three men came into this building from the service entrance. Now, there's a camera at the door but not in the stairwell so we can't say they're the ones."

"They don't look like thieves or someone holding a grudge."

The two cops exchanged a look before Good Cop continued. "Is there anything you want to tell us, Mr. York? Anything unusual you may have noticed about the Maddocks? Anything that might have caught your eye?"

"You mean besides the fact that Trist knows things he should have no right knowing? No, nothing, what are you implying?" There was something going on that had the cops nervous and it wasn't Trist's confessional nature.

"If these are the men that broke into the Maddocks' apartment I think it's a little too far of a stretch to think the shooting and the break in are unrelated. These fellows," he tapped a finger against the pictures. "They're not common thieves. If you're keeping an eye on Mr. Maddocks, keep it a close one."

"I may not have a degree in criminal science but even I could tell that much." The pieces clicked into place inside Val's head. "You think they're cops?"

The pair exchange looks and Bad Cop shrugged but let the Good Cop speak. "If they'd been cops, there would have been a warrant, a report on a weapon fired, something. If we hear anything, I assure you, we'll contact you. Until then, don't let him go wandering, at least until we can figure out what's going on here."

Val nodded and started to follow them to the door. "Is Gavan safe?"

"We're sure he's fine, it doesn't appear that whatever is going on is directed at him. Don't worry, it's most likely someone carrying a grudge. We'll get to the bottom of this." Good Cop comforted but Bad Cop looked like he might be carrying his own grudge now. "Until then, don't do anything stupid and keep an eye on your boyfriend."

Boyfriend. The word tripped Val up because for all his acceptance of the situation it was a different thing entirely to hear someone else accept it. "I will." He managed to get out and happily shut the door behind the two officers. The entire situation was odd, not just having an acknowledged boyfriend, and Val turned toward his bedroom promising he was going to get out of Trist whatever it was the other man had held back from saying, promising he was going to get some answers.

Part Thirty Three

He found Trist sitting in the corner of his bedroom, tucked between the wall and the dresser, wrapped in the old quilt Val used as a bedspread. Val crossed the room to stand above where Trist was obviously hiding. The only reaction he was given was to see Trist pull himself deeper into the corner.

"What's going on?" Val asked, gently, and he knelt down to be closer to Trist's eye level.

"Nothing, nothing is going on." The words tumbled out.

"Trist." Even Val could hear the forced lie.

"I'm sorry, Val."

"What for this time?" He smiled to take the sting from the reply.

"It's not safe for me to stay here but I can't go anywhere else. I'm sorry."

"Of course it's safe for you to stay here."

"I'm not being paranoid!" Trist snapped back. As soon as the words escaped he clapped his hands over his head. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Just, tell me what's going on. Why didn't you tell them it was the same people that shot Gavan?" He figured they were going to be here for a while so he sat down on the floor.

"They're cops, Val."

"Yes, the same people you were telling me to leave Violet's investigation to, the good guys."

"Not them, the ones that shot Gavan." Trist answered sharply.

Val sat and tried to shift out whether or not Trist was being paranoid. "Are you sure?"

"No, if I was fucking sure do you think I'd be sitting here on my ass like a sitting duck? They might not have been cops but they were slick like cops. They were trying to snag me, Val. When Gavan went away for the weekend they were going to take me then but you showed up in the picture and they couldn't. They didn't know who you were. When Gavan dragged me out to get new jeans and I left the store without him, they were going to take the chance. Only, Gav came out early, worried about me. He yelled at them to let me go, came running over and they shot him, Val, they fucking shot him."

"I thought you didn't remember."

"I don't!"

"But..."

"Fuck! Look, they were there, in my office, I saw it from them. I can't remember shit but I saw them. I freaked out when Gavan got shot, pushed them away, started screaming so they let me go. I don't even remember them trying to snatch me. They would have grabbed me from the hospital but you came before they could and then they watched until you left the building. Val, if I hadn't come down here they would have gotten me. You'd have come back and I'd have been gone and no one would know." He was shaking now, frightened and desperate to get Val to take this seriously. "They know where I am now, they'll come for me, find me, take me."

"Trist, no one is going to take you anywhere, I won't let them."

"They're fucking cops Val, they've got guns. They've already tried to kill Gavan, they'll kill you too." There was no need to clutch at Val, his words did that for him.

"You're certain they're cops?"

"No, not certain but they feel like cops. I'm scared Val, I can deal with whatever they do to me but I can't stand them hurting you."

"You speak like it's going to happen for certain."

"I'm not certain, I can't see anything. I..." his eyes scanned wildly, searching for something only he could see. "There's nothing. That scares me more."

"Well, they won't be coming in here again. Security on the service entrance will be tightened and you're not leaving my sight. They won't come after you here, not a second time and so long as we're smart, everything will be okay."

"You believe me, then?"

Trist looked so hopeful, so hungry for someone to have faith in him that Val felt himself smiling. "Yes, now, my ass is falling asleep. Come out to the kitchen and get some tea?"

Trist nodded but it was more to make Val happy than to make him feel better. Tea wasn't going to fix things or find answers or make him safe, but tea would make Val feel better and that was all the reason he needed. He surrendered the quilt unhappily, it was both warm and smelled of Val, and followed out to the living room.

Before Val could get too far away, Trist slid a hand across Val's ass. "Wouldn't want something so nice to fall asleep." The hissed intake of breath at Val's shock.

It wasn't until a mug of tea, steaming hot, was pressed into his hands that Trist was able to think clear enough to remember why he'd been freaking out enough to be cleaning. "How'd your cloak and dagger thingy go?" He sipped at the hot brew and was pleasantly surprised at the gentle green tea taste.

"It was odd." Val had wanted to tell Trist all about it but now found himself pausing. He didn't want to stress the already strained man further. Beyond that, he was unsure how to express the fear he'd felt that had driven him home.

"How odd?"

He shrugged.

"Like, odd like me or odd like a fish with fur?"

"They said Navef was mixed up with some terrorist group and that to investigate their deaths too hard would tip off the group."

"He wasn't a terrorist." Trist almost laughed at the idea.

"I know that."

"But you didn't tell them that you doubted their story?"

Val raised an eyebrow. "I'm not stupid. Navef was a pacifist, he didn't believe in war, let alone terrorism. I can't figure out why they would bother to lie to me. Why bother to answer my questions at all? Even with a lie?"

"Why?" Trist set his mug down. "Sweetheart, it's to get you to stop asking questions. They feed you a line, you bite and shut up because suddenly it's the patriotic thing to do."

"I never thought of that." The idea froze him, chilled him and made Val wish his life would go back to the dull, boring reality of a few weeks ago.

"Of course you didn't, you aren't devious like me."

"Why would they shut me up? What're they hiding that someone like me could even begin to threaten?"

"That's the million dollar question." It was easier to not worry about strangers with guns, break ins and the dull paranoia of being sought after when he could focus on the worried stress Val carried. "Let's find out."

Val just shook his head. "How? The police won't give me the time of day. A private investigator isn't going to get anywhere. Besides, right now, we should worry about keeping you safe and secure, that's the most important thing."

He rolled his eyes. "You really are dense. It's two birds with the same stone Val. I can either sit here and obsess or I can do something. I'll figure out what happened, it's what I do. Let's do it, let's figure out why this is so important." He could feel her, the little girl with wide, dark eyes, that kept begging him to get her Uncle Val to listen. There was something in the solemn steadiness of her patients that upset him.

Val wanted to accept, the need to figure out just what had happened to his sister had grown to one of the most important things in his life. The trouble was, something, someone, else had grown more important.

"No." He shook his head.

"Val!"

"No, Trist, it's too big of a risk. We're supposed to be trying to keep you stable until Gavan is better, not provoke things. I won't risk it." He couldn't meet those odd eyes. "I won't risk you."

The words were so shyly tender that Trist felt the smile tugging at his face. Anyone else would have happily and fully exploited his odd skills, only Gavan had ever cared more for him than what he could do.

"That's sweet, love, but it's not going to matter. I could sit in your bedroom and not come out for the next couple of weeks and I'll still fall apart. It's just how I'm made, some days are good, some bad and what I do has little sway over which day will turn out good." Val was studying the tea in the mug he was holding and Trist couldn't see into his eyes but he could feel the conflict that

rolled off the other man in waves. "Let me do this for you. Please."

He struggled with himself, torn between the conflicting desire to accept and maybe learn what he couldn't otherwise or refuse and protect what he had. "If I refuse, you'll try on your own anyway, won't you?"

Trist shrugged. "Damn straight."

"I don't like this."

"I know."

Val sighed and gave in. "Okay, what do we have to do?"

"Can you take me to where they were killed?"

"No, they went off a bridge into the water." Just saying that made his stomach knot up.

"Okay, what about their house? I mean we both know the kids were killed in the house." He glanced up in time to see the look of pain cross Val's face. "Sorry."

He waved it off. "Maybe, but it's been sold. The family that's in there now won't want to let us snoop about." Besides that, Val wasn't sure he wanted Trist trying to do this out in public. He wasn't sure he could settle the man down in a controlled location, let alone someone else's home.

"How about their autopsy reports?" He tried not to sound like a ghoul but he had to find a way to bring himself closer to the time of their death.

"Trist,"

"I might not get anything, will you let me try?" He tried to sound calm but inside he was wound up and itchy. That was a sure sign that he was on the right track, now if he could only get Val to follow through before that pressing sense got too strong.

"I don't like this." He protested but he pulled the file from the drawer he stashed it in. He held the file back, teetering on refusal, before sliding it across toward Trist.

Very carefully, Trist set his mug of tea down and pushed it out of reach. The file lay in front of him, sealed up and innocent looking but he could feel the weight it carried. It wasn't a question of if he could pick something from the file, the question was whether it would be the process of the autopsy or the events that led to the need for one. He sat for a moment, slowing his thoughts and breath down, deepening both as he focused on what he was looking for. For how much he struggled every day to stay shut down, to let go and open up was absurdly easy.

Trist took another long, slow, breath before letting his fingertips brush the folder. Val wasn't sure what he was expecting, maybe the instant reaction that he'd witnessed to his mother's engagement ring, but the stillness surprised him. Long moments passed with Trist sitting rigidly still, breathing steadily, eyes lightly shut and with none of the drama that had accompanied earlier visions Val had been present for.

Until everything changed. Like someone wandering, seeking, Trist remained steady until he found what he'd been looking for. His eyes went from gently shut to squinted shut, drawing his eyebrows together in twisted up pain. The steady breath that had been moving so easily grew short and rough. Trist whimpered a little, from the back of his throat and his face grew pale.

There was no warning beyond that, Trist just started screaming. Val had heard people screaming

before, screaming in rage or pain or sheer anger but there was something horrible to the sounds Trist was making. It was the sharp pain the screams drove into his heart as much as the worry that a neighbor would call the police, that moved him around the counter to clamp a hand over Trist's mouth. The slender man flinched from the touch, pulled away, bucked like a wild thing but Val got a hold of him and didn't let go.

The back of Trist's head slammed into Val's face and he saw stars but he didn't let go. He kept his hand over Trist's mouth, muffling the keening wails that the man was making and kept his arms wrapped around the twitching body. Trist's body grew clammy, damp with a chilled sweat that made his skin slick and difficult to hold on to. This time, breaking Trist's contact with the item that had triggered his vision didn't work to sever him from it and Val held on and prayed for it to end.

When it did end, Val almost hated the sudden silence as much as the pain filled screams. Trist went limp, like a man unconscious but the soft keening moans that escaped with every handful of ragged breaths betrayed his wakefulness. Val held on, and slowly uncovered the mouth he'd muffled. With his hand now freed, he soothed it over the sweat damp head and cradled the weakened body close to his own.

"You okay?" He knew it was a lame question to ask because it was pretty obvious that Trist was not okay.

Trist managed to shake his head weakly. "I'm going to... I..." he struggled weakly to move away from Val before he puked.

Val understood and he hurried the pair of them into the bathroom. He barely had the toilet seat up before Trist collapsed, his stomach turning inside out. He knelt there, body shaking harder from the stress, retching, while Val stroked a shoulder and held his fraying braid back out of the way.

It took a long time for his brain to learn that his stomach was empty and stop trying to turn it inside out. When the heaving ended, Trist collapsed more than crawled away from the toilet, tears in his eyes, trembling. He lay there, on the cool tile floor, slowly recovering enough to sob. Behind him he heard Val put the toilet seat down, flush it and move to the sink to run water on a wash cloth but when the cool cloth wiped his face, Trist was too exhausted to even open his eyes.

Tears slid down his face and he choked on sobs that didn't quite make it from his throat. "God, Val, she loved you so much." He forced out with a voice that sounded strained, a twisted version of the screams that had ripped him apart before. "She died to protect you."

The soothing hand Val had been rubbing over Trist's back stalled. "What do you mean?"

Trist just wrapped his arms tightly about his chest and folded over his knees. "They were dead, they were all dead. She knew it didn't matter, they'd kill her too but she didn't want them to kill you. Oh, fucking mercy they broke her hands and she still refused to talk." He could hear his voice breaking but it sounded distant. "Why?" He keened. "Why would she be so stubborn?"

"That was Violet." Val sighed softly and the obvious torment Trist was in drew him back to soothing comfort. He brushed the loose hair back from Trist's down cast face. "If she dug her heels in, nothing could move her. What did you see?" He wasn't sure he wanted to know, not really.

Trist shook his head. "She came home, there were men there. I can't see them. Navef was dead, a bag over his head. The kids were laid out in the bathroom like dead fish, drowned. They wanted something. They thought Navef had it, the hurt the kids trying to get him to cooperate but he didn't have God damned clue. They knew it was her, fuck, Val, it's too much. If it had been for

her kids, she would have done anything but she couldn't fucking let them hurt you too! Oh God, Val, it's too fucking much!" He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes but he could have gouged them out and he'd still be able to see the lifeless, soaked bodies of the children, the agony of a hammer smashing into slender, elegant hands.

Val pulled Trist up from where he was curling up and tucked him against his body. "Shhh, it's okay, it's okay now. What's this about me? Why would she be protecting me?"

It took a moment for the change in position to register but once it did Trist reached out and clung to Val's chest. "Shit, I don't know. Something about the mice, the mice know everything. That doesn't make any fucking sense." He giggled uneasily. "I've lost my mind haven't I? I keep seeing mice running across a field that's being plowed up."

Val's blood froze. "You aren't crazy. I, oh, she wouldn't?"

The startled tone shook Trist a little. "What? Did that make any sense to you?"

"Maybe, come with me? I want to check something."

Trist sniffled and wiped at his face but he helped as much as he could when Val hauled him to his feet. "Where're going?" Everything instantly started to tremble and he wanted to collapse back down onto the cool tile.

Val just shook his head and got a steadying arm around the weakened body. He moved them easily back out into the main room where he nearly dropped Trist onto the sofa before he hurried to the bookcases. The order was too new for him to instantly find the book he was looking for but he did find it.

"Val?"

"The Complete Works and Songs of Robert Burns." He read the title as if it explained everything.

"Big fucking deal."

"Trist, I loaned her this book. She got it back to me a couple of days before they were killed! This was one of our uncle's books."

"So?"

"To a Mouse? The best laid plans of mice and men? It's a Burns poem. He wrote it after he ploughed up a mouse's nest." Val opened the book and started flipping across the pages.

Trist just shook his head. "Oh."

There was nothing tucked inside the book. Val flipped to the poem and again, there was nothing there. No notes, no underlined letters, no code or instruction and Val frowned over it. "I don't understand."

Trist heaved a deep and exhausted sigh but pushed himself to his feet anyway. He snatched the book from Val's hands and walked with a swaying gait to the kitchen. The moment he touched the book's cover he knew what they were looking for but he was too tired to explain.

"What?"

He shook his head, dropped the book on the counter and pulled a knife from the drawer. The book was old, it had been passed from hand to hand. Occasionally it had been loved by an owner but too often it was misunderstood. Trist liked the book but he had a feeling that the

poems inside were too deep, too much, for his rather straight forward mind to grasp.

Only, it wasn't the meaning of poems he was seeking. He flipped to the back cover and the lovely swirled oil and ink print page glued to the back cover. His first instinct was to just cut the paper away but some part of Trist was alert enough to know that such blatant destruction of a book would piss Val off. Instead, he ran the sharp edge of the blade under the paper and peeled it up.

"What're you doing!" Val snapped as the glue crackled and gave way.

"It's here." Trist muttered out and slid the concealing layer of cardboard out.

"What's here? Be careful with that!"

It took shaking the book a couple of times but after a few quick jerks a small, three inch, cd-rom fell out and clattered on the counter top. "That."

Val's mouth fell open. "Oh, my God."

"That's what they were killed for."

Part Thirty Four

The disk rested on the counter between the two men and both stared at it as if it were about to spring to life and, possibly, be hazardous. Val managed to shut his mouth, no longer willing to be shocked or amazed at the odd turns his life was taking but equally unwilling to follow any further down the rabbit hole. He glanced up, hoping to see the same level of exhausted amazement on Trist's face and was disappointed to find only pain and grief.

"Well, play it." He nodded to the disk. "You can play a little disk like that can't you?" Trist knew next to nothing about computers, trying to learn them gave him headaches.

It took a moment for the words to sink in before Val nodded and went to fetch his laptop. "Yeah, it'll play."

While Val set the laptop up and got it on and humming, Trist settled onto one of the chairs. His head hurt, he was tired, he felt like he'd been kicked around. All he wanted was to curl up somewhere and never come out again, with Val. He couldn't see what was on the disk, didn't have a clue, and part of him didn't want to know. Trist struggled with a compulsion to just snap the thing into two and keep the deadly contents secret.

Apparently, it was a common thought because when he glanced up, Val sat holding the disk by it's edges but not quite able to drop it into the extended, waiting spot in the cd drive door. Trist shrugged. "We don't have to see what's on it."

Val glanced from the disk he'd been holding to Trist at the surprisingly tender tone. "It's not that simple, is it?"

Trist just shrugged. "It can be, but I don't think you're so simple."

Val drew a slow shaky breath and dropped the disk into the drawer before closing it. "I need to know."

"I know." He watched as Val got the laptop to behave and pulled up a list of files.

"Most of these look like text files." He muttered to himself. "But this one, here, it's a video file." The cursor traced over the file as he debated launching the file. "The file name, it's 214."

"So?"

"That's my birthday, she used to mark things she wanted me to find with 214."

"Oh."

There was only a moment's more debate before Val launched the file. The computer hummed to itself and slowly loaded the file. The file buffered and a picture of Violet popped on the screen, waiting to be played.

"Oh, God." The sight of her stabbed him. Val clicked the play button but he wasn't sure he wanted to.

"Hey, baby brother." She smiled but there was a touch of worry in her dark eyes. "Since you're watching this, I'm in trouble again. Sorry to drag you into this to bail me out, literally, if you're watching this. Hopefully, I'm sunbathing on some warm beach until this mess is straightened out but in case I've been arrested, well, thanks. Just, see to the files okay? That'll see to me." Her smile faded. "I'm sorry, I just don't want to get Navef and the kids mixed into this. Love you, baby brother."

The file finished and reset at the start, waiting obediently to be played again, but Val didn't see it. He was too busy trying to swallow the lump in his throat and keep the tears in his eyes from falling. When a hand covered his own, he about jumped out of his skin.

"You okay?" Trist asked carefully, feeling the grief heavy in the room.

Val shook his head. "I just, I'd almost forgotten what her voice sounded like."

There were no words to answer that. Trist sat in silence for as long as he could, maybe all of twenty seconds, before nudging Val's shoulder. "What did she put on the disk?"

That snapped Val from his thoughts. There were dozens of files on the disk and no guide or hint of where to start. He began clicking on some at random, scanning text, before moving on to the next.

"Well?"

"I don't know, there's a lot of files here about Senator Hammelman's suicide." It had been a big news story a couple of months before Violet's death. The Senator was powerful, rich, at the prime of his life, but he'd blown his own head off one night. He'd left not a word behind to explain why, only vague hints from family that he'd been upset before his death. Something had disturbed the stable man, something he'd taken to the grave with him.

"Was she investigating it?"

"Violet didn't investigate, she gathered information and put it into logical sense. She took complex reports and connected the dots." He answered distractedly.

"What the fuck ever, was she working on why the guy off'd himself?"

Val nodded. "Looks like it. See here? It's a list of names, she has some marked as compromised, Hammelman's is on it. This one? He's a state senator, he switched parties a couple of months ago and that swung the balance of power. There's senators, judges, governors, this is quite a list."

"Compromised? What's that mean?"

"I don't know." He was frowning, trying to make sense of the complex information and partially formed reports. "What's this here?" The file names changed. Val clicked on the top name and it opened to a letter head.

"What is it?" Trist leaned over, antsy now. "Power of God Fundamentalist Faith Church? I've heard of those wahoos, more crazy than I am."

"These are internal documents."

"Did you know their church in Texas is the largest in the world? Maybe they aren't crazy, can you imagine the dough they fucking fleece their members of? I'm in the wrong line of work. The fuckers want to make homosexuality illegal, sheep fuckers." Trist was biting his nails again and knew it was from the growing sense of Val's unease more than his own. "Invited me to one of their 'Power of God' conferences last year, pushy bastards called me for weeks."

"Oh, God."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Fuckers 'heal' people of being gay so they love pussy, like I'm going to sit in a room with those morons and keep a straight face."

"Trist, do you know a Samantha Adrian?"

"She's strictly amateur."

"How about Howard Croteau?"

"Never met him." Trist shrugged. "Heard he's decent though. Word is, he bugged out and disappeared about a year ago."

Val turned the computer so the screen could easily be seen by Trist. "All of these names? Are they all psychics?"

He scanned the list, startled to find his own name among the half dozen. "Yeah. They are." The names on the list had one thing in common, once petty fussing was set aside, they all were good. "What is this?" It put a nervous unhappy feeling in the back of his mind.

"I'm not sure, look, it's split into two lists, the one you're on is marked primary, Eshe's on a secondary list." Val scrolled down.

Trist felt lightheaded. "So is my grandmother. I don't understand any of this."

"Well, let's see about getting contact information for some of the other names here, maybe they know more than we do." It was easy to hook the laptop to the internet and search for the first names on the list.

That left Trist to sit and bite his nails. The need to run was growing. It was starting to be an itch between his shoulder blades. He'd be far happier on a plane to some place far away, if he was scared silly of airports and planes and traveling. At least he wasn't alone, that was something he hated more than traveling, even if the growing worry on Val's face wasn't very comforting.

The laptop snapped shut and Val started pulling wires free and stuffing the entire thing into it's case. "Come on." He tossed the case on the counter top and pulled at Trist's arm.

"Val, I'm tired." He whined, heard he was whining and didn't care.

"Trist!" Val snapped and pulled the man physically into the bedroom. "Don't fight me with this, just trust me and do as I say!"

The sharp tone as much as the tense uneasy startled Trist. "Yes, daddy."

That earned Trist a harsh look but Val moved into his closet. He didn't travel, not really, and had procrastinated on buying luggage for the honeymoon. Besides, they would need something lighter, something easier to carry.

Two black backpacks landed on the bed, one leather, one nylon and Trist stared at them. "What's going on?"

"Pack, take only what you need for a couple of days." Val was moving about his bedroom, gathering things and stuffing them into one of the packs.

"What?"

"Pack!"

"Val, you're scaring me." He watched the quick movements and wondered if some of his craziness was contagious.

"Pack." Val stopped and drew a long slow breath. "Please, we need to get out of here, they know where you are."

"I told you that earlier."

"That list of names? You're the only one on it that isn't listed as dead or missing, now, please, pack!"

His blood went cold but he started moving. It was easier for him, all he had to do was transfer things from one bag to another and cut down on some of the changes of clothes. It would have been a snap to do if his hands weren't shaking.

Val pulled the zipper shut on his pack and slung it over a shoulder. "Ready?" It was a silly question, Trist sat on the edge of the bed, clutching his pack. The dark head nodded anyway and Val snagged an arm as he hurried past.

"Where're we going?" Trist managed to ask, not knowing and too exhausted to try to learn on his own.

"I don't know yet, but away from here." He pushed coat, scarf and hat at Trist and shrugged into his own. "Got what you need?"

Trist nodded and watched as the laptop case was slung over Val's shoulder. "Wait!" The sudden urgency had distracted him but a thought floated up. "Val, Eshe's name was on one of those lists."

Val froze, uncertain and with no idea of just what to do. "Call her." He wanted to stand in the doorway and watch the hallway like some overly dramatic crime movie but Val held his ground by the door while Trist dialed the numbers.

"She's not answering."

"Is that normal?"

Trist shook his head. "She always answers when I call, always." He turned worried eyes to Val but he didn't want to ask. It wasn't easy to explain how much the other woman meant to him.

Trist didn't need to say it, his eyes spoke loudly enough. "Then we'd better go over and make sure she's okay."

Part Thirty Five

Twice on the cab ride over Trist asked through clenched teeth for the driver to hurry and Val thought if he asked the man a third time he'd snap and yell at his lover. The only way he got Trist to sit down and stay down was to give him a hard look and take his glove covered hand in his own. From then on, Trist simple fidgeted and scooted around his seat until the cab pulled up in front of the bookstore.

The kindness and concern Trist had shown the driver the last time they'd made this trip was forgotten. This time, the cash was nearly tossed at the man and Val was almost shoved from the back of the cab. The air outside the warmth of the car was crisply cold and smelled like distant snow. Val knew that Trist was distracted and worried when the slender man didn't complain about the cold once.

In fact, Trist didn't even stop to shiver, or wait, before he hurried up to the front of the store. A dim light was glowing from inside and the door, when he tried the knob, turned easily but the door struggled to open. A cold fear, colder than the air, settled along Val's nerves. He'd had to push the body of his dead uncle back to get the door open and he'd spare Trist having to do the same if he could.

"Trist, wait, I..."

Trist wasn't inclined to wait, he pushed hard and the sound of books toppling aside came as a whisper hush. Val sighed out the breath he hadn't know he was holding and followed as Trist slide in past the barely large enough space he'd wrestled from the door. Only, once inside he almost stepped on Trist as the man had stopped just feet inside the doorway.

He frowned at the mess. The store was in disarray, books were tossed everywhere, papers scattered about and among the mess were a few orderly stacks. He bent down and picked up the book that lay directly in front of the door and handed it to Val.

"Eshe? Eshe?" He called out as he began gingerly picking his way across the scattered mess.

Val glanced down to the old copy of Alice in Wonderland before he carefully set it on the counter to the side. He itched to straighten up the books, it felt wrong for such an obviously beloved collection to have been so disrespected.

"Who's there!" A woman's voice called from the back of the shop. "I'm armed!"

"Sanaa, it's Trist." He called out, knowing the woman in hiding that he'd never met.

"Trist Maddocks?" There was less force in the tone now.

"The only one. It's okay, it's just me and a friend. What're you doing here? Shouldn't you be in New Orleans?"

From behind a back shelf stepped a woman as dark as night and as startlingly beautiful as Eshe must have once been. Her cheekbones were high, her hips wide and her body strong and agile. Even in the jeans and sweater she wore, Val could see her in tribal prints, laughing. There was a

strength to her sharp eyes and she watched them with caution.

"What's my mother?"

Trist shook his head. "I don't know, what're you doing here?"

"I moved back home, it was time." She said as if it explained everything.

"No, it can't be, Eshe's health is fine, she's years more."

Sanaa shook her head. "If you are as good as she says you are, you know already that mother won't live to be an old woman. She's decades more, maybe, but you know how we pass down the knowledge." Her eyes, dark and rich, slid to where Val stood and narrowed.

"That isn't your cousin."

"No, he's not."

Those eyes narrowed more. "I can't see him but the books like him. Odd, he's like you?"

"No, Val doesn't have sight but he's not blind either it seems. He's my friend and lover, he can be trusted. Where's Eshe?"

Sanaa stared for a few more heartbeats before shaking her head. "It's frustrating to only half a hint of something. I don't know where mother is, I got into town yesterday and called her but she didn't answer. I figured she was busy but when she didn't answer today I came over and found the place like this."

"Are her cards here?" He glanced around the chaos but didn't see them.

"Not that I've found. What do you see?"

Trist shook his head. "Your grandfather isn't speaking, he's not making any sense, I..." he shut his eyes and pulled a glove off to trail fingertips over the counter that Eshe always sat behind. "This is, scrambled, I..."

Sanaa and Val stood out of the way and let Trist walk from the front to behind the counter, his fingers trailing as he went. He shook his head and kept moving. "She was listening to the cards, they told her to run."

"That doesn't make any sense." Sanaa whispered.

"She took nothing, her cards, some cash, papers, left everything else." Trist pulled his fingers from the table and opened his eyes but they weren't focusing on the pair across from him. The scanned the room and he stopped breathing as he watched the violent force of the vision he was shown.

Val pried his gaze from Trist to Sanaa and saw the same worried, uncertain fear in her eyes. Moments were slipping away and Trist still wasn't breathing, Val didn't want to interfere but a line had to be drawn. He pushed past the uncertain woman and around the corner. His fingers dug into Trist's shoulders and he pulled the man backwards, breaking his contact with the counter top.

"Trist! Come on, breath!" He clasped his hands on either side of the slender man's face and willed the unfocused eyes to see him. "Trist!"

The black ringed eyes dilated to solid black for a moment and then sharply snapped into focus on

Val. Trist drew a gasping lungful of air, coughed on it, sucked in another and managed to hold that one in. His knees collapsed and he let himself drop like a rock to the cluttered floor below.

Only, he didn't hit the floor, Val wrapped his arms around the gasping, limp body and pulled him close. "Shhh, that's it, breath." He soothed a hand over the tightly woven braid and willed Trist's breathing to settle down.

"Nuru threw the books at them, to slow them down, so she could get out." He gasped out. He'd no idea that the spirit had such strength, but the desire to protect his daughter and give her the time to get away had been so strong. "He's scrambled because he's so weakened now."

"But, mother, she's alright?" Sanaa had moved closer but didn't quite come around the counter.

Trist nodded. "She's fine, hiding somewhere, I don't know where. She's safe." Now with the nervous worry gone, Trist felt doubly exhausted. He managed to get a few steps away from Val before he wobbled and would have fallen again if not for Val's steadying grip.

"Easy."

"Sorry, just, so tired."

There didn't seem to be a good place anywhere around for Trist to rest on but Val remembered an older sofa toward the back of the shop. "It's okay, been a long day, huh?" He tried to grin but it felt more like a grimace on his face. He half carried Trist back to that sofa, found it only had a few books on it and was otherwise undisturbed. "Here, rest." He lowered the limp body down to the springy surface.

"Val, we shouldn't stay, they don't know about Sanaa, we shouldn't risk staying."

"I know, but you rest a bit. Don't worry, we won't stay long but even a ten minute nap will help. Okay?"

Trist was too tired to debate the issue. "Don't let me sleep." The word sleep made him yawn.

"I won't, rest." He soothed a hand across Trist's head and helped ease him back into the comfort of the sofa.

Trist sighed and felt his eyelids drooping. The sofa smelled like Eshe, it smelled safe. He was too tired to fight when the sofa was sucking him down to rest. There was no way to explain how exhausted he felt, how much it took out of him to have a strong vision once, let alone twice in a day. He wanted to go home, he wanted his safe apartment and the tiny amount of stability he'd managed to wrestle from life. Trist wanted Gavan to come in and tease him about how much of a pain in the ass he was. Instead, he found a light, restless sleep.

Val watched from across the store and was pretty sure Trist was asleep before he could rejoin Sanaa. While he helped her gather up the tossed books into stacks, he tried to explain all that had been happening but the more he talked, the more crazy it sounded. It did feel different when he tried to put it in words to someone else.

"So, you're going to do what?" Sanaa asked, not really sure what to make of things but trusting anyone the books liked so much.

Val shrugged. "I haven't thought that far ahead. I just knew I had to get him out of that building. It's too far of a stretch to call it random, don't you think? And now with your mother running out without so much as a note left behind?"

"It's odd. So you're doing this for him? A guy you've only known, what a couple of weeks?"

Geesh, do you have a brother? I need to find a man like you.” She smiled to take the sting from the words, worried at the stressed exhaustion she saw in Val.

Was he doing it just for Trist? Val wasn’t entirely sure of his motivations any longer. “Trist is somehow tied to what happened to my sister.” It was easier to put it in such simple terms, Trist was a way to understand what had happened, that made more sense than some grand conspiracy.

“So, what’ll you do from here?”

“I have no idea.” But even as he said it, he knew it was a lie. “No, that’s not true.” He glanced to where Trist was soundly asleep on the sofa. “I’m going to have to get him to his grandmother’s house. Her name was on the same list as Eshe’s, maybe she’ll know something and if not we can give her the heads up. It won’t do any harm, they already know about her.”

“Good luck with that, Betty Maddocks is a difficult woman.”

“You’ve met her?”

“Once, in passing, that was enough.” She took the stack of books from Val’s hands and added them to the growing pile along the edge of the bookcase.

“Sanaa, I need to ask another favor.”

“Of course, since I’m sure I don’t have to ask you to do what you can to help my mother.”

“No, you don’t. Gavan is at Bently, if Trist and I are out of the city as it looks like we’re going to be, will you check on him? They’re going to move him to Mercy as soon as they can and his parents are coming by too but, well, he’ll be worried when he wakes up and Trist isn’t there.” He doubted Gavan or Sanaa were in any danger but the two of them keeping an eye on each other couldn’t hurt.

“Of course, I’d be glad to. I assume I shouldn’t tell him too much.”

“Please, I’m not sure it’s a good idea to talk about this.” He glanced around and wished he could stay here but they’d found Eshe, it would be easy to track Trist to this store. “One last thing, I need to use your phone.”

“Honey, you’re family, you don’t need to ask.” She waved to the phone, recently reassembled from where it had been knocked off the hook. “Can I toss together something for you two to eat before you go? I’m not much of a cook but even I can make sandwiches.”

“No, thanks, it’s okay.” He glanced to Trist and dug out the business card from his wallet to dial the number written on the back of one. “We need to get moving.”

He had almost been forced to resort to water tossed into Trist’s face to get the man to wake up when their cab arrived but with a little shaking and a lot of shouting, Val got Trist onto his feet. With Sanaa’s help, he bundled Trist back into coat, hat, scarf and gloves the way a parent had to for a small child, all the while Trist was stumbling and yawning.

A gloved hand raised up to rub at an eye and nearly poked it out. Trist startled a little, yawned and shook his head. “Told ya’ not to let me fuckin’ fall asleep. Too damned tired, too groggy.” He yawned so deeply he nearly staggered to into Val.

“You needed some sleep, come on, the cab’s waiting.” He directed the shorter man by pointing

his shoulders toward the door and giving him a gentle push. "Thanks Sanaa, and be careful."

"I will, and thank you, both of you. I'll let the community know to be on their guard. If someone is hunting us down, well, we'll be looking for it now."

Val nodded, tried to tell his logical mind that it all made sense and got Trist outside into the cab. The afternoon was almost gone and night was quickly arriving, the air was cooling down fast. He wanted to be done with everything and safely away somewhere before dinner.

Trist went where he was directed and did as he was told. In the cab he was still yawning and would have happily slouched against Val but the man gently pushed him away. That made him frown but he yawned and simply propped his head, which now felt like a bowling ball it was so groggy, against the car's window.

They were almost down town before he yawned and squinted out into the growing dark. "Where're going?"

"To borrow a car." Val answered crisply, starting to know the neighborhood, knowing they were close. The small store fronts were closed or closing for the night and the bars and dance clubs were just starting to open. It was early yet, but crowds were already gathering around the trendy down town neighborhood.

The diner was old, built from a shiny metal trailer in the 1950's and settled on the corner lot when the railroad tracks had been active and the space undesirable. Around it, as the years had passed, had grown up apartment buildings, stores and clubs but the diner remained, mostly, untouched. Now, a building had been placed around it, the actual kitchen was in the new addition and the retro diner was used just for seating but the menu had changed little over the decades. Only, now, instead of serving workmen the waitresses in their vintage uniforms served club goers, hung over college students and the trendy crowd of people in higher income brackets that liked to keep their artsy roots well watered.

Dr. Steve Watchson sat waiting at a table near the door. A slice of pie was on the plate in front of him but looked more picked apart and mashed than eaten and the waitress was refilling his coffee cup. Val had to admit, if he was being honest, that outside of the hospital, out of the blue scrubs the doctor normally wore, Steve really was quite handsome. It made him feel a little guilty that he'd play off the attraction he'd picked up on from Steve to get this favor.

He led them into the diner, ignoring Trist's complaint at the brighter lights and took them right to Steve's table. "Hey." He said uncertainly.

Steve bounced to his feet. "Val."

Trist frowned and didn't at all like how the square jawed, classically handsome man was eyeing his Val. He glanced to his lover and liked the slight blush Val wore even less.

"Sorry to have bothered you."

"Not, it's okay. Will you sit? Have some coffee?"

Val shook his head. "Can't, did you bring the car?"

Steve nodded. "Yes, but come on, sit down and tell me what's going on. I'd like to help. We've all been a little worried about you, Val." His eyes slid to where Trist was frowning.

"We can't we have to get moving..."

"Check in times, you know, they're a bitch." Trist broke in, forcing a smile that had a touch of

lewdness in it.

Both men turned to look at him. "I'm sorry?" Steve asked in his clinical, soft way that he used at work when people tried to explain black eyes by falling down the steps.

Val to turned to Trist and raised an eyebrow but he held his protests.

"Val figured, since I'd been through so much, time away from the city would do us both some good. He found this adorable bed and breakfast a little bit outside the city, they say it is absolutely picture perfect. You know, check in times and such, if we're going to enjoy the rest of the week we have to get out there tonight." The words poured out and Trist wasn't entirely sure why he was lying to the man.

"Oh." Steve glanced from Trist to Val and Val just gave a weak smile and kept his own confusion hidden. Confusion slowly dissolved to understanding and Steve finally got the nature of their relationship. "Oh! Well, then..." He pulled out his wallet and dropped a couple of bills on the table. "Let me walk you over where I parked it. It's older and a little touchy but runs well."

It was more difficult for their eyes to adjust from the light to the darkness than from the dark to the light and Val found himself following Steve half blindly down the street and to a side alley. Trist followed close to his elbow, hovering in an almost childlike way.

"I had to park down here, there wasn't anything left on the street." Steve apologized and hurried them along, tossing glances back over his shoulder at the pair that moved close behind him. "Right down here, in the alley." He nodded as he turned right into the mouth of a small side street.

The small car was parked about halfway down, Val could just make out the curve of the bumper. "I really appreciate this, Steve. It's good of you to loan us the car."

"Hey, you know, I'd do a lot to help you out, Val."

"Val?" Trist stopped, they were half way to the car.

"What's wrong?" But before he could ask he heard the crunch of feet on pavement and his eyes caught movement. In the dim light he made out several tall, strong men and one older man.

It took Val's mind a little longer to process that he knew all three. The two larger men were orderlies from Mercy, they worked the night shift but he knew they were capable of handling any situation. The older man was Dr. Sketz, one of the attending psychologists that supervised Val and a man that he'd respected for years.

"Val?" Trist whispered, feeling suddenly frightened, knowing what was about to happen but not knowing what Val would do.

"What's going on here?" Val looked to Steve for answers but the other man wasn't willing to meet his eye. It didn't miss Val's notice that Steve and one of the orderlies were now blocking the way back to the street.

"Val, I have a court order admitting Tristram Maddocks for 72 hours observation." Dr. Sketz came closer. "We have to take him with us."

"What do you mean? No one's evaluated him, he's no threat to himself or others? What's going on here?" It didn't make sense, but when he glanced to Trist he saw the cold fear and unhappy acceptance in the odd eyes.

"They evaluated him at Bently."

"Not possible, he was unconscious while there."

"Val, please, let them do their jobs." Steve pleaded. "It's for his own good, and yours too. You're in danger, Val."

"Nonsense." Val whispered but he felt lightheaded.

The orderlies were closer now, almost within reach of where Trist stood frozen, half hidden behind Val.

"The police believe he is the cause of his cousin's shooting." Dr. Sketz began slowly. "Un-medicated, it's only a matter of time until he places your life in jeopardy as well, let us help him."

"Val?" Trist hissed out, strong hands closing on his arms and trying to move him away.

Val stood, bolted in place, and accepted the paper handed to him from Dr. Sketz. He scanned it but it was all very official, very properly done. "I don't believe this."

Dr. Sketz shook his head. "You've not seen his files. He's a sick man, delusional, very convincing with his personas and claims. Once, he claimed to be a Brazilian housemaid that was killed by her employer. He had his therapist so convinced the man was actually trying to find this woman's name in missing persons reports."

"She wasn't there because she was an illegal, you fucking dumb asses!" Trist shouted and pulled at the hands holding him. The distance being forced between them was growing but he was exhausted and even rested, the men were stronger.

"He claims he's psychic, Val." Dr. Sketz said it gently, as if he were announcing that Trist thought he was Napoleon or Elvis.

Val stared at the paper in his hands. "But, he is."

"Val, listen to yourself. You're my best therapist and maybe I'm partially to blame for this because I've been working you so hard. There isn't any such thing as being psychic. If it can't be proven by science..."

"Than it isn't real." Val finished.

"Fuck off!" Trist shouted and began to kick, anything to pull closer to Val instead of further away. He could feel his lover's logical mind over riding everything, casting doubts.

"But," Val heard himself saying, weakly. "He knew things, things no one could."

"That's what these people do." Steve moved forward, trying to block the sight of the struggling Trist from Val's eyes. "They watch for little, small reactions, read them, and guess from there."

"But..."

"No one is blaming you, son." Dr. Sketz patted Val's arm in a fatherly way. "We should have seen this coming. What with your relationship coming apart, your sister and her families death, it's been a straining couple of months, hasn't it?"

Val found himself nodding, wanting to give in, wanting the last couple of weeks to have been some break from reality.

"Anyone that's been through what you've been through would be easy prey for his kind of

delusions, Val. You don't even know this man, you don't know his history or illness."

"Val!" Trist shouted and threw his weight back against the orderly. "Don't listen to them!"

"I know how difficult it is to accept things, personal things." Steve said, weighting his words with deeper meaning. "I've been there. It's a horrible burden to carry around a truth you can't accept for so long, it makes you desperate for anyone that might understand."

That was it. Val knew, logically, all the things he'd seen or been told could be explained away. He'd been over worked, bordering on depression, avoiding a mountain of grief and recently dumped and into his life had stumbled Trist. It couldn't have been more obvious unless Val had worn an t-shirt that read 'Easy Mark' on it. He had been desperate for someone to see he was crushingly lonely.

"You're right." He heard himself whisper and Trist's screams of rage made him flinch. "I'm sorry, I'm just tired. I should have seen this, I mean, I actually believed, I..."

There was more arm patting. "It's okay, it's okay, son. It's my fault for working you too hard when you've been through so much. You're just the best I have. Let Steve here get you some dinner and home safe? I'll be going with the boys and getting Mr. Maddocks comfortably settled in." Dr. Sketz nodded toward where Trist was close to being bundled into the back of a van behind the parked car.

"Val!" Trist screamed and tried to kick one of the larger men. All they did was get a hold of his legs and carry him faster to the van. "Oh, God, Val!"

The shouts were like small stabbing pains into Val's chest. "I wanted to believe him." The crumbled court order cut into his hand as Steve started to lead him away. "I wanted to believe."

Part Thirty Six

Behind him Trist managed to pull a leg free and kick the orderly. "Fuck you, Val!" He shouted between his incoherent screams. "You're fucking lying to yourself, fuck you! Go back to your shitty little lies!" The orderlies he could handle but the carefully approaching Doctor was a different story. Trist screamed and twisted in their grasp even harder when he was the plastic tipped hypodermic needle.

The shouted accusation stopped Val's feet. He felt torn into two, split between all that he'd ever learned or saw, all that his logical reality had been and the new world of emotion and affection Trist had shown him. He'd isolated himself, the last weeks, into Trist's world and never thought how the litmus test of real life would divide it. They were right, believing Trist was psychic was insane.

"Val? Come away. It'll be okay." Steve said softly and tried to get the taller man moving again. "They'll get him the help he needs."

All of the functioning neurosis he'd ever worked with flashed into his mind, all the delusional cases welled up. He'd worked with people that were as convinced of their own reality as they were the sky was blue but he'd never been sucked in, never doubted or been fooled. Dr. Sketz was right, he was good at his job, he was good at what he did. Val knew people, he may never have known himself but he knew people. He'd always known his client's worlds as fully as they had and still known it was a delusion, that was what made him so good at his job.

Not for a moment did he believe Trist was delusional. Even now, standing in the alley, he didn't believe. It wasn't emotion, it wasn't about sexual attraction, it wasn't even loneliness, it was

logical. Nothing set off his instincts, no red flags popped up in his mind in warning that the slender man was lying. Trist may be a little crazy, a little unstable, but his reality wasn't a creation of his illness. With that thought, a bridge formed and gapped the space between Val's emotions and his logic and the two connected.

Part of him still wanted the easy out, the chance to wash his hands of all the terrifying new things Trist was dragging from him. His life wasn't fulfilling before but it wasn't disturbing, he'd always known which way was up. With Trist, he was lucky to know anything and while the vibrant life in the other man thrilled him, it also scared him silly. The part of him that wanted to go back to his safe stability wanted to believe in the men he admired and trusted, wanted to let them make the choice. That was the part that wanted to believe the real lies.

"Wait." He whispered and brushed off Steve's helpful hands. "This isn't right."

"Val, it's okay to be attached to your first, but he needs help."

Val balled his hands up into fists and tried to think of a way to undo what he had done. There wasn't one, they had Trist, they had a court order, the paper cut into his hand.

"Wait!" He un-crumpled the paper, smoothed it out and scanned over it again in the dimming light. His blood went cold. "Trist!" He shouted as he turned. "Let him go! Stop it! Dr. Sketz, there's been a mistake, let him go!"

Steve clutched at him and Val pushed the doctor aside with more violence than he needed. Near the van, Dr. Sketz was trying to get the wildly thrashing Trist steady enough to get the needle into a muscle. Val started to hurry back, unsure what he could do against two orderlies.

Trist saw Val turn back and he almost stopped fighting. He'd thought he'd lost Val, lost the man back to his world of logical order and controlled sense. There was no room for people like him in that world. When things were cut into black and white, Trist knew he was lost to the wayside.

His backpack.

Trist got in a good kick and an elbow that caused the orderlies to almost drop him. They held onto his coat and he fell to the pavement, twisting inside the fabric trying to get out of it. "I don't understand!" He shouted back to Matt's whispered voice. Val's old lover had been silent since he'd refused to pass on the protective statement and he'd thought the man had moved on.

The front pocket of his backpack! Tell him to look inside!

Trist shook his head. "Val!" He shouted, strangled by his coat, eyes wide at the needle almost to his hip. He snapped a hand out and wrapped it around the doctor's wrist. "Your backpack, the front pouch!"

"What?" Val called back confused but he dropped the pack from his shoulder.

"Matt, aw fuck!" The orderly behind him got a hold of his arm was slowly prying it away from the doctor's wrist. "Matt says to check!"

"Matt says?" His mind whirled off into a circle. The pack he had shoved his stuff in was one from college and without wasting more time to think, he was pulling at the battered zipper on the front pouch. When he'd gotten it open enough to shove his hand in, he suddenly understood.

His fingers curled around the cool metal of the starter's pistol. Matt had made a bet with a top member of the track team, bet the nets off the basketball hoops in exchange for the starter's pistol. He'd won. Val had forgotten that one night, toward the end of their senior year when there had been a rash of muggings on campus, Matt had stashed the fake gun into Val's bag. Told him

to carry it just in case. Val hadn't ever taken it back out and over the years he'd just tossed the bag into his closet and forgotten all about it.

"Val, stop this, let them do their jobs." Steve pulled on his shoulder.

"Get back!" Val ordered and waved the gun at Steve. It worked, in the dim light the gun looked real and very threatening. Steve let go of his shoulder and stumbled backwards. "Let him go!"

"He has a gun." Steve announced in an overly calm voice.

Four sets of eyes swung his way, three in shocked fear, one in exhausted relief. No one moved as Val got back to his feet. "Don't make me hurt anyone. Dr. Sketz, please, I can't explain now but I know what I'm doing. Put the needle down."

The doctor wavered, judged the steady determination with the solid man he knew Val to be, and he slowly eased the needle away. "You can't get far, we have a court order. If we don't enforce it, the police will, Val. You have to see the logic in that. This isn't going to get you anywhere. This man is a suspect in the attempted murder of his cousin." He spoke steadily, smoothly.

"I can't explain now! Let him go." He shook his head at Steve. "Get over by them where I can see you better." The starter pistol was heavy in his hands.

At Dr. Sketz's nod the orderlies let go of Trist, letting the slender man flop to the concrete ground. "Val, think about what you're doing. You're holding a gun on me, your supervisor. You've trusted me for years, as I've trusted you. Think about what it is you're doing."

Trist slid away from the men and scrambled, unsteadily, to his feet.

"You okay?" Val asked quickly, unsure he could meet Trist's eyes after what he'd done.

"I'm okay."

"Get the backpacks."

Trist nodded, pulled his clothes back into order with quick tugs and crossed to where the two backpacks and the laptop case had been dropped. He pulled them up over shoulders that felt half dislocated, over bruises that felt doubled in size. His breath pulled in his lungs, burned, as it slowed down and leveled out.

"Think about this Val, it's not too late." Dr. Sketz spoke again.

"You're right, it's not too late for me to do what's right. Trust runs both ways, you're going to have to trust me. Don't follow us." He ordered, pushing Trist back down to the mouth of the alley and the street that was filling up with club and bar goers.

"You know we can't let you go." It was a darkened threat, an open warning.

Val nodded. "I know."

Trist let himself be half pushed by Val's free hand toward the mouth of the alley. "Val?" He wasn't sure if he wanted to thank or yell at his new lover but for the moment his relief was crushing.

Val's dark eyes slid over and he nodded. "Give me the backpacks, can you carry the laptop?"

He nodded as he threaded the shoulder straps onto the outstretched arm. When he'd pulled them high on Val's shoulder, having to stand on tip toes to do it, he draped the laptop case over his body. "Now what?" Trist whispered, watching the way Steve moved closer to Dr. Sketz and

how the two were talking softly to the pair of now pissed off orderlies.

"Can you run?" Val whispered back, keeping his eyes on the group in the dim shadows deep in the alley.

Trist was pretty sure he couldn't. "Yeah, I'll manage."

"Good." His free hand slid over and found Trist's, his fingers curled around the bare ones he found. Somewhere in his struggling, Trist had lost gloves and hat. The scarf hung at a twisted angle but wasn't gone. He gave the hand he was holding a gentle squeeze and a tug to the side before Val turned, lowered the starter pistol and half dragged Trist out onto the main street.

The far end of the street was filling up with people, but it was a good block away. Trist saw it, knew Val was trying to get them lost in the crowd and struggled to get one foot in front of the other. He stumbled but before he could fall Val reached behind him and steadied him. Trist opened his mouth to say he couldn't go further but after a quick glance behind him, seeing the orderlies rushing out of the alley, he wasted no more time.

"You okay?"

"Fine," he panted out, his breath burning. "I'm fine."

Val just nodded and pulled them toward the walking groups of people. It wouldn't be enough, they'd be spotted for sure. In a couple of hours, the crowds would be thicker, people would be lined up to get into the bars and clubs but for now the night was too young. There was no doubt the orderlies would catch up to them, Trist was exhausted, they couldn't outrun. Val shook his head and tried to out maneuver them.

They wove around groups of people as carefully as possible, trying to break the pattern of the crowd as little as they could. The back of Val's neck was itching, he had hated hide and go seek as a child, hated that impending sense of being caught that so many other kids had loved. He liked being safe, secure, boring. Every brush from someone on the street made him tense back up, thinking it was one of the orderlies catching them and his nerves were making Trist more nervous.

Almost in front of them, a club door swung open and the loud thumping music poured out with the small group of club goers. Val hadn't been paying attention to the names of the bars they'd been passing, none were large, but each had their own little awning stretched over the street and people tended to cluster around them. Before the door could go shut, he caught it and used the grip he had on Trist's hand to push the slender man inside.

Push was the right word, Trist dug his heels in. Cold fear poured down his spine and even in the outer entranceway, he could feel the crushing weight of so many drunk people. "No!" He turned to go and ran into Val.

"We can't outrun them." He had to put his mouth near Trist's ear and raise his voice to be heard. The club appeared to be down a flight of steps and the music rolled up to them on a wave of cigarette smoke and the stall smell of sweat.

"I can't do this!" He almost sobbed back.

Val reached up and caught the sides of Trist's face. "In and out, five minutes, I know you can do this."

He studied the steady brown eyes. It was a leap of trust and one he was a fool for making. Val had almost walked away a few moments ago, he could again. That was logic. Trist didn't operate on logic. He'd known from almost the moment he'd met Val that the man would never easily step

from his comfortable little world, not when faced with the sheer weight of all that was expected of him in a day to day setting. He'd always known that Val could easily be convinced to doubt the odd skills Trist had. It was the man's very binary, black and white, view of life that had drawn Trist. Just because he was in love with Val didn't mean he was blind to his faults and a fool would make the same mistake, place trust in the wrong place, twice in ten minutes.

Trist nodded, knew he was a fool, and was happy for it. "I trust you." The words shook him to say.

Val's smile was small, bitter and Trist could read the self hate in it as clearly as if the man wore a sign. "Come on." Was all Val was able to say and he pulled Trist toward the bouncer.

The man was taller than Val, older, stronger and looked more than able to throw anyone out even if it meant carrying them up a flight of stairs to do it. He held up a hand that was the size of a paw and stood from where he was sitting on a stool. Impossibly, the man was even taller than they'd first thought.

As Val dug out his wallet to pay the cover fee, Trist smiled, then laughed. "All bets are off!" He shouted loud enough for the bouncer to here.

The man looked startled but he plucked the twenty from Val's fingers. "I don't know you."

Trist shook his head. "You're a good man, Jerry! A good man!"

"What the hell? Only my mother ever called me Jerry."

"Bets it is than, she's proud of you, you should know that." Trist shouted again.

The large man took a step back and narrowed his eyes. "What the fuck?"

Val pulled Trist slightly behind him. "My friend knows things but he's harmless." He pulled another twenty from his wallet. "Is there a back door?"

Bets hovered, uncertain, but he took the twenty and nodded. "Down by the bar, make a left, down the hallway. Anyone bothers you, tell 'em Bets said it was okay."

Val nodded. "Thanks." He rummaged in his wallet and found the emergency bill he tucked in there. The fifty unfolded easily. "There are a couple of guys following us, they don't like that my friend knows things. You didn't see us."

This bill didn't disappear so quickly. Bets studied the slender man, who looked like he'd just gone a few rounds with a city bus, hiding slightly behind the one obviously in charge. After a very long heartbeat's uncertainty, Bets nodded and the bill disappeared as well. "Get going or I'll see you again."

"Thank you!" Val said but it was difficult to get the full depth of his appreciation into his voice when he had to shout.

As he was being tugged behind Val, toward the stairs, Trist nodded. "Good man, Jerry, good man." Then the steps were in front of him and he was stumbling to follow behind Val and descend into the swirling pool of emotion.

They paused at the bottom of the stairs, just inside the darkened space below. The music was twice as loud, lights swirled and flashed in the darkness. Even with the thinner crowd, people moved everywhere. It was overwhelming for Val, who liked quiet and solitude but he set aside his own distaste at the whimpered groan from Trist.

The slender man had staggered back against the wall and brought his hands up to cover his

head. The long fingers dug into his hair, already frayed from the struggle earlier but his eyes were wide and frantically scanning the room. "It's too much!" He shouted when Val turned to him. "I can't do this, I can't!" It was like drowning in lust, hunger and loneliness. There were too many drunk minds, too much emotion, too many desires. It made him aching hard and bitterly sad at the same time, made him want to rub his hands across his body to work out the ache of need and scream in raging anger. It was going to pull him apart.

Val glanced around again, spotted the bar at the far end at the same time he heard a commotion at the top of the steps. He ducked his head back around and into the stairwell, spotted the orderlies being harassed by Bets at the top and knew they had to get moving.

"I know you can do this, in and out." He shouted at Trist before pulling the tense body tight.

The arm around his shoulders was a comforting weight, solid and safe, while at the same time making Trist want to crawl out of his skin. He let Val pull him deeper into the invisible sea around him and he had to close his eyes to keep from falling. It was too much, seeing with both sights when his internal one kept changing, kept flashing, a thousand snapshots into his brain.

Val led them into the crowd and down toward the bar, trying to hurry. Distantly, in the back of his mind, it sunk in that the song was a club remix of Billy Idol's Rebel Yell. It added a touch of the surreal to the moment, made him wonder if he'd lied to Trist before when he said that this wasn't a movie but real life. Not only was he pulling a gun, fake but still the idea was there, on his boss, but now he had his own soundtrack.

Against his shoulder, Trist buried his face deeper. If it was all a movie, it was one in bad taste because Trist's suffering was real. "Shhh." Val whispered and soothed a hand across the tattered braid. "Almost there."

And they were, most people gave them space, thinking that Trist was so drunk he was almost falling down. It was a notion Val did nothing to dispute, supporting Trist as much as he could and weaving them back to the bar. Behind it, the bartender didn't even glance there way as Val pushed the door open that was labeled Private, which meant that either the bartender didn't care or a lot of people slipped out the back with their drunk friends.

The hallway was better lit, painted in old, yellowing white paint and at least quite enough that Val could hear himself think. Trist was mumbling to himself, random sentences, nonsense phrases that made no sense. "Shhhh, almost out." Val whispered more to cover up the ramblings than anything else.

There in the back of the hallway was a glowing exit sign. Val nearly kicked the door open and pulled Trist out into the bottom of the outside stairwell. The night air was suddenly frightfully cold after the over heated club and it burned in his chest. The bulb over the stairwell was broken leaving only the diffused light from the distant street light to give any glow to the dark alley.

"Trist?" He pried the slender man from him but as soon as Trist was no longer clinging to him, he was hiding his head in his hands. Val shook him lightly. "Trist! We have to keep moving." Shaking Trist did nothing to snap the man out of whatever haze he was in.

Val glanced around but the small concrete stairwell was empty, he heard no one in the alley over their heads. This wasn't the normal side exist, that was pretty clear. He could drag Trist out, pull him along and shove him into a cab. In theory time would sooth out some of the worst of being so overwhelmed but Val had no idea how long that would take. That wasn't right, not when Val had been told what to do, what would work. It was only his shyness, his own fears and his distaste at basically molesting a helpless man that made him pause.

He wrapped his hands around Trist, pulled the tense body close to his own, in the vague hope that maybe that would be enough. All it did was make the slender man's state more acutely

painful to Val, there was no denying that he was lost and not in a happy good place either. He could feel Trist's heart pounding, racing like a frightened bird. Val tucked his face down along the tense neck, scrambling for ideas and not finding many.

The smell hit him and made his knees weak. It was in Trist's coat, his scarf, the hint of his laundry soap, a faint linger of his cologne and the distinct clean scent of Trist's skin. Even in their short time together, that scent had become hard wired into Val's brain. His hands spread out over the tense back and before he could let himself think about it, he pressed his lips to the side of the tense neck. The rapid pulse beat under his kiss and Val closed his eyes and suckled gently on it.

The tone of Trist's lost keening moans changed subtly, the sound spurred Val on. When his teeth found the chilled earlobe and nipped it, warmed it with his breath, Trist tilted his head to the side granting greater access. Val teased the ear, licked the chilled flesh around it and found his own body growing tense and trembling. One of his hands slid up the slender back and wrapped around the fraying braid. He itched to unravel it, to run his hands through that dark silk.

It wasn't about sex or touch or pleasure, not anymore, not for Val. Trist was the hottest thing he'd ever seen, there was no debate about that, but it was how he felt enfolded in those arms, how he felt holding the slender body. This was right, this was where he belonged, this feeling was home. He was an idiot for running from it, even if the idea of feeling so right placed fluttery fear in his stomach. It left him frightened and vulnerable feeling and totally unwilling to let go.

A leg parted his, a thigh slid forward and Val leaned against it, pushing Trist back against the cold concrete wall. The feel of how beautifully they fit together sent tingled fire along Val's nerves. The night was no longer bitterly cold, in fact, he was feeling flushed. When his hips slid forward on their own and slid against Trist's, when his growing ache slid along shockingly hard arousal, he felt positively on fire.

Hands snaked around Val's face, pulled him from where he was lost in the texture and taste his world had become. He opened his mouth to question or protest but Trist silenced him with a kiss. Tongues met, Val whimpered and the hands holding him still tightened their grip. He wanted to drop down, pull open Trist's pants, free the length hidden there. He wanted his tongue along that flesh, tasting, sucking. He wanted Trist's hands pulling his hair as he lost control and came. Val no longer cared they were outside, that Trist might not be in the frame of mind to consent. He didn't care that Trist would be able to see him while he was sucking him off. All he cared about was feeling that weight and heat in his mouth, hearing his lover's moans, being lost in the heady scent of his lover's body.

The imagined desire was so strong that Trist saw it. It tumbled into the suddenly empty blackness of his mind, the only vision he was able to see and the only one he even half way wanted to see. "Oh, yes." He heard himself sigh. "I'd like that too." The vision made his body thrill but the shivering cold backed his desire down several notches.

When the hands holding his face pulled Val away, he studied the now more aware eyes. He couldn't say just what he saw there, hurt, confusion, lust, all and more? There was a bittersweet pain that painted across Trist's face in the moment before his entire body shivered, trembled, in its vain efforts to get warm.

"Trist, I..."

"We ne... need to get mah... mah..moving." Trist forced out, shuddering now in shock, exhaustion and cold. He couldn't deal with Val's guilt or his remorse.

Val saw it, the distance mingled in with the shock and felt a moment of cold terror that he'd ruined everything. "Here." He pulled his gloves out of his pocket and jerked them over Trist's frozen fingers. From around his neck he unwove his own scarf and quickly got it wrapped around

Trist's exposed skin, wishing it was his lips not his scarf keeping the slender neck warm. The splash of reality did more than the cold air to settled down the lustful need that had burned only a moment before.

It took Val's strength to get Trist up the narrow stairs and into the dark alley, one of his arms slung about the slender waist. "Which way?" He asked, looking to both equally distant and poorly lit exits from the alley.

Trist swung his head from one side to the other before nodding to the far end. "Tha... that one." His teeth were chattering now and all he wanted was to sit down and not move again, ever.

"Good, we need to get moving and we have to find a cab, I know who will help us." He hoped anyway. Val hefted Trist's weight a little against him, more than half supporting the nearly hypothermic man, and got them moving toward the far end of the alley and hopeful safety.

As with most situations, when a cab was really needed, there wasn't one to be found. They crossed street after side street and Val stopped counting when they'd gone five blocks. By the time they'd hailed a cab, Trist was barely moving, stumbling at Val's side and too exhausted to even shiver any more.

Half frozen and dead tired, Trist took three tries before he managed to get into the cab's back seat. Val was instantly in beside him and giving an address he didn't know to the driver. "Could you please turn up the heat?" Val finished. "We're frozen half solid."

He turned to where Trist was slowly starting to shiver again and pulled the gloves from his hands. The fingernails were almost purple they were so blue and as cold as ice when Val took them between his own. Without worry of what the driver might think, he started puffing hot, moist air on them and rubbing them gently between his own to warm them back up. Neither man found himself able or willing to speak for the length of the car ride and Val continued to rub lightly at the chilled fingers far longer than he needed to.

Part Thirty Seven

The driver dropped them off several houses away from the one Val was actually looking for. He was getting paranoid and didn't want to be placed right at the door, just in case. Even if the odds of anyone making a connection to here were slim, Val was unwilling to take stupid risks.

Their breath plumed out in small little icy clouds under the yellow orange glow of the street lights. The homes weren't grand but they were newer and in a very good school district. Each had a small parcel of yard, green in the summer but now frozen and dead, most had their tiny space fenced in. In warmer weather kids chased each other on bikes and families had cook outs, tonight, the street was empty and lights glinted out from behind heavily drawn curtains.

Trist was shivering hard again while they stood in front of one door and rang the bell. They waited, Val considered ringing the bell again but the porch light flicked on and the curtain by the small window set in the door shivered as someone inside glanced out. There was no pause after that, the door was unlocked and pulled open.

"Val?" Edward asked as he opened the door and found the unexpected pair outside in the cold. "Good God, get inside before you freeze to death."

"Thanks." Val crossed into the small foyer and Trist followed without having to be dragged. The door was quickly shut and relocked, cutting off winter's icy touch. "I'm sorry to bother you."

Edward was shorter than Trist. He was balding but had cut his hair short because it didn't bother

him. His body was lithe and wiry from too many hours working and missing too many meals. There was little fuss in the man. "Hey! Maria! Val's here!" He moved to help the pair of men out of their coats but when he took a step forward, Trist actually flinched back and hid behind Val. Edward slid a glance to Val and saw little to comfort him in the brown eyes.

"What? Val's here?" Maria called back as she made her way into the foyer.

All of the adults were trumped by a short, dark headed whirlwind that rushed past her mother and slammed full speed into Val's leg. "VAL!" Missy shouted and attached herself like a barnacle.

He smiled softly and rustled the thick hair. "Heya Missy girl, how's things?"

"You haven't been over to see us in ages!" She scolded with her mother's firm tone to her child's voice.

"Missy, stop it, you know he's been busy." Maria echoed the tone but her eyes were on Val and the slender man that almost was hidden behind him. "Go on now, child, and finish getting ready for bed."

"But, Mom!"

Val knelt down and smiled. "Go, listen to your mother and I'll stop in and read you a story if you're good. Okay?"

She nodded, her curls bouncing. "Okay."

Edward swatted at the child as she shuffled her way back into the house. "What brings you by so late, Val?" He asked once the girl had cleared the room.

Val had gotten back to his feet and he glanced from one worried face to the other. "I need a favor, a big one. I'm sorry."

Maria shook her head. "You're family, don't be sorry. What's happened and what can we do?"

"A place to stay tonight, to borrow your old car tomorrow and forgetting we were ever here?"

The couple exchanged a look and in it was all the unspoken debate of a married couple. "Of course. Are you in trouble?" Maria answered for them both.

Val felt the strained laughter well up. "Something like that." He rubbed at his eyes and felt exhaustion well up. "Trist, these are my friends, Maria and Edward. This is Trist, he's my..." Val stumbled, unsure what word to use.

"We're friends." Trist covered for him, feeling the weight of not being out as a physical pressure.

Val shook his head and drew a breath. "No, he's my boyfriend."

The term put a soft smile on Trist's pale face but it made the tension in the small foyer almost tangible. Maria and Edward's eyes both grew rounder and for a long moment neither one spoke.

"You so owe me that bikini clad carwash!" Edward finally announced with a laugh. "I told you he was gay! I told you!"

"You two bet on whether or not I was gay?" Val asked stupidly.

"It was only in good humor, Val." Maria explained but she was frowning at her gloating husband. "I should have known better, Edward has the gaydar of a drag queen."

"I'm like the only straight artist in my local guild, trust me, I can tell."

"Did everyone in my life know I was gay before I did?" Val muttered.

"Nice to meet you Trist." Edward swung a hand toward the still hiding man and Trist actually flinched at the movement. "Well, get those coats off and I'll go heat up some cider. You two have to be frozen solid. Then we'll sit down and figure out what's going on. Sound good?"

Val nodded. "Thanks you two." He had to swallow hard to clear the uneasy lump from his throat. "I didn't know where else to go if..."

"Well, don't worry about it. At least neither of you will have to crash on the sofa, the double bed in the guest room is plenty big enough for two." Maria smiled and started to take the peeled off layers of coats and gloves from them.

Their bags were passed to Edward. "I'll go toss these in the guest room."

"Are you two hungry?"

"We're fine." He turned to look at Trist and found him shivering, huddled over himself and glassy eyed. "Come on, let's get something hot into you."

He nodded but Trist only made it another three steps before he collapsed. There was no doubt this time, Val was there, catching him, easing his trembling body to the smooth wood floor. "Sorry." He forced out and was trembling too much to get back to his feet.

Maria was instantly kneeling beside the pair, her eyes took in the bruises on the pale skin where one sleeve had ridden up. She reached out and touched the slender wrist to feel for a pulse. "Sweet Jesus, he's hypothermic."

"I'm fine." Trist whispered out, warm enough that he wasn't stuttering and he wondered how horrified she'd be if she could have felt how cold he was an hour ago.

"Edward!" She shouted over a shoulder. "Get the electric blanket out and on the guest bed, plug it in and warm it up!"

A muffled agreement drifted back to them but Maria was already focused on Trist. "We really should get you to a hospital." She muttered as she felt at Trist's pulse, too fast and thready, before tilting his head to prod at the swollen and angry pair of stitches on the back of his skull.

"No." Val answered firmly before Trist could even protest. "No hospitals, he got this way because of a hospital."

Trist shook his head. "I'm just tired."

She glanced between the two men and shook her head. "A story I can't wait to hear but lets get you warmed up first." Maria knew to stay out of the way, Val seemed unusually possessive about the slender man and it took little effort to haul him to his feet. When she turned around she caught a glimpse of her daughter hiding around a doorway. "Melissa Elizabeth! Get yourself to bed now!" She snapped out.

"But, Val said..."

"Now!" The girl sighed and turned to disappear down the hallway and Maria felt herself smiling. "She's too young to understand really why you haven't been by to see us. Telling her you lost someone more dear to you than her hamster was to her didn't help much."

Trist hated having to lean so heavily on Val and loved it at the same time. There was such solid strength in the warm body. For the moment, he gave in and let them move him blindly down the hallway to the small guest room set at the back of the house. It was on the first floor, gratefully, because he was pretty sure he couldn't manage the stairs.

The guest room was small, a double bed took up most of the space, a dresser was pressed to one wall and a door hung open to a small bathroom but it looked like heaven to Trist. Now with five adults in the tiny room, it was down right cramped but Edward finished soothing the electric blanket across the bed and brushed past them.

"I'll get the cider going." The look he gave his wife was warm, understanding.

"Worked out well, huh?" Trist muttered as Val helped him to sit on the now warmed bed.

"What?" Val asked, uncertain to what Trist was speaking about.

Trist nodded toward Edward and locked his eyes on Maria. "The two of you. Your family was wrong about marrying a white guy, it's worked out well. He supports your goals, takes the burden of the home from you, and you allow him to have his art without starving. It feels good when things work out." He sighed and fell back onto the warm blanket. "Oh, this is nice, I so need to get one of these."

Maria's eyes were wide but she looked to Val for an explanation. Val met the look and half shrugged, unsure of how much he should say, how much she'd believe, how much he should keep private.

"Val, go read the kid a story. I'll be fine." Trist pushed himself up to sitting again, slowly warming up.

"But..."

"Hush, she's a kid, that comes first, she misses talking to you."

"I can stay and make sure he's okay." Maria added and it was enough.

"Okay, but I'll be right here if you need me." Val nodded and with a worried glance slipped out of the room.

Trist flopped back onto the warm blanket again. "I can't stand him fussing right now." He sighed and rubbed the side of his face against the soft cover of the blanket to warm it up. "You're nice to be around, I'm glad you leave your work at work. Check for that girl in Alabama's missing persons."

"How can you..." Maria whispered.

Trist sat up again and shook his head sadly. "I just do. You and I, we do the same thing, we speak for the dead. Do you have any aspirin? I'm afraid my bruises have bruises."

Uncertain and a little speechless, Maria nodded. "I'll be right back."

"Thanks." Trist forced out, remembering his manners, before collapsing back onto the gently warm blanket. By the time Maria returned, he'd pulled the edges of the blanket up around him and was basking in the warmth.

It was her gentle laughter at the door that made him poke a head out of his cocoon. "You're going to bake your brains doing that." She warned the dark haired man.

Trist pulled his head back inside. "I'm so fucking getting one of these." He sighed.

With a thump to what she hoped was a hip, Maria sat down beside the wrapped up man. "Don't swear in front of the kid. She hears enough bad things from her mother."

"Sorry." He shifted in the blanket and peeked out again. "You're a good mother."

That made her smile. "I'm trying to be. Now, out of there."

With a groan Trist wormed his way back out into the contrastingly chilled air but happily abandoned the heated blanket for the small glass of juice and two white pills. "Ah, vicodin painkiller of champions." He downed the pills and finished the juice in quick swallows.

"Consider it my professional opinion that you needed it. Now, strip down to your shorts."

He raised an eye brow. "As delightful as you are, my dear, I'm not that sort."

"Strip!" She ordered and presented the square tin. "Tiger balm, if you're as banged up as I think you are, you'll need help getting this on your back and I don't think you want Val to get all fussy."

"Not at the moment." He struggled to get his shirt off and Maria had to help pull it over his head as if he were a little child. He was wincing when the fabric finally surrendered.

"Edward used to take karate lessons three times a week. He used to say, if he didn't come home with bruises he wasn't trying hard enough." She spoke softly to hide the shock of seeing the slender, starved body lit up with dark bruises over pale skin. "It's going to be cold, I'm sorry."

Trist shrugged and flinched more from the contact than the cold. "It's a mixed blessing though."

"Hmm?"

"That he broke his hand and stopped going." He sighed when the careful hand tending to the bruises on his back stopped. "I'm sorry."

"Val tell you about that?"

Trist shook his head, worried if he opened his mouth he'd be saying more stupid things.

"My grandmother always had a touch of sight, but I never much believed in that nonsense."

"La muchacha, su lógica consigue de su manera." Trist found himself muttering.

"¿Usted habla español?"

"Sorry, I barely speak English." He flinched from a bad spot and his breath hissed in sharply.

"Huh, she used to tell me that all the time, that God would give me signs if I just watched for them, that I was too logical to see them." She refused to get upset. "So, you and Val huh? And off with the pants."

He sighed but stood up and stripped his pants off. The Tiger Balm was soothing a lot of the aches away but that could have been the vicodin too. "We're trying, things haven't been all that peachy lately." Stripped to his boxers did little to help hold in what warmth he'd managed to find. Before Maria could even snatch up one of his legs and poke at the scrapes and bruises, he was shivering.

"I wouldn't have thought him gay, I just thought he was one of those, cold, logical sorts. You know, the kind that never get their feathers fluffed over anything?"

Trist flopped back onto the electric blanket and let Maria pull his torn up legs into her lap. Her words made him smile, a touch bitterly but still it was a smile. "Trust me, push the right buttons and coldly logical isn't anything close to him." As the balm soothed his body and the painkillers gradually kicked in, it mixed with the warmth from the blanket and Trist felt himself coming unraveled.

Maria looked over to see the slender, battered, man wiping at tears he refused to shed and she quickly finished cleaning and treating the last of his wounds. She gave a last pat to the bare leg before sliding them off her lap. "I'm sure whatever happened between the two of you can be resolved, nothing is ever as dire as it first seems." She pulled the edges of the blanket up and around the slender man and re-wrapped him in the blankets warmth. "Don't stay in there for too long, you'll bake yourself." She waited long enough to see a shiver in the blanket that she thought was a head nod and only then left the small guest room, pulling the door tightly shut behind her.

Val ended up reading two chapters in Missy's book but by the time he was finished, the girl was soundly asleep. The sight of the child, tucked in, safe, put a sharp sting in his chest and really made him want children. It wasn't just children, he wanted a family. He wanted his own single family house with the loving spouse and the kids and PTA meetings. He wanted this house, it's warm laughter, it's easy comfort and part of him knew he'd never be any closer to it than he was now.

He soothed a hand over the sleeping head, clicked off the light and went back downstairs to find their hosts. He was tired, almost bone weary and worried that Trist was angry with him. There hadn't been time to apologize and Trist had been unusually quite since nearly being carted off.

He found Maria and Edward in the kitchen, sitting around the light pine colored table sipping at mugs of spicy cider. They looked so easy together, he'd always admired that. It was the sort of scene he'd pictured in his head when he thought about his marriage to Kelly. The two of them, sitting, sipping hot drinks after tucking their child into bed for the night, just happy to be near each other. It was a foolish fantasy to expect something after they were married that they didn't have before they were married.

"Hey." Val half whispered into the quiet of the night. "I'm sorry about this."

Edward stood up and poured out another mug of the cider. He set it on the table. "Don't be. Sit, tell us what's happened?"

"I should check on Trist."

"He's asleep, I'm sure." Maria smiled. "Sit down before you fall down."

"Is he okay?"

"Sit down!" She waited until Val obeyed and curled his hands around the hot mug. "He's fine, banged up and sore but I gave him two vicodin and we got some balm on those bruises. He's curled up in the electric blanket and should be sound asleep. Are you okay?"

Val wasn't sure how to answer that. "I guess so." He sipped the cider and shook his head. "I'm not sure I should explain, things have gotten strange. I don't want to endanger you."

The couple exchanged a look but it was Edward that nodded. "Tell us, we'll be fine."

He opened his mouth to try to explain but the memory of Violet laid out for autopsy floated up in his mind. "Something's going on, something odd. Trist's caught in the middle of it, so was Violet. They killed her and the whole family because of it, they shot Trist's cousin."

"They?"

Val shook his head and hid his unease behind his cider. "They tried to kidnap Trist again tonight, he's different, special."

"He's psychic, really, truly psychic, isn't he?" Edward glanced to Maria but she was only watching Val.

He nodded slowly. "I believe so."

"These people, they're after him because of what he can see?"

"That's a good theory."

"I like him, Val." Maria nodded. "He's good sorts."

"I like him too, I'm still a little uneasy with the whole thing. I didn't know how to, you know, tell you guys about this."

"How did Kelly take it?"

"She doesn't know yet. She isn't back."

Edward chuckled. "I don't envy you that conversation."

"You guys really are okay with this?"

"With you being gay? Don't be stupid, of course we are." He answered without a moment's pause. "Now this situation? That's a different story. We're worried about you."

"I'm worried about me, too."

Part Thirty Eight

It was another half hour before the cider was gone and Edward and Maria were finished questioning him. Val was very careful with how he answered, saying just enough to get the seriousness of the situation across but without saying what he feared would be a dangerous amount. Mostly, he just relaxed in their easy ways and casual comfort and by the time they called it a night, he was yawning and actually settled enough he was pretty sure he'd be able to sleep.

He opened the door to the guest bedroom carefully, not wanting to wake Trist if he'd managed to fall asleep and found the two lamps on the nightstands tucked to either side of the bed glowing. He smiled at the lump wrapped up in the electric blanket and since he didn't smell burnt steak figured Trist wasn't cooking himself. While still trying to make as little noise as he could, Val snatched up his backpack and started for the small bathroom.

"I like her." The lump in the blanket declared.

Val about jumped out of his skin. "Jesus!" He glanced to the bed and saw a single black rimmed

green eyes peeking from the blanket.

"Maria, she's a good sort. I like her." The head flopped back down and the eye sunk back into the blanket. "I wish my mother had felt like her."

The bag slipped from Val's hand and he sat on the bed beside the radiating heat of the Trist-lump. "They're good sorts. When they got word of what happened with Violet, Maria and Edward made like a weeks worth of food and froze it for me. The invited me to come stay here as long as I wanted so I wouldn't be alone."

"Which you refused."

He shrugged. "I had Kelly, I wasn't alone."

Trist just snorted and pushed himself up so his head was resting on a hand and his elbow was firmly planted on the bed. "Where are you sleeping tonight?" He asked coldly and studied the side of Val's face.

He should have known he wasn't welcome but that didn't stop the coldness that wrapped around his spine. "I'm not leaving you alone, you'll have to deal with me sleeping on the floor in here."

He moved smoothly, the Tiger Balm and vicodin had soothed the stiff pain from his body, and surged to his feet. The throw blanket at the foot of the bed pulled free and wrapped around his bare shoulders and trapped some of the warmth in. "You sure fucking well were willing to leave me alone back there!"

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't fucking cut it!" He frowned and moved closer to Val, hovered over him. "I trusted you." He wanted the words to sound angry but they came out sounding hurt.

"I'm not the hero sort you thought I was, I'm sorry." Val kept his head lowered.

Trist just snorted and paced away, trying to figure out how to hold the blanket around his shoulders and bite his nails at the same time.

"You shouldn't be real." Val finally said, forced out, knowing things were ruined but trying to explain. "People who make claims like you do, they aren't real."

Trist just stood with his back to Val and kept his mouth shut.

"I wasn't prepared to deal with how other people would view our relationship. I wasn't ready to face it. God, Trist, you scare the life out of me!" He finally admitted and stood up. "You make me feel things that I don't know how to deal with."

"Yeah, it's so difficult to figure out how to deal with a good blow job." Trist snapped back.

"The sex isn't what I mean." Val moved closer, pulled like a moth to light. The words bunched up in his throat and he had to swallow hard and force them out. "You feel like home to me and that scares me. My life is dull but it's safe and I'm used to it, I'm human, I like safe." He admitted. "I don't expect you to forgive me. Dr. Sketz is a man I admire a great deal, I trust him, it was easier to trust him than myself."

"That's because you're a fucking moron." He meant the words to be half teasing but he was still hurt, still a little angry and frightened, and they came out harsher than he intended.

The words carved out a part of Val's heart and left a hollow, empty place. He nodded. "Anyway,

I'll sleep on the floor, give me a second to wash up."

Before Val could turn to slink away, Trist turned. His fist swung out, balled up and caught the taller man in the stomach, dead center. The breath wooshed out of Val's lungs even if Trist hadn't used all his strength. He half doubled over and stumbled a little, his dark eyes going wide with surprise.

"You hit me!" He wheezed out.

Trist nodded, the hurt and anger gone now. "You fucking deserved that!"

As Val managed to catch his breath, as the shock of the impact faded and he understood the hit wasn't that solid, he nodded. "I did." He started to turn to go to the bathroom, half wanting to weep but not finding the tears to do it.

Hands stopped him, caught his arms and shoulders, slid up his body to his face and lifted it. Val let Trist pull him closer but his eyes flew open when the mostly naked body pressed against his and skilled lips covered his own. Surprise kept his own mouth closed and Trist's tongue traced their line, teased them, until Val relented and parted them. The kiss took him over, it was almost as violently surprising as the blow he'd just received. It took him over, it consumed him, it made him instantly hard.

Trist broke the kiss and glanced up at the shocked, hungry face. He soothed a hand over the shaken expression and smiled in a low, soft way. "You fucking deserved that too."

His breath didn't want to move smoothly and it wasn't from being hit in the stomach. "What?"

"Fucking moron, why do I always fall in love with the pretty stupid ones?" This time Trist managed to have it sound as teasing as he felt. He soothed a hand across Val's hair. "Sweetheart, I knew, I've always known, that this wouldn't be easy for you. That you'd walk away from me sooner or later." He couldn't keep his eyes on the hopeful, confused brown pair. "I didn't expect you to come back." He forced out. "I love you, Valentine York, fool that I am. Just, don't ever do that to me again!"

Violet had tried to make fudge once and one thing had led to another and she'd misjudged the cook time. Instead of fudge, she turned out a tangled gooey mess. The fudge had curled up into a sticky, tangled, useless ball. That's how Val's emotions felt, tangled, balled up, too sticky to touch.

He closed his eyes and pulled the slender man close. Trist didn't protest and Val knew he was holding the battered body too tightly. He buried his face into the loosened hair and just clung to all that he'd believed lost.

There was a desperate hunger, a need for comfort, in the clinging hug Trist was enrobed in. He allowed it, welcomed it but when it seemed like it would go on all night, he ended it. It took a shrug of his shoulders and a swat to Val's ass to get the taller man to let go.

"Go, wash up, I'm tired." When Val released him, Trist went right to the bed and straightened the heated blanket over it before crawling into bed. The covers were deliciously warm and he sighed as he snuggled under them to his nose.

Val took long moments in the bathroom but when he emerged he was clean shaven and stripped to his boxers. It was a lovely sight and Trist grinned in a happy lewd way as he watched the slender strength circle the bed and click off first one of the bedside lamps and then back around to the other. He sighed happily in the darkness, lit only by the dim glow of a nightlight in the bathroom, as Val slid into the bed beside him.

"I could get used to the feel of you sleeping next to me." He whispered. Trist ran a hand across Val's stomach and grinned at how the man flinched from the contact.

"If I don't bake tonight, it's hot under this blanket."

"Sue me for being cold blooded." He curled himself over and around Val, being sure to press still cold fingers and toes to the warm bare skin.

Val hissed at the sudden shock of ice. "Stop that."

One cold finger found an already pebbled nipple and teased it. "Make me." Trist purred against Val's neck.

"I..." his thought was broken by a moan which he struggled to hold in. It was like there was a switch to instantly make him hard and Trist controlled it. "I thought you were tired?"

In the dark, Trist kissed Val's jaw line. "I am, far too tired to fuck you silly like I want to." He found Val's wrist and dragged the unresisting hand down to press against the scalding length that was slipping free from the cotton of his boxers. "Not too tired to finish what you started back in that alley."

There was a moment's pause, a hitched breath of uncertainty just before Val's hand curled around the offered touch. The fingers were teasing, but Trist still lolled back, falling onto the soft bed. He didn't have to pull Val along, as soon as Trist fell onto his back, Val was hovering over him.

He squinted his eyes open and studied the shadows and dimly lit highlights of Val's face. He snaked a hand up into the tumbling hair and pulled Val down to him, surprised that the lips that met his were parted and hungry. Understanding was a little slow because Val's fingers were quite skilled but it did arrive in Trist's mind. Yes, there was lust here, and desire, but there was more to it. Val needed to be reassured that he was still wanted, that Trist still had a place for him in his life. Val needed to feel safe again, to regain some sense of being needed, wanted. In that moment, Trist could have asked for anything and Val would have happily given it to him.

If he needed further evidence it was presented to him in Val's single minded need to pull the boxer's from Trist's hips as he disappeared under the blankets. The taller man had taken what Trist had said literally and was set on finishing what he'd started in the alley. Only this time, the sharp hungry need to taste him was missing, there was desire yes but this was more about emotion than physical and Trist shook his head.

"Christ, Val, you're more fucked up than me." The hands teasing him, the lips pressing to his hips in early warning, froze at the whispered words. Trist reached down and pulled Val's shoulder's back up, pulled the man out from the covers to lay tight against his body. He soothed hair back from a confused face and smiled. "I didn't mean it to be an obligation."

Val shook his head. "It's not."

He pushed upward and kissed the tip of Val's nose. "I had something else in mind."

Val frowned. "But..." Part of him was disappointed, part of him felt rejected and he was fully confused. He needed this, needed to remind Trist and himself of why he was worth putting up with.

"Stop that." Trist scolded. "You don't get it do you? I love you, I don't put up with you, I love you." He wished for a single moment that Val could feel emotions as he did, so that he'd know, fully, the depth of that emotion. "You don't have to do anything, be anything. Unconditionally, Val, I love you unconditionally."

The moment was raw and naked between them. Little things stood out, the beat of his pulse in the hard arousal of his length, the feel of the waistband of his boxers pushed down to his thighs and forgotten. Trist lay there, waiting to see if words alone could sink into Val's mind, hungry to move them on, touch skin and souls.

Val finally shook his head and ducked his eyes deeper into the dark shadows. "I don't know what that means." He finally admitted, hoarsely, his voice breaking on the confession.

The hand that Trist had resting on Val's shoulder slid up and tilted the hidden face up again. "It means that no matter what you do or don't do, my feelings won't change. It means I love you even if you hate me."

"I don't hate you."

"I know. It also means I love you without obligations." He stroked across the tormented face and wanted to scream at the mistakes that had so distorted Val's view of life and love. "Would you be willing?" He asked gently, frightened his own lust, his own roughness would shatter the vulnerable man and moment.

"What?" Val asked as he leaned into the soothing touch but he knew no matter what Trist asked for, he'd be willing.

The idea was a tormenting one, a vision that had been floating in Trist's mind since he'd met Val. He raised up and let his breath tickle an ear before he whispered. "Soixante neuf." The French words fell easily with the hissing exhaled breath.

The words alone made Val moan, his body arched up in remembered pleasures. The breath froze in his throat. "How?"

Trist's chuckle was gentle. "How did I know that Matt's mother was French Canadian and for anyone else it was vulgar sixty nine but with his Pony it was soixante neuf? I have my ways."

The vision hit him again as it surged across Val. The sight of the tall, lean basketball player slipping into Val's bed across the room late at night. Matt's soft touches to wake the otherwise sound sleeper. Val's instant response, the languid way he gave in to the whispered request in French, was erotic and sweet. The sight of the two boys wrapped around each other, both trying to please the other, neither wanting to find release first, sent shivers down Trist's spine. It had always been one of his fantasies but he'd never had a lover willing. It was one of the few things sexually that Val was far more experienced with than Trist was.

There was a moment when Trist thought he'd over stepped his place, a hurt that flashed with the hunger in Val's eyes and emotions. So much of the older man's past had been run from rather than resolved that even with his advantages, Trist still often felt like he was doing a jig in a mine field.

The hurt flickered away and Val's mouth twitched upwards in a teasing smirk. "Sounds like a plan, besides, with how you can't keep your mouth shut, it's the only way we can do anything and not have the entire household know."

"Fuck, Val, you're so hot." Trist muttered, lost in the smirk he'd seen before, only in visions, given to Matt. To have that hidden smile turned on him, for him, made his body melt. He knew what he wanted, Val, on his back, his arms pinned under Trist's legs but he also remembered how easily Val choked. "I've never done this before." He confessed.

That startled Val. "Never?" It was something he'd missed, Kelly hadn't been interested. The one time he'd suggested it she'd shot the idea down. Said it distracted from the moment and he'd

respected that.

"My lovers haven't been as nice as you are." Trist whispered as Val's fingers untied the band from his hair.

Which was worse, denial and a single, wonderful lover or acceptance and a string of people that weren't tender? Val wasn't sure. "These have to go." He whispered and slid his hand down Trist's hip to catch the half removed boxers.

There was a great deal of shifting and moving under the blankets, elbows bumping and general haste to remove garments but with little fuss both men were naked in the darkness. Trist took longer than he needed, using false clumsiness to steal sliding touches against Val's chest, his thigh, his ass.

Val tugged and pulled and without having to explain in words that he knew would make him blush bright red, he got Trist on his side and the pair of them supported on pillows. There was a moment of awkward uncertainty, of vulnerability and he remembered why Matt always suggested this playful contact after waking him up. If he was fully awake, Val couldn't help but feel nervous, uneasy, but waking from a sound sleep it was easy to slid from gentle dreams to better waking.

"Oh, fucking mercy." Trist sighed when he understood and Val's cock bobbed a few inches from his face. Something hot, wet, tormenting, circled the head of his cock and a strong hand held the startled buck of his hips in place. "Oh, fuck, Val!"

"Shhh." Val teased, puffing cooling air on the trace he'd made with his tongue.

There was only one way he'd be able to stay quiet and it was a good way. It wasn't in Trist to tease too much, he doubted he was going to be able to last long. He bobbed forward and swallowed Val whole. The effort was rewarded by a low, whimpering moan which trembled along Trist's cock.

Each surrendered to the other, both men gave of themselves and accepted in return. Trist lost himself in the tingling pleasure of the double overload and how it twisted with the visions of Val's past. There was no whispering words from Matt, but Trist felt the man watching, near by, unwilling to interrupt. For this moment, this time, was for them alone, a private joining.

It was such a shattering experience for Trist that it wasn't until he was close to the edge of his own release that he understood how much access the positions they were in offered. He stroked a hand across Val's ass and earned a new depth to the man's sighing moans. There was no lube and Trist was too far gone to think of substitutes so he settled for petting the flesh within his reach. He ran tormenting fingers, raked nails, across ass and back, down to thighs and back up. Each touch made Val writhe and took Trist closer to the edge.

Closer until there was no option but to fall. He tried to offer warning but he didn't want to release the flesh he was tormenting. Trist backed away, his body tense and trembling but he had no words. Val must have felt his meaning in the tension that wound up his body, for he groaned and pulled away enough to keep from being caught off guard. Trist glanced up, as he bit his lip and held in the exalted cry he wanted to make, and nearly died at seeing the shadowy form of Val swallowing him.

There was a moment's pause as Trist struggled to catch his breath but as soon as the floaters faded from his vision and he was sure he wasn't going to pass out, he turned back to the aching need in front of him. Val was shuddering now, gasping for breath around random licks he was still placing to Trist's groin. Fingers dug into Trist's hips, pressing on already sore bruises and a tight, wound up keening cry shuddered from Val's throat as he let go and died a small death.

They lay, entwined in an explicit way, long enough for hearts to slow and the sweat on their

bodies to cool. Trist could have happily fallen asleep, pillowed on Val's thigh, face nuzzled against his groin, but Val had other ideas. There was sliding flesh against flesh, body past body, as they got turned around and Trist was pulled into Val's arms. Lips found each other in the emptiness of the night, mouths parted and the taste of the other was shared.

Val's fingers slid through the dark silk of Trist's freed hair and when the kiss finally broke he pressed his forehead to the slender man's. "I'm not letting you go." He whispered into the night.

Trist nodded and tugged the blankets up over them. "You'll never lose me, Val, never." And he meant it, it was one promise he could keep. Even if Val let him go, a part of Trist would always belong to the other man.

Part Thirty Nine

Trist slept soundly, without dreaming, which was extremely rare. He woke feeling rested and more stable than normal, in an empty bed without the electric blanket on. He stretched out and scratched at his stomach, not at all worried about being naked in a strange place. His toes explored the bottom regions of the bed and found his boxers but could find no hint of Val's. While yawning he got his boxers back around his hips and reluctantly left the pocket of warm blankets he'd been wrapped in.

A light was on under the bathroom door and Trist never considered issues of privacy, he just opened it. Slowly, to give Val plenty of time to yell at him if he was intruding but when no shout came, he went in without pause. He found Val standing by the sink, towel wrapped around his hips, shaving. The sight made him stop and just stare, the dream of seeing such a casually domestic sight every morning overwhelming the background noise.

"Morning." Val smiled as he spoke, glancing in the mirror's reflection to where Trist stood silent in the doorway.

"Morning." Trist forced back as a whisper.

"You okay?"

He only nodded and forced himself to shake off the almost painful craving to never lose this man. "Fine, slept like a rock." Trist moved to stand behind Val, his eyes peeking over one bare shoulder. "Didn't you shave last night?"

Val nodded and rinsed the razor off. "Habits and I don't like stubble."

Trist snaked his arms around Val's waist and pressed the side of his face against the still shower warmed shoulder. He clung there, trying to absorb in the feel of the contact, to somehow imprint it around the chaos of his mind and make it a permanent part of his memories. "What do we do now?" He finally whispered out, not wanting to think.

"Well, we're going to get breakfast into you than we'll see if Maria and Edward will loan us their old car. Than, we're going to go a couple of miles away to a payphone and you're going to call your grandmother."

His blood chilled. "I forgot her name was on that list." He suddenly felt awful. "We should call right away, warn her, do something." His fingers dug into Val's stomach without thought.

"It's not safe to call her from here, just to be careful. Don't worry about it, you were worried about Eshe, you knew these guys were in the city. Besides, from what I hear about your grandmother, she's a tough old lady and I'm sure she's fine." He wanted to believe that she was but Val's only

real concern was keeping one and only one psychic safe and that one was trying to squeeze him to death. "Now," Val patted the locked arms. "Shower, we need to get moving."

Trist nodded but he was moving without clear thought. He wanted to go home, he wanted Gavan to be there waiting, he didn't want to see his grandmother or shower in someone else's bathroom. It was little things, things of hearth and home, that he required to stay stable and for all the good Val was doing him, he wanted his life back. The hot water helped to settle him a little, it soothed the pain from stiff muscles and sore bruises but did little more.

When he got the water off and himself out of the shower to shave and finish getting ready for the day, Val was gone. He heard the man in the bedroom, moving around, dressing most likely and it was comforting. It gave him a touchstone in the other wise wild chaos his life had dissolved into.

With the towel still wrapped around his waist, Trist opened the bathroom door and found the bed made and both their backpacks waiting there. Val was already dressed his hair neatly combed into place and looking as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Absently, Trist rubbed at the side of his head, trying to sooth an ache that wasn't really physical.

"You sure you're okay?" Val asked, pausing in his fussing at getting them packed up to go.

"Peachy."

"You're rubbing your temples."

"So?"

"You only do that when you're unhappy."

Trist dropped his hand from the side of his head. "Oh." He glanced to his hands, the thinness in them and shrugged. "I want to go home." It sounded whiny even to his own ears.

"Soon, okay? Soon." Val studied Trist, really looked at him, and saw that the man was running out of steam. He looked defeated, like he needed to spend a few days curled up in bed sipping at chicken noodle soup and recovering.

Trist nodded and moved to brush out his hair and braid it back. It would stay wet longer that way and if it was still cold outside he'd freeze but he just didn't think he could stay pulled together with his hair loose. "Soon." He agreed and couldn't meet Val's eyes.

"I'll wait for you out in the kitchen, okay?"

Trist just nodded and was glad when he was finally alone. "Quiet, all of you, just shut up." He hissed out and moved to get ready for the day.

Val hauled his backpack out with him when he left the bedroom and tried to not allow himself to worry too much about Trist. The man was resilient, he wasn't out of control, he was just tired. It was all easy things to tell himself but he couldn't lie to himself about how important Trist had become to him.

He was yawning as the smell of coffee hit him and he found Maria pouring him a mug. "Morning."

She turned and smiled. "Morning yourself."

"Where's the munchkin?"

"Edward drove her to school already. Don't worry, I don't have to be to work until noon today, so it's no bother. Oatmeal?"

Val shrugged and finished spooning sugar into his coffee, he was craving it sweet and with milk today. It was how he had drunk coffee as a teenager. "I'm not really hungry."

"You should eat, see to it Trist eats too. Val, he's frightfully skinny."

He lowered himself into a chair and half smiled at the bowl that appeared in front of him. "He's eating but the visions are hard on him. Thank you, for everything."

She waved it off and dropped a pair of plastic sandwich bags in front of Val. Each bag held a half dozen pills. "White ones are vicodin, he's still as banged up and might need them. The others are a sedative, a strong one. Consider it in my professional opinion that you should have some on you."

He almost pushed the bags away, he didn't like the idea of Trist drugged, but his logical mind overrode his emotions. The bags crinkled up and he shoved them into a pocket. "Thanks."

"You're in love with him." She folded her arms across her chest and watched the guarded brown eyes widen slightly.

"Maria."

"Val."

He studied his oatmeal for answers not so easily found.

"Your eyes, they never looked this way for Kelly. Nice to know you're human after all." She teased gently, long since suspecting that the quietest, coldest, of people were often the most sensitive.

"I barely know him."

"I knew Edward all of an hour before I knew I'd marry him. Sometimes you just know, that's the kind of love worth doing anything for." She dropped a set of car keys on the table knew Val. "That's the kind of love worth risking everything for."

"Oh, something smells good!" Trist announced as he stepped into the kitchen.

Maria smiled in greeting but Val kept studying his oatmeal. "Good, and you'll eat until you're stuffed! Got to put some meat back on those bones of yours boy, oh, my grandmother would fuss so over you." She moved over and bent the dark head down to poke at the cut hidden under the hair.

"Stop fussing." Trist mumbled but he submitted to the inspection with a small grin.

She released his head and scooped out another bowl and poured coffee. "So, which one of you is top?"

Val swallowed his coffee wrong and started choking to death.

The borrowed car was Edward's old means of transportation. Which, given his starving artist status for so many years, meant that it had been cheap, small and easy to maintain. Once they'd stopped having to worry about money, he'd kept it because tinkering with the old car made him

happy, reminded him of how far they'd come together. As he'd said so often, they kept the extra car around just in case and that fit Val's situation perfectly.

The small car hummed and its heater produced an amazing amount of warmth, which was a good thing since Trist was shivering again as soon as the winter morning's air hit him. They said their farewells and bundled into the car, Trist dropped into the passenger seat with the same weighty sound as the backpacks made hitting the back seat.

"Sure you don't want to drive?" Val asked when they'd gone a couple of blocks and Trist hadn't moved from where he leaned against the car door. "I don't mind."

"I don't have a license." Trist admitted softly, his eyes watching out the window but not really seeing the happy neighborhood they slid by.

"Oh."

"I'm too much of a nut case to get one." He sighed and liked the way his breath steamed up the colder glass of the window. "That and I had a bout of seizures a couple of years ago, it's in my records and well, the DMV doesn't like drivers to have seizures behind the wheel."

"Normally don't need one, living in the city." Val tried to comfort but the hurt in Trist's voice was unmistakable. It was pretty clear that the slender man wanted little to do with conversation and Val respected that enough to shut up.

He wove them around morning traffic and out toward the suburbs before pulling over in a strip mall parking lot and its small bank of payphones. The car slid into a space but Val left it running. "Stay here, I'll go call the hospital to check on Gavan and come back and get you so you can call your grandmother. No point in you freezing until you have to. Okay?"

"Sure." Trist whispered back but he stayed staring out his window.

The idle passiveness made Val frown but he flipped his collar up against the cold and crossed the space to the phones. It was painful to see Trist so dulled, so broken looking but he figured even the rather manic fellow couldn't be upbeat or even surly all the time. He knew full well that anyone emotionally unstable taken out of their comfort zone was made worse and Val was just grateful Trist was holding together as well as he was. He listened to the nurse on the phone talk but he watched the car and the bundled up body slouched in the front seat.

When he returned and pulled the door open a rush of cold air slid in with him. "Good news! Gavan was awake this morning, talking and he's out of ICU. They're transferring him to Mercy today he's so stable."

"That's good." Trist nodded but he couldn't hold Val's eye. "He's not alone right?"

"The nurse said that his parents were there and Sanaa as well."

"Good, I don't want him being alone."

"He's not, now, sooner you make this call the sooner you're back in the warm car. Ready?"

Trist just nodded and hauled himself out of the car. Everything hurt and the idea of having to deal with his grandmother on top of everything else made him want to run and hide. Only, it was too cold to run away and he had no place safe to hide. He sighed as he pulled off a glove to dial the number, Val hovering near by and watching the parking lot.

He leaned his weight from one foot to the other and tried to focus on the icy puffs of his breath will the line rang. No matter how defiant he acted, or how old he got, just knowing he'd have to

interact with his grandmother made him feel five years old and half ready to vomit. Each ring on the line felt more urgent, more likely to be answered and each ring only brought with it another ring.

"She's not answering?" Val finally spoke, and ignored how his voice caused Trist to startle a little bit.

"No." He whispered and carefully hung up the phone. "She'll turn the ringer off on the phone when she doesn't want to be bothered."

"She do that often?"

Trist just shrugged and stared at the phone. "I can't read her easily, I can't see if she's okay."

Val gathered up the discarded gloves and tugged them back over his lover's cold fingers. "Than let's go find out."

"Val, I..." Trist wanted to try to explain how he didn't want to go, how he just wanted it all to go away but the words died as he started to speak. He nodded. "Let's go." He let himself be guided back to the car and soon, the small inside was toasty warm again but it couldn't warm up the cold lump in his stomach.

Val drove in silence, not even wanting to turn the radio on. He half expected flashing lights in his rear view mirror at any moment, as if they were fleeing bank robbers. If anyone knew, he did, that the cops were too busy to worry about enforcing a court order for commitment, unless they stumbled into police hands and notice anyway. What he wasn't sure about was whether or not his little waving around of the starter pistol had been reported. He was certain he was now unemployed, a chilling thought that made his mood almost as glum as Trist's.

They drove for almost an hour, Val turning when Trist would mutter out directions, merging onto highways from the softly uttered route numbers. Trist could have been taking them out of state for all Val knew, he didn't ask for an address to Betty Maddocks house. He liked driving, liked the safe feeling of moving it gave him.

"What made you change your mind?" Trist finally spoke, still leaning on the car's door and staring out the side window.

It had been so long since only the bare minimal of conversation had passed between them that Val raised an eyebrow and glanced over. Trist didn't look anymore willing to enter into conversation and that didn't offer much clue to the context of his random question. "Change my mind about what?"

"About me, last night, in the ally." Trist prompted. "What made you change your mind?"

Val drew a slow breath and wanted to lie. It would be more romantic, kinder, to say it was love and faith and happy fuzzy emotions that had swayed him. "Well, you don't act like the clients I've worked with that actually have the psychosis you've been labeled with."

Trist snorted. "You came back for me because I wasn't as crazy as I've been accused?"

"Something like that." Val couldn't glance over now.

"And?"

"And the judge that signed the order? Her name was on Violet's list of compromised people." He shook his head. "Maybe we're both paranoid now."

"I'm not paranoid, someone is out to get me." Trist tried to joke but it sounded as cold as the morning air. "You know, you threw away fucking everything to come back for me."

"I know."

That dropped them back into brooding silence and it wasn't until Val turned the car off the highway that he dared break into it again. "What're you thinking about? You've been really quiet."

Trist shifted in the seat and turned to watch Val. "I can feel how much you loved Violet, it's like mad crazy real." He wasn't sure if Val could ever love anyone that deeply again. The hurt had been too great, carved too deeply into his soul, to risk such pain being repeated. He wasn't sure if Val actually loved him, or would ever love him. "I've a sister."

"Do you? I didn't know that."

"And a brother." He glanced out to the passing countryside, the patchwork, winter sleeping farms and newer built homes all tucked around trees and rolling hillsides.

"Older than you? You feel like a youngest child to me."

"Older than me." He sighed. "My brother and I, we haven't spoken since I was fourteen, he was nineteen. I haven't even seen my sister in six years, and we fought then. She has three kids, my brother has five, I've never met them."

"I'm sure if you wanted to get to know them they wouldn't stop you." Val spoke gently.

"No, they've made it clear they don't want me around. Being gay freaked them out enough, add in the fucking family legacy and shit, I can't blame them." He pulled off his gloves to bite at his nails. "I fucking hate going home."

Part Forty

Val drove them through a small town, he counted two cemeteries, three churches, an ice cream parlor, small grocery store and a very small downtown shopping section. Signs pointed the way to the library, school and town hall; cars parked at silver parking meters and people actually were walking around. It looked like an ideal, little town, something from a movie ideal of a little self contained town. As sweet as the little town was, he couldn't picture it as Trist's home.

It was, but as he continued to follow the muttered directions, it was clear that Betty Maddocks lived outside of the town. As the shops faded to houses and the houses grew farther apart, Trist started to get antsy. He shifted in his seat too much and kept glancing from Val to the passing scenery.

"Down here, on the right. The blue and green Victorian." Trist pointed to a house set back from the road. The drive way was long, at least a half mile and it had the look and feel of an old farm house. Wide old oak trees that once had formed a wind break stood at random intervals around the winter dead yard. In front of the house, painted in the same mish mashed Victorian colors, was a picket fence and a few outbuildings set a good distance from the house itself.

Val pulled down the lane slowly, taking in the quiet of the farm around the old home and the isolation of the house itself. He pulled the small car up behind a larger, blue, four door sedan and put the car in park. "You okay?"

Trist nodded. "My grandmother, she," he wasn't sure how to explain. "Fuck, look, being gay is just one of a dozen things she hates about me."

"I'm sure she doesn't hate you."

"Yeah, okay."

The door to the inside opened and the screen door pushed out under the wide, wrap around porch. A woman carried a black suitcase out and set it down, glancing up at the unknown car and frowning slightly. Val wasn't sure what he expected but the woman was matronly. On the short side, with a round face and a wide mouth, her face was cut with smile and laugh lines. Her hair had aged to grey, mixed with the last dark strands of her youth and her frame had grown padded with age. He wouldn't have been surprised to see her wearing a crisp white apron and baking cookies. It was a comparison he instantly placed. The woman on the porch reminded him sharply of his old cook, Anna, even though the two women didn't look so much alike.

"My aunt, Mary." Trist explained and opened the car door.

"Tristram?" The woman on the porch called out as soon as Trist started to climb from inside the car. "Oh Tristram!" She laughed out and hurried down the steps.

Val watched, half expecting a cold welcome but the woman came directly to Trist and clasped either side of his face between her hands. It was an action he'd seen Gavan do and the slight narrowing of her eyes followed by the easing of tension in Trist's shoulders spoke louder than words. There was nothing cold in the older woman, she was smiles and welcome.

"Better?" She asked after a moment.

Trist nodded. "Much, thanks."

She soothed a stray hair back from Trist's face. "Welcome, you're much more stable than I'd feared. We were on our way into the city to check on you and Gavan. What brings you out here?" Her eyes, hazel with blue tones, slid from Trist to where Val hovered, backpacks over his shoulder.

"Long story, better told once." Trist followed her glance but really didn't have to. Val stood in the weak winter sunlight, his hair lightened even further with the red highlights in the soft brown glowing. Seeing his love hovering to the side, uncertain about stepping closer, looking as lost and confused as ever, made Trist smile. "Aunt Mary, this is Val, Valentine York, he's my keeper since Gavan got shot."

"Your keeper huh?" She gave Trist a knowing look before stepping away, toward where Val hovered and offered her hand. "You must be a fine keeper, indeed, Mr. York, if you can keep our Tristram as stable as he was."

Val juggled the backpacks and accepted the woman's hand. "Ma'am, I've little to do with it, Trist's really been trying hard."

She slid a look to Trist and was all smiles. "He's cute."

Which made Val blush and fuss at the backpack straps over his shoulder.

"Be nice, Auntie, he's shy." He slipped over and slid an ungloved hand into Val's own bare hand. The fingers that wrapped around his were warm and he raised them up to press a quick kiss to the back of Val's hand.

"You two make a pretty pair but you know your grandmother's thoughts on the issue." Mary warned.

"Right now, I don't give a flying fuck. Where is the old bat anyway?"

That chased some of Mary's smile away. "Inside, bringing down the other suitcase. Come in, I'll make some tea."

"Thanks but there isn't time for that." He didn't let go of Val's hand, in truth he needed it's warmth to calm him, and led them both toward the front door.

Only at the front door he paused, because standing inside the screen was his grandmother. Whatever Val had been expecting, it wasn't what was standing before him. She was slender, short, stern looking only because of the frown she wore. Her hair was white, not grey, and styled into a controlled bob. The slacks she wore were grey wool, fine and understated and her blouse was tailored and crisp. Not even a speck of her make up was out of place and even her posture was structured and rigid.

"Tristram." She greeted, nodding her head just slightly.

"Grandmother." He answered, his voice steady, but his hand clutched at Val's.

Her eyes, exactly like Trist's, green ringed in black, slid from her grandson to study Val. "You know my thoughts on your preferences. I can't control what choices you make in your life but I will not have my will flaunted under my own roof."

"Well, I see someone had a heaping bowl full of bitch flakes for breakfast."

Betty Maddocks just snorted and shook her head. "Get inside before you freeze your scrawny ass off." She ordered and pushed the screen door open toward them.

Trist caught the screen door and passed it to Val before slipping inside, his head hung slightly down. What ease the contact with his aunt had given him was gone, if anything, his shoulders carried more tension now. Val held the door and waited for Mary to follow Trist inside, she smiled warmly at him, her eyes glowing with her good humor.

The door opened into a foyer, an actual formal entranceway. The house was obviously old, and just as obviously renovated. The wood floors were sanded and polished to a nice shine and broken up by worn, well loved rugs. Flyspecked mirrors hung on the wall around old pictures in heavy ornate frames. The stairwell was a good distance away, leaving the entrance un-cramped and open and there were obviously several living rooms or parlors on the first floor. It was a formal home, filled with dark wood and ornate furniture. It left Val feeling comfortable, it reminded him of both his parents cluttered elegance and his uncle's structured order but it must have been smothering for Trist.

"I'll put water on for tea." Betty said, sailing with measured steps to the back of the house behind the stairs.

The small party followed her, like ducks in a row, back to the kitchen. It was a long, narrow room that was dominated by a large stove and a huge butcher block style wood table. A small atrium opened off the back of it, spilling in light and warm air, filled with rows of potted plants ranging from useful kitchen herbs to flowering blooms.

"We're not staying long enough for tea." Trist muttered again, knowing neither woman would listen. Proving him correct, his grandmother turned on the stove and let the flame dance up around a large copper tea kettle.

She turned and crossed her arms across her chest, frowning. "So, what brings you all the way out here?"

"It wasn't your pleasant fucking company."

"Mind your language boy." She snapped back. "I see you're still wearing your hair like some dirty, good for nothing, lazy hippie."

Trist opened his mouth to toss a volley back but Val rested a hand on his arm and stopped him.

"We aren't here to exchange barbs." He spoke softly, suddenly wanting to get Trist as far from his grandmother as he could. It wasn't just because the pair were fire and ice and would consume each other, but seeing Trist's eyes, those haunting eyes, set in another person's face, disturbed him.

Trist nodded and tried to stay focused. "Look, something going on. Some whackos are grabbing psychics, they shot Gav, they killed Val's sister and her family, they tried to get Eshe and I too."

"Eshe and me." She corrected.

"What the fuck ever!" Trist sighed. "They're coming for you, if they can't snatch you, they will kill you and as much as I'd like to ring your scrawny chicken neck myself," he drew a breath, knowing she hated being called that. Knowing her older brother had teased her as a child by calling her chicken neck so brutally that she'd end up crying. "You're still my grandmother. Your bags are packed, just you and Aunt Mary, get in the car and go."

Better glanced to her sister to see if Trist was out of control, to see how unbalanced her grandson was to be spouting such nonsense. At her slight shake of her head, she knew he wasn't. "Don't be absurd. We're going into the city to see Gavan, which you should be doing. He gives so much to take care of you, when no one else would, the least you can do is help him now."

Val saw Trist's fists ball up. "Get your passports, get the cash from the safe and fucking get out of here. I'm trying to keep you safe!"

She straightened her spine and raised her chin, a look of set stubbornness that made even Val understand she wasn't going to be moved. "I live my life by the guidelines established by our family for generations. I only work with approved clients. I am not in danger because I do not skim from the dregs of society and make myself a target for every madman out there!"

"Fuck the family! Fuck the guidelines! Just once, just once!" He shouted back. "In your rotten, horrible, selfish life, just once, trust me!"

"Well, this is a new record, from hello to a screaming match in less than five minutes." Mary inserted pleasantly.

"Mary, please, I'm not going to turn our lives upside down simply because Tristram has lost control again."

A sound wrestled from Trist's throat, half sob, half growl and all desperation. "Memaw, please, please listen to me." He forced out.

She froze and stared at him, at the torment his face expressed so easily and for once her first thought wasn't that her grandson had never learned control. "You haven't called me that since you were five."

Trist raised his head and locked onto her eyes, willing himself to meet the uncomfortable gaze. "Because after I called you that, you slapped me." The memory was sharp, it was one of his most bitter. He'd just wanted her to be proud of him, to love him, and he'd been met with scorn.

"You were mocking me with what I'd called my grandmother." A woman she'd loved dearly who had died before Betty had reached her teen years.

"I wasn't mocking you." He glanced away. "I just wanted you to..." but he couldn't bring himself to say it, couldn't bring himself to ask for love that wouldn't ever be returned in a healthy way. It made him angry. "Fuck this."

He crossed the distance between them and reached up. "For once, you're going to fucking listen to me."

Betty tried to pull away but the cold fingers of her grandson slid across her face, cradled her head. "What do you think you're doing?"

Trist opened himself wide and nearly staggered under the crushing weight of so much noise. He listened and found the one voice, muffled, controlled, under all the chaos and pulled just that thread to him. It made his head split in pain but he had her, and once he had a feel for that thread, that connection that should have been so much more deeply known to him, he ripped it open.

Distantly, he heard her gasp, heard the tea kettle start to whistle, but he didn't pause. He tripped every bit of information about the whole mess and let it spill over him. Each memory, each vision, cascaded like sheeting rain down to his grandmother and she not only saw but saw as he did, Violet's death, his near kidnapping, the files Val found, Gavan being shot, Eshe's near miss and Nuru's violent struggle to keep his child safe. He let it fall as it was, uncensored, as raw and painful as it was for him to experience, across her. He pulled no punches and let her see, for the first time, how he saw.

Mary stood and Val moved without thinking. He let the backpacks fall from his shoulders and quickly stepped between her and where Trist and Betty stood. "Don't." He warned, unsure what he'd do to stop her but knowing he'd have to.

"But," She protested, her eyes sliding from the tall stranger to where her family stood looked in something she'd never seen before. Energy and sight flared around them and it was frightful to see.

"Whatever he's doing, let him." Val locked on her eyes. "Please." The tea kettle was screaming for attention now, forgotten on the stove behind him.

It was a tearing choice, to trust the erratic and often out of control great-nephew with her beloved sister's sanity and maybe even life or to break in and do what all of her instincts and years of training demanded. Before she could resolve just what to do, the pair gasped great breaths of the near drowned and staggered apart.

Val hurried to where Trist stumbled backwards blindly and got a grip on the slender man before he could trip or slam into something. Trist was gasping for breath and trembling, weakened and dazed but he clung to the offered support and Val tried to sooth him. "Shhh, it's okay now, it's okay."

Mary hurried to her sister's side but Betty just shook off the support. She was leaning on her hands, the palms pressed flat to the table top, struggling to make order of all that Trist had so casually dumped on her. It was too much, far too much and there wasn't a single touch of insanity to any of it.

"I never believed..." She hissed out, forcing order back into the chaos.

No one in the room could swear if she meant the strength of Trist's visions in general or the ones he specifically shared. Trist didn't know but he answered both. "You never want to believe." He

fisted his hands into the fabric of Val's shirt and refused to let go.

Betty drew a long, steadying breath and forced herself to stand straight. With rigid, control motions she checked to make sure her hair was perfectly in place before turning to flip the knob on the stove off. The kettle slowly started to wind down its angry wailing.

"Bets?"

She shook her head at her sister's quiet questioning. "Go, get the money and passports from the safe."

"What?"

"Jesus Christ, Mary! Just do it!" She felt her hands shaking and suddenly understood the fragility in her grandson.

Betty was a harsh woman, tightly controlled, demanding of perfection but she rarely ever spoke in anger to Mary. The harsh snapping startled the older woman and she nodded dumbly. "Okay. I will."

That was the last demand Betty could make, she sank down onto one of the long benches that ran the length of the old table and hid her face in her hands for a moment. When she dropped them and glanced to where Trist was clinging to Val, she suddenly saw things differently.

Trist loved this man, really loved him, with all the crazy, half mad abandon that he did everything in life. What was more, the handsome, taller man, seemed almost as attached to her grandson. Most importantly of all, she knew Val had seen Trist in good and bad spells and wasn't swayed by either. He'd be strong enough to stand firm and be a real support to the chaos that swirled around her heir. While she couldn't bring herself to approve of their lifestyle, she found grudging respect for this new lover.

"I knew you were stronger than me." She finally forced out, her voice trembling. "But that..." Her eyes closed as the visions flashed again. "It's like I am in a dark room with a candle but you, you're full afternoon sunlight." Just remembering the vivid strength of Trist's sight was making her breath grow shorter, making her control crumble.

"Maybe," Trist whispered out, gaining strength in defiance. "Maybe next time you'll just shut up and fucking listen to me." He forced his hands to relax and let go of Val's shirt. "Oh, I've a headache." He moaned.

"What will you do? They want you more than Eshe or myself. They will find you." The cold fear that had driven Trist to her door was now wrapped around her own spine.

"I don't know."

Val cleared his throat. "Actually, I've an idea." Two identical pairs of clear green eyes with haunting black circles around them both turned and stared at him and he grinned sheepishly. "If you're willing."

Part Forty One

"Why the hell did I agree to this?" Trist muttered to himself, huddled beside Val and hurrying down the sidewalk beside him.

"Because you said we could trust them."

"No, I said if the worst thing I can damned well pick out of a cop's skull is him fucking some skanky whore, they're not on the take." They were headed for one of three diners in the small town. It was the only one of the three that he wasn't banned from, and that was only because of a favor offered to his grandmother.

Val had insisted they park a good distance away to both secure the car and Maria and Edward's help, not trusting that a pair of cops wouldn't run their plates and track the ownership down. Trist had moaned about the cold but followed beside him with little more than minor complaining.

"Look, neither of us are superheroes and we're in way over our heads. We need to trust someone." They'd gotten Trist's aunt and grandmother bundled off to parts unknown before they called the number on the good cops business card.

Good Cop's name was Lance Shultz, Shultzy to his friends and the one Val had pegged as Bad Cop was John Smith. A name ordinary enough to make anyone over compensate and be willing to be the mean one. Val had been cryptic on the phone, making it clear they were out of the city and someplace safe until Trist nodded permission to set up a location to meet. He used just a hint at what they knew to lure the pair out, knowing they would be out of their jurisdiction. It was a careful balancing act to lure the pair of cops out to meet them without saying too much but just enough to stress the importance of keeping their mouths shut. Shultzy continued to be a good cop and agreed, even when Val demanded they meet at the earliest possible moment.

The earliest possible moment turned out to be one o'clock that afternoon which meant the cops were interested enough to leave almost as soon as they'd hung up the phone. That made Val feel better but he was still edgy while he walked with Trist on one said and his laptop on the other. With the diner in sight, he stopped and caught Trist's arm.

"Last chance to turn around."

Trist eyed the diner and Val before shaking his head. "Let's get this over with."

The diner was warm and smelled of stale fried foods and overly sweet pies. The bulk of the lunch crowd had cleared out and left most of the booths empty, that made spotting the two cops far easier. They'd taken over a booth near the back in an out of the way corner and sat waiting with coats off and coffee cooling in front of them. Val motioned to the back booth but led the way, letting Trist half hide behind him.

The pair of cops stood up as they got closer and Shultzy, the good cop, offered his hand to Val. "Good to see you again, Mr. York."

Val accepted it, glancing around casually but looking as they'd agreed to Trist. The slender man nodded slightly, giving his approval to go forward and that was all he need. "Don't take offense but I'd be happy to never see you again."

"None taken, we came alone, as you requested."

Val nodded and shrugged out of his coat but wasn't surprised when Trist kept his on, choosing instead to strip off his gloves and hat instead. "We're grateful for that, I know it sounds cryptic but I really don't know who we can trust right now."

Trist slid into the booth first, putting himself across from Bad Cop and liking the way the normally outspoken man squirmed at having to face him again. "You know something that makes it worth our time to drive all the way out here, right?" Smith tossed out, trying to regain some sense of control and balance.

"Something like that. I need your both to take this seriously because it's going to sound a touch

fantastic.”

Bit by bit, over several cups of coffee, Val laid out all they'd uncovered. They'd made their mind up to hold nothing back from the police officers when they took the chance and called them in. As coffee was consumed and their story unraveled, Val watched distant disbelief melt into concern and then settle into uneasy worry. Trist stayed silent, biting on his nails or slurping at his overly sweetened coffee and let Val speak for them both.

Shultz sat silent, reading across file after file of reports half finished and answers half found. The picture it was all building toward wasn't a good one and the idea of something this bizarre, this big, frightened him. He glanced to his partner, a man that had watched his back for years and knew the worry would be instantly read.

“So, you're thinking these Power of God Fundamentalist Faith Church sorts are behind all this? Including Hammelman's suicide? Your sister's death? Gavan Maddock's shooting?” Shultz asked carefully, listening to his own voice for sounds of paranoia.

“Hammelman killed himself.” Trist spoke up for the first time. “He was guilty, he tried and convicted himself of treason and hung himself.”

“Because he's told you that?” Smith retorted.

“He was found naked, wearing only a hood, hanging by his neck with the word guilty written across his chest in black marker. He doesn't need to tell me, I can see it.” Trist refused to back down.

“Those were details that were never released.”

Val put a hand on Trist's knee, under the table and stopped him from answering. “Hammelman's not my concern. This list, it's six months old. Who knows which other names have been compromised?”

“Blackmail.” Shultz nodded. “Someone like your boyfriend could be very useful to sorts that want power.”

“We need to take this to the DA.” Smith added.

That made Trist sit up. “No!”

“Trist is right, we don't know who's been compromised now.”

“The DA is a friend of my family.” Smith was nodding now. “Trust me, the man is so squeaky clean he farts soap bubbles. There's nothing on him to blackmail him with.”

“Everyone has something they don't want someone else to know.” Trist muttered around biting an already non-existent nail.

“Besides that, what are you going to show him? A file that could have been rigged? Reports Violet halfway finished? A transcript of a man who says he's psychic? No DA is going to listen to that.” Val used logic to sway the pair. “We've an offer.”

“Okay.”

“They want Trist, we give him to them.”

Both cops sat up in their seats.

"I call them, the church, their number is in those files. I tell them that Trist will do anything I ask him, that I can control him. I'll tell them that I want to meet with them to discuss an arrangement. We get them out here, you bug us and tape everything and then rush in and save the day. That should get you enough evidence to take it to the state or the federal government or whatever for a warrant for further."

"That's a dangerous offer." Shultz started slowly.

"It'll only be dangerous if you pick the wrong people to help you, or the wrong judge to sign off on this. I'm afraid our options have been limited down to stopping them or moving to Mexico."

"I don't speak Spanish." Trist tried to joke but it came out flat and unfunny. "They killed Val's sister, they shot Gavan, they tried to kidnap me and they've threatened my family and friends." He glanced to Val and half grinned. "We may not be heroes but we aren't cowards either."

"We can help you get hard evidence and we're trusting you two to take them apart with it." Val finished, trying not to think about how it all connected, how fate had so interwoven their lives. He didn't care, fate or chance or something more, he was just grateful his life had become so entangled with Trist's.

The cops exchanged a look and a choice was made. "Give us an hour to make some calls."

Val nodded and slid a paper and a computer disk across the table that he'd hidden in his pocket. "Directions to the house we're staying out, phone numbers and the like. The disk is a copy of those files. We're trusting you two with our lives, do you understand that?"

Oddly, it was Smith that had grown serious and nodded. "Don't worry, we'll keep you safe."

"Thank you."

"No." Shultz finished. "Thank you for trusting us."

The hour became two and then almost three but instead of a phone call, a half dozen cars had pulled up out front of the Maddocks' home. Shultz and Smith had taken the warning very seriously and called only those they'd personally trust with their lives. It was a mishmashed gathering of state, city and Federal agents all under the command of the Feds. The sight of the dozen men and women made Val irrationally frightened, he'd never been skittish around police before but then, he'd never had so much to lose before.

"Stay there!" He shouted from the porch, letting Trist hover behind the screen door. The slender man had been pacing and biting his nails in his nerves and nothing Val said was strong enough to distract him.

"It's just us." Shultz said, stepping forward with his hands held out. "It's okay."

Behind him Trist snorted. "Too many lumped up for me to get a clear thought on."

"Sue me for being a touch paranoid." Val called back. "We're doing this our way. Come up onto the porch slowly, one at a time. No one's getting in here unless Trist says it's okay."

Odd glances were exchanged around the group but Smith spoke to the woman in charge and she nodded. "Deal!" Shultz shouted back and slowly, with his hands in clear sight, he came up onto the porch.

Trist tossed his head inside, shivering in the cold. "To the right is the parlor, it's big enough."

"Thanks." Shultzzy nodded and smiled the way he did to small children.

"I'm crazy, not stupid!" Trist snapped back.

It made Shultzzy flush a little, unbalanced from the very idea that anyone would know his thoughts or emotions so clearly. "Of course." He nodded and kept moving.

One by one the dozen or so people, all carrying equipment and computers, came up onto the porch. Some of them Trist stared at for long moments, his eyes glazed over and some he snickered at from visions only he could see but none of them did he refuse or turn away. The parlor quickly filled up and Val ignored the fussing to find a throw blanket to toss around Trist's thin shoulders.

"Better?"

Trist just nodded, his teeth chattering a little. "Will be, they're good Val, this just might fucking work."

"Hope so, I want to get you home again."

Trist stepped closer, into Val's personal space and leaned over to whisper. "I want to get you naked, screaming my name again." The look of shock and lust warning on the startled face pulled a mild chuckle from Trist. He was too stressed, too tired to out right laugh but he saved Val further embarrassment and didn't kiss him.

He left Val standing in the hallway and shuffled into the parlor. Smith tossed his head toward Val. "What happened to your boyfriend? He looks like a cat after you've stepped on it's tail."

"What are you fucking doing? Trying to be nice to me?"

Smith just shrugged. "Way I see it, if you are what you say you are, it's better to keep on your good side."

Trist snorted and shook his head. "I don't have a good side."

"Seriously, we got off to a bad start, I want you to know we'll do right by you two."

"I already know that or we wouldn't have called, Sport." Trist dropped the man's childhood nickname without thinking about it. Val passed by him and he followed, wanting to not think and just do whatever Val thought was best.

"Mr. York, Mr. Maddocks, This is Michelle Valinski, she's a friend of mine from the FBI's local bureau office. That's what took so long, we called in the big guns." Shultzzy grinned and it had a silly look to it when his eyes fell on the strong featured but rather plain woman.

Valinski offered her hand, her dark hair cut short. "It's a pleasure to meet you both."

Val accepted it. "Please, call me Val." It was a psychological tactic, they were less likely to take too many risks if they felt friendly with each other. "This is Trist." He introduced but Trist was chewing on a nail and studying Shultzzy and ignoring the offered handshake. "He doesn't shake hands."

"Oh, sorry." She withdrew her hand and tried to study the pair before her.

"Shultzzy! You dog!" Trist blurted out and grinned. It made Shultzzy blush and several eyes turn his way.

"Behave." Val whispered.

"Sorry." Trist hissed back but didn't sound sorry.

"Well, I won't overwhelm you both with a slew of names, everyone here is trustworthy, I assure you." Valinski started around her people were opening cases and hooking up wires, moving with a plan that obviously had already been thought out. "Due to the urgency of this, we thought it best to move quickly. We're going to hook up some equipment and then have you call them, Val, okay?"

He nodded. "Okay."

"We've been going over those files, you say your sister gave them to you?"

Val shook his head. "No, she hid them in one of my books. Trist found it. Violet took her job seriously, she was very stubborn."

"Well, it appears someone at Power of God gave her remote access to their system. Our tech guys think they can trace it down to a short list of who might have done that, we'll find the whistle blower. Shultz and Smith were working with me about the break in at your apartment building, the thought was that since no warrants were filed it had to have been on the federal level."

"I told you they were cops." Trist muttered.

"Not quite." She broke in. "There isn't any investigation of you on a federal or local level, however, we were able to cross reference the only clear image of one of the men's faces we had. He's ex-FBI, he found god and went to the private sector because he couldn't work for a country that had turned its back on god, as he saw it."

"He joined Power of God." Val nodded.

"Yes, and there's a quiet investigation of the church going on right now, into weapons dealing, corruption, a handful of other charges only every time anyone gets close, they back off for no reason or drop the investigation."

"Blackmailed."

"Most likely, we've no real proof yet."

"I'll blackmail their sorry asses into doing their fucking jobs." Trist muttered.

"Fortunately, that won't be necessary." Valinski smiled. "Now, let's get to work."

An hour and half later, Trist was slumped against Val's side but the taller man still sat with totally perfect posture. The small team of law enforcement had been going over a thousand details, coaching Val on how to sound and what to say and the whole thing just left Trist exhausted. It wasn't easy being around so many focused people, let alone sitting in his grandmother's parlor with all of those memories taunting him. It made sorting out the voices, the real ones and the ones only he could hear, more difficult.

"Are you sure you can do this?" Valinski asked, Shultz had sat near her as the pair seemed comfortable working with him.

Val nodded. "I know I can."

"Shut up!" Trist hissed and curled forward, resting his forearms on his knees and clasping his hands over his head.

That earned them more than a few glances, and more than one worried look was passed around the cops. Val smiled softly and rubbed his hand across Trist's back, trying to sooth some of the tension away.

"There's a lot of people here for him, it can get a bit loud." He leaned forward to get Trist's attention. "You okay?"

Trist glanced up but his eyes fell on the large, sad brown of Val's niece. She stood silently, sadly, off to the side alone and wasn't trying to get his attention anymore. All she did was watch, with those bottomless eyes that broke his heart. "I'd be better if she'd go away!"

Valinski followed Trist's glance and saw only an empty corner. She was the only woman on the team. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend."

"Not you, her!" Trist nodded toward the still empty corner. "Never fucking mind. I'm fine." And he tired to smile to prove to Val he was but it came out as a grimace. "Let's just get this over with."

"I think you should go upstairs while I call them." Val answered softly, not sure how much attention Trist had been paying to the last hour.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to have to say some mean things about you, I don't want you hearing that."

Trist sat up suddenly and swept in to press his lips quickly to Val's, not caring that they were in a room of cops, or that even the hurried buss made Val blush and stiffen in embarrassment. "It's okay, baby, I know what a good liar you are."

Val didn't know how to answer that and luckily for him, Shultz saved him from having to. The cop dropped a hand on Val's shoulder. "Come on, let's see if they bite."

He nodded and stood up, calling from the phone in the kitchen while the bulk of the crew listened in from their equipment in the parlor. Val had asked for as small of an audience as possible, not sure he could sound convincing if the entire room was watching him, and they'd reluctantly agreed. The only condition was that Shultz would be there to prompt or encourage him. Val doubted he'd need it, he knew how important it was for them to believe him.

Val's hands felt shaky but they looked steady as he glanced to the paper he was holding. It had the phone number they'd wanted him to call written on it as well as the formal address of the farm house. He was afraid his mind would blank and get the numbers reversed when actually under pressure.

Supposedly, the number was an internal one, not the publicly published phone number the Church used. He pressed the buttons and drew a slow steadying breath as it started to ring.

"You'll be fine." Shultz spoke quietly behind him.

Val ignored him and listened to the line ring, on the seventh buzz a cheerful woman's voice answered.

"Power of God, God loves you, this is Suzie, what extension please?"

"I don't have an extension, I need to speak with your supervisor."

"I'm sorry sir, if you don't have an extension, you'll have to dial the main 800 number."

"Unless you want to be fired, find me a supervisor that knows who Tristram Maddocks is and find me one now." He studied his feet. "I'm not a man that likes to be kept waiting."

Suzie paused on the other end of the phone, obviously weighing her options but like Val had guessed, she wasn't going to buck someone seemingly in charge. "Yes, sir, hold one moment."

First hurdle safely crossed and Val's heart was pounding in his throat. The clock over the stove showed that only a moment had passed but it felt far longer. The line clicked and then beeped as he was transferred and finally a male voice came on the line.

"Who is this?"

No introductions but Val hadn't expected it. "Valentine York, the brother of the woman you had murdered. I have some things you might want."

"I don't know anything about a murder, this call is in reference to Tristram Maddocks?"

"He's one of the things I have." Val kept his voice harsh, just on the border of anger.

"What is it you want, Mr. York?"

Val glanced to Shultz and the hopeful look on the man's face was too much so he dropped his eyes back to his own shoes. "I want the people responsible for my sister's death. You didn't really think I'd believe your whole fake terrorist investigation bullshit did you? I have the copy of your files, I've read them, I think we may have mutually agreeable goals. The only thing standing between a very profitable relationship is the bastards that killed Violet. You give me them, I give you Tristram."

"And the files?"

"Stay safely in a secure location to prevent some accident befalling me as well."

"How can I know you can deliver what you say you can?"

"I found you didn't I? Tristram is good, better than the half assed sorts you've got working for you now. He's crazy, totally crazy and nothing you can do to him will get him to co-operate if he doesn't want to. He's useless to you without me."

"What is it you want, Mr. York? Beyond the people I may or may not be able to deliver to you?"

"Same thing everyone wants, a ton of money. Trist means nothing to me, he's a means to an end of bringing justice to my sister's name. Once I have that, I don't care what you want him for." It twisted his heart to say that but it came out as coldly empty as he needed it to sound.

"I won't discuss this further over the phone."

"Sensibly so, I'll be here tomorrow at nine am, write this address down." Val read off the farmhouses address slowly. "I know you have a team in the city. Have them here tomorrow and we'll come to an arrangement so long as you deliver."

"That shouldn't be a problem, Mr. York. So long as you can demonstrate your control over Mr. Maddocks."

That was it, they wanted Trist, if they knew he'd be there, they'd show up. "I'll have him here will

bells on.”

“Good, look for my people tomorrow.” The line cut off.

Val sagged and dropped the phone back onto the receiver. “Oh, God.” A warm hand fell on Val’s shoulder and he followed it up the arm to meet Shultzzy’s eyes.

“I promise you, we won’t let anything happen to either of you.”

He nodded but wasn’t sure he believed it, there would be no promises doing this. His hands were shaking now and he let Shultzzy guide him back into the parlor and the waiting Valinski. Val didn’t make it that far, Trist hovered out in the hallway, biting on a nail.

“I’ll meet you in the room.” Shultzzy nodded and slipped ahead. People were always moving about but it was obvious that Val wasn’t comfortable with public displays of affection.

They stood there, in the hallway, for just a heartbeat, and stared at each other before Trist bowed his head and hurried forward. Val opened his arms and let the slender man tumble against him, unsure just which Trist he was getting. The hurt one needing comfort, the worried one looking for security, the passionate one that was horny or one who’s face he hadn’t seen before, but none surfaced and Trist just hugged him tight.

“Not mad at me?”

Trist shook his head against the chest but he didn’t let go. “Do I?” He asked in a small voice.

“Do you what?”

“Mean nothing to you?”

“What?” Val’s blood chilled.

“You said I meant nothing to you.”

“It was just what they needed to hear.”

“It’s the only time you called me Trist, you said, Trist means nothing to me, not Tristram. It’s okay you know, I’m just happy being here.” He nuzzled his face against Val’s neck. “It really is, I’m not Kelly, always bitching that you’re too emotionally distant.”

The soft voice, almost drifting with it’s need to know and fear of the truth, was used to being hurt. Val had heard it enough times in the voices of his clients. Those too beaten by anger and emptiness to ever expect more and it made his chest feel hollow to hear it from Trist.

Val pulled away enough to slid his hands on either side of Trist’s face before he bent forward to kiss the other man. The idea he could so easily kiss another man away from locked doors made him feel lightheaded and a little like a stranger to himself, until their lips actually met. Even the simple, chaste, kiss was enough to remind him of how right being around Trist felt.

“I wouldn’t be able to survive if I lost you.” It was the truth that was making him so frightened. He wasn’t worried about his own safety but if Trist were hurt, or worse, killed, Val knew he’d never recover. There was no doubt, it was that fear of loss that was holding him back from totally falling for Trist.

“Self preservation.” Trist spoke for them both, but he closed his eyes and let Val’s hands slid down to his shoulders. “We should get back in there, Dickless Tracy has plans for us.”

Part Forty Two

Somewhere as the afternoon faded away, Val volunteered to cook for the entire team. It seemed a better idea than ordering in pizzas and since the bulk of the team were spending the night at the house or in surveillance outside the house it wasn't like they were going anywhere. It was a good thing too, since his nerves were so wound up and cooking was his favorite form of distraction.

"Okay." Valinski said, pointing with a hunk of half eaten garlic bread. "We'll have people watching all night, so don't worry and we've put bugs in most of the rooms so we'll be listening too. There won't be any trouble tonight though, so sleep soundly. Tomorrow morning, at six, we'll wire you two up and than back off."

"That's the problem." Shultz finished for her, stealing sideways glances at the handsome woman he was so secretly in love with. "The only place for us to stay out of sight is those sheds. They're set back from the house so if trouble starts, you two have to hit the deck and hole up cause it'll take us a good, thirty, forty seconds to cross the yard and get in here. Don't be heroes, don't be foolish, get your heads down and wait for us. Understand?"

Val nodded and Trist just pushed his food about his plate.

"This is really good. You should, like open a restaurant or something." Smith added around a mouth full of penne.

After plans had been gone over, twice, Val excused himself to shower. He needed the hot water to sooth some of the nervous fear away, wanting to be as stable as possible while around Trist. When he turned the water off and towed his hair dry, he pulled on the only pair of cotton pants he'd packed and a plain t-shirt. Dressed presentably but still barefoot he made his way downstairs and found the house quietly empty except for Shultz and Valinski hunched over a laptop going over files and trying not to touch. The sight made Val smile softly and loath to interrupt so he went in search of Trist on his own.

Instead of finding Trist, he found a second parlor toward the back of the house. Square and open, with turn of the last century bent wood chairs lined against the walls and pots overflowing with rabbit foot ferns sitting on stands. The light switch was a push button and it turned on an antique fixture in the center of the room.

It wasn't a parlor, but a music room and Val stood inside the doorway surprised. Music stands were partially folded to the side. A few cases were stacked in the back holding unseen instruments but the room was dominated with a grand piano. He knew from the color of the dark wood and the shape of the legs before he even walked over to it that it was a Bechstein, and a well maintained one at that.

He wandered over, figuring no one would mind, and ran a gentle hand over the high polish of the wood. When he raised the cover over the keys and struck C, the note rang clearly and hung in the air. Idly, he picked out a light tune, a simple one with a single hand and waited for Trist to show up and scream at him to stop. He wasn't nearly a skilled enough player to be worthy of such a grand old piano but the vibrations it trembled into the air were cleansing.

When no one came in to tell him to stop, Val pulled the bench out and slid behind it. He let his fingers find half remembered melodies and bits of classical music he'd been forced to learn as a child. Snatches of lullabies switched into bits of pop songs and Val slowly forgot to be self conscious. Slowly it formed into a song he'd taught himself how to play shortly after he'd read of Matt's death.

The song was simple. The melancholy notes hung in the empty room and memory tugged at Val. Without thinking about it he began to sing softly to the carefully played tune.

"In every heart, there is a room, a sanctuary safe and strong. To heal the wounds of lovers past, until a new one comes along. I spoke to you in cautious tones, you answered me with no pretense. And still I feel I said too much. My silence is my self defense. And every time I've held a rose, it seems I only felt the thorns. And so it goes, and so it goes, and so will you soon, I suppose."

Trist had been wandering around the large and empty house. Catching glimpses of the families his grandmother and aunt had raised there. They'd married brothers, good, strong men of a solid family that had been entwined with their own for centuries. They'd lived together and raised a dozen children under their combined roof.

It used to be something that had pissed Trist off, seeing so clearly all that he'd be denied. There was no house filled with laughter and children growing in his future. There would never be any long steady relationship to pass the years with. He'd even happily embrace the grief of burying a spouse to have had the lifetime shared. The happy memories only served to make the emptiness of his days seem starker by contrast.

Music filtered to him, the gentle sounds of the piano in the music room that so many of his family had learned to play over the years. The piano that Trist had never even been allowed to touch for fear of the damage he would cause. The melancholy randomness of the music drew him toward the room, in search of who was picking out such carefully played tunes.

It surprised him a little and at the same not at all to see Val sitting at the bench. His hair still damp and falling limply. Long fingers splayed across the keys in graceful arches and his torso swayed a little with the changing music. The sight set an ache inside of Trist's chest, something sharp and desperate. The beauty of seeing his love sitting quietly, playing out emotion he had such trouble finding words for, nearly broke his heart.

There was no need for them both to be worried and dejected about the next morning, and maybe even the days to follow, separately. Trist took a step into the room, wanting to go to Val and wrap his arms around him and for just a few moments chase away the fears. Before he made it further than that step, Val began to sing softly. His voice low and overwhelmed by the strength of the piano but Trist could pick the words out with ease. It froze his steps and entranced him.

"But if my silence made you leave, then that would be my worst mistake. So I will share this room with you, and you can have this heart to break. And this is why, my eyes are closed. It's just as well for all I've seen. And so it goes, and so it goes, and you're the only one who knows. So I will choose to be with you, that's if the choice were mine to make. But you can make decisions too and you can have this heart to break. And so it goes, and so it goes, and you're the only one who knows."

Trist watched as Val's careful hands caressed the last, slowly sad notes from the song and he stilled in front of the piano. For a heartbeat neither man moved, Val stared straight ahead at his own reflection in the polished wood and Trist was ensnared in the emotion of the moment.

"Please." Trist finally whispered into the silence, making Val start. "Don't stop."

Val spun at the whisper and felt himself blushing to think that Trist had stood there, listening. "How long have you been there?" It felt intimate, as if Trist had caught him masturbating.

One slender shoulder rose and fell. "Long enough. That was beautiful. You are beautiful."

Val dropped his glance, unable to be studied by those intense, open eyes. "It's Billy Joel."

"Your mother taught you to play." Trist announced.

It wasn't a question but Val nodded.

"You should play more often."

"I'm not very good at it."

"Please," Trist took another step into the room and stopped, frightened that he'd shatter the moment. "Please, keep playing. For me?"

"What did you want me to play?"

"Anything. That song? I liked it."

Val kept his head bowed but he nodded and turned back to the keys, trying to ignore the fact that someone was listening now and trying to tell himself it was okay. The tune to the song came out easily but his ears weren't listening for mistakes, instead they caught the soft footfalls of Trist crossing the room.

That meant he should have been ready for the hands that settled on his shoulders but the contact still made him jump a little in wound up nerves. His fingers faltered but he kept playing, ignoring the errors and missed notes as the hands on his shoulders ruffled upward. They splayed out across the back of his neck before moving up to glide among his damp hair.

A warm body settled on the bench behind and slightly beside him but Val kept his eyes on the keys. He wasn't sure he could stand it to see Trist there. Torn now between wanting to surrender totally to Trist and completely terrified of the very idea. When faced with his own emotions, he did what he always did, he hid.

Lips fell onto his neck. Soft, gentle, loving and Val's fingers jerked away from the keys. Hot breath tickled his ear and Trist whispered close to his skin. "Don't stop."

Val's own breath caught on a hitched gasp. The request was erotic without really being meant as such. There was nothing blatant about playing the piano, especially the sad song that he kept repeating. It was the tenderness with which Trist was kissing his neck, the worshipful way the other man was suckling on an ear, the intimacy of something so private shared with no shame, that was the foundation of the eroticism.

It was a solid foundation on which to build. Val closed his eyes and let the music move his fingers on it's own. Trist's hands slid across his body, down, over his chest and stomach before finding the hem on the cotton and tugging it upward. He thought it was to allow those hands to roam against skin instead of fabric but he was wrong. They didn't actually touch him, instead they pulled the cloth upward to his shoulders and over his head. His hands had to come away from the keys long enough to allow Trist to slide the fabric down and off but as soon as they were free, they were back picking out notes without being promoted.

Fingertips slid across his flesh as gently as his own slid across the ivory keys. A fingernail traced the shape and form of collarbone and throat, nipple and navel, and each fluttering touch made Val's breath hitch in his throat. The lips that rained soft, whispery kisses onto his skin, across his shoulder, made him want to sob in hungry need but he lacked the strength to so surrender.

Trist stood from the bench and his hands slid to Val's ribs. The contact was unspoken but words didn't seem necessary, the touch told Val the other man wanted him to stand and so he stood, the music faltering as he gained his feet. Down the fingers glided to rest inside the simple cotton waistband before moving lower, carrying the cotton with them. Val wanted to protest. He wanted to remind Trist that he couldn't be naked in a music room. He wanted to point out the cops

sitting, most likely listening to them in the room and the fact that said cops could walk in on them at any moment. He flushed red from uncertainty, vulnerability and wanted to protest but the only thing he did was raise each foot as he was directed and then stand, still playing, naked in front of the old piano.

"Beautiful, you're so fucking beautiful." Trist whispered, awed by not just the physical form standing so tense in front of him but all the tightly wound emotion begging to be unraveled.

"I'm not." Val protested, his music stopping, embarrassed enough that he was only half aroused when behind a closed bedroom door he knew he'd be aching with want.

"Shhh, play, you are beautiful, play for me."

Val shivered but his hands found the keys again. The original music was gone, he wasn't even sure what he was playing now. It was just strung together chords and notes that spoke to his own loneliness, his own fears and heartbreak. Trist didn't touch him again right away, leaving him uncertain and alone. A hand snaked forward and dropped a hair tie on the shiny surface of the piano and Val shivered again, imagining Trist shaking his hair from the tightly controlled braid he wore.

Then he was there, still clothed body pressing to Val's back. His hands running softly across Val's body in an effort to memorize the feel. The tickle of the free floating dark hair made goose bumps tingle the flesh of his shoulder and he started to forget that he was supposed to be embarrassed.

The hands slid to his waist and lips fell to the back of his neck to suckle on the knobs of vertebrae. Kisses fell across fevered skin as Val kept his eyes closed and his fingers moving. Down Trist kissed, nipping lightly at the base of a shoulder blade, sliding hands over shoulders and down tense arms. Down he kissed until his arms wrapped around Val's waist and Trist tucked his face against the small of Val's back. There was a fluttery feeling that took Val a moment to understand, his skin had become a thousand million nerve endings and he was feeling the soft brush of Trist's eyelashes as the man blinked.

"I love you." Trist whispered. "God, I love you so."

The tight, odd hug, released and Trist's hands slid onto Val's ass. The touch made Val's playing stumble again but he kept going. Hot kisses fell to the small of his back, burning now, before dropping lower. Nothing in his history, or even in his fantasy, prepared Val for the first feel of those soft lips placed to his entrance. He jerked away, startled, but the hands on his hips held him in place.

"No." It was wrong. That wasn't a place to kiss, it was a means to an end and wrong. It was just wrong. He tried to pull away again but a wide, hot tongue slid across his flesh and pleasure poured across his body. His hands hit the keys but it made a discordant noise. "Don't!" He tried to protest again even as that tormenting tongue grew hotter on his flesh.

"Please, give me this." Trist didn't wait for permission.

Val shivered and forgot that he was supposed to be playing. He clutched at the piano and thought he might pass out he was having such trouble breathing. That tormenting tongue kept sweeping over a million nerve endings and Val heard someone moan before he realized it was coming from his own throat. Just as he thought he couldn't stand any more, just as he was getting painfully hard, that wet tongue slid inside his body.

"Oh, my God!" Val twitched and jerked from the unexpected pleasure, caught like a fly in a spider web of shame and delight. His hands sounded rough notes on the piano as his body trembled. "Oh, God, no." Val knew he was blushing red from embarrassment but it felt too good

to care.

One of Trist's hands slid down his thigh and bent his knee. Val was too far gone to protest but his knee sounded odd notes when it was placed to rest on the keys. This opened him up, exposed him further, and the dirty shame of it almost had him climaxing. If the thought wasn't powerful enough, Trist's hands running across his body, teasing his throbbing cock and tight balls with ghosting touches, made things ache so much more. Trist's tongue was fucking him, that was the only thought Val could hold in his mind, Trist's tongue was fucking him.

Every startled jerk Val made twitched his body on the keys and sounded music. It mingled with the stuttering, breathy moans he was trying to hold in and Trist swallowed the sounds whole. His plan had been to rim Val for a while, get him nice and loosened up, and then fuck him right there over the keys, but from the sounds Val was trying not to make, the taller man wasn't going to make it that far. Trist slid his tongue lower, tracing down to the touch of skin between ass and balls and now, more desperate sounds followed the track of his tongue.

Val shuddered, his knee propped on the keys sliding further down the scale, as Trist licked and then sucked one ball and then the other. "Oh, stop, I..." He moaned. "I can't." His voice whined but he wasn't sure what he was asking for.

Strong hands pulled Val from the piano and made him stagger backwards. He followed mindlessly and let Trist turn him around. Before he could protest, he was being pushed back again, his ass striking the cold keys and Trist's mouth hotly swallowing him to his root. He opened his eyes just long enough to glance down, and saw Trist. His eyes shut, his hair falling loose, fully clothed, deep throating him.

"Oh... God... Trist..." that's as much of a warning as Val got out before he fell over the edge and lost what shreds of control he had. His body arched, his hands hitting the keys and his world exploded. His feet kicked for purchase but they ended up sliding on the floor below him. The sounds of the piano were harsh and vibrated through his body as Trist swallowed his release whole. It left him splayed across the keys of a grand piano, naked, sweating, trembling and wanting more.

He glanced down once more to see Trist softly licking slightly puffy lips and it was too much. Val bowed backwards and dropped his head onto the piano. He lay there, panting, slowly settling down, and simply unable to move. From his knees, he sensed more than saw or felt movement. It was too much work to lift his head and figure out what Trist was doing.

Trist made a mental note to thank his Aunt Mary and her chronically dry skin. She had bottles or tubes of lotion stashed in every drawer, in almost every room in the house. He found one on the first try and smiled at the thick, slick cream for severely dry skin. The smile fled when he glanced back to the piano and saw Val still draped over it. It was simply the sexiest thing he'd ever seen, ever. It made him whimper, and then growl.

He stalked across the dozen or so steps to where Val was splayed out and while still fully clothed, bowed over him. Trist ran his hands into damp hair and fisted a grip into it hard enough to lift Val's exhausted head. The eyes fluttered open and quickly squinted shut again when Trist claimed a bruising kiss. Val's mouth surrendered to him, parted as easily as his knees fell apart and invited him to be bold.

Trist knew he was going to take Val, he just didn't want to be fully clothed when he did it. It was a temptation though, to just slide open his pants and take that sweet body as his own. In the end, it was the thought of feeling skin against skin that made him release Val's mouth and step backwards.

The cloth seemed stubborn and didn't wish to part from his body. Trist tore at it, pulling it roughly off, exposing his skin to the cooler night air and not even feeling it. There was no room for chilly

nights when he glanced up and saw Val's lust darkened brown eyes watching him with a tinge of sadness and a covering of desperation. Lost in that glance, he was lucky to remember that lube was a good thing.

Slick fingers left prints on the highly polished wood of the piano bench but Trist didn't care. He pulled it to rest behind his legs, standing between Val who was still draped across the keys, and the bench. He knew what he wanted, he pulled Val's hips down, sliding his ass from the keys so his weight was rested on the small of his back instead. Without being asked or directed, Val braced both feet on the bench behind Trist's legs, arched out between his arms across the top of the piano, the spot his back touched the keys and the unsteady bracing of his raised heels.

There was no room left for words and for once even Trist was silent. He stepped forward between the circle of Val's legs and claimed the parted and waiting mouth again for a searing kiss. One hand automatically tightly fisted into Val's hair, pulling slightly, knowing it had to hurt and not caring. The other positioned his slicked cock and held himself steady as he pushed forward, entering Val with no further warning.

Trist whimpered, lost in the agony of the tightness that swallowed him. Val had been impossibly tight their first time and that had been after careful stretching and preparations. Now with only his tongue and a solid orgasm to ease the way, Trist was certain he should stop. He knew he had to be hurting Val but he couldn't stop.

Val moaned and if the hand hadn't been buried so tightly in his hair he would have let his head drop back down. It did hurt, just like the sharp pain of his hair being pulled and just like that, he embraced it. His skin felt clammy with the shock of the steady penetration and the overwhelming emotions that were carried with it. Trist stole his breath in a ravaging kiss and took all that he had during that long, stubborn first joining.

All logic and sense said to stop. Val knew his body wasn't ready, not yet, and he knew his heart wasn't nearly ready to be laid so bare and exposed. Self preservation Trist had called it and it screamed that they should stop. He resolved to say the word as soon as his mouth was free.

Trist broke the kiss and whimpered again, only this time it was directly against Val's ear. Val's mouth worked as he tried to speak, Trist was taking him in harsh, deep thrusts causing his body to rock and shudder on the piano. He struggled to form that single word and slowly it bubbled up and found voice.

"More." Val whispered, startled himself at the request that fell from his lips. Self preservation be damned. If they stopped, he'd die. No matter how sore his ass was going to be or how broken his heart might feel, he needed this more. "More." He begged again, his voice raspy and soft.

The single command shattered Trist. He groaned low, in the back of his throat and let himself go. His hands found the strong waist, the strength hidden both in the Val's body and his soul, and helped to steady his lover.

Impossibly, Val's cock was slowly rousing from its sleep. The rough, deep thrusts, the primal need Trist was showing for him, placed desire into his veins. He wasn't hard again, not yet, but he was getting there and each time the head of his cock brushed against Trist's bare skin he was closer. Each time Trist sighed or growled, he moved closer still to full arousal.

"Oh, fuck, baby..." Trist gasped and his hips shuddered in the deep, uneven motions of release.

Val felt it and brushed aside the touch of disappointment that their joining was cut short. The sound of Trist's voice, the harsh, tormented breaths, soothed his ego. He'd done that to Trist, he'd given that to him and that placed a warm happiness in his chest. He risked his precarious position long enough to move one arm and sooth it through the shower of black hair.

"We should get dressed." He whispered, keeping the tinge of regret from his voice. There was nothing to regret, even if he missed the chance to come with Trist fucking him. If fortune smiled on them and fate was kind, they'd have plenty of more times in the future.

Trist lifted his face and leaned his head into the touch. "Why? We're not finished yet." He slid his still aching cock out slightly and back in and delighted in the shocked lust that shivered visibly across Val.

"Holy mercy." Val shuddered in understanding. Trist had come, yes, roughly, filled with need and desire, but he hadn't finished. The cock still buried tightly in his ass wasn't softening with the glow of release but throbbing with the ache of want. There wasn't even a touch of slight discomfort now as Trist took another experimental thrust. It made Val boneless and he lost his balance on the piano.

This time, Trist caught him as he fell. Steadied him as he found his footing on the floor, guided him while they were still joined backwards, and pulled him down to sit across his lap when he perched them on the bench. That was amazing, the angle changed, the taking was slower, more languid and when Val opened his eyes, he fell into Trist's.

The position was intimate. Matt had tried it once, when they were seniors and Val had protested and pulled away. Sitting on his lap, chest to chest, eyes so close, lips within a breath of each other, it was too much. It had felt too much like lovemaking and not just sex and he'd run, frightened and shamed.

There was no running now. He parted his mouth when Trist wanted to kiss him, tilted his neck when Trist wanted to nip the pulse that beat there. He felt no shame at how his hands clutched Trist's back, forgetting bruises and the need to be gentle. He felt only a sense of rightness and tucked his legs up so he was kneeling on the bench, letting him raise and lower himself on that wonderful, perfect cock.

The sight of Val fucking himself on Trist's own desire was nearly too much. It undid him, stole his breath and control. His hands were freed now from guiding their joining and they roamed over chest to tease and tickle down sides and back. One found a newly awakened cock between them and pumped it lightly, tormenting, just enough to wrest ever louder sounds from Val. His mouth devoured Val's skin hungrily, suckling and marking any flesh he fell within his reach.

"Lean back, my beautiful Valentine, lean back." Trist ordered, using his hands to support Val's lower back as the lithe form complied.

The angle changed and Val nearly blacked out. The combination of having his head back so far, his hands smacking unmusically into the keys again, and Trist now hitting his prostate dead on was almost too much. His world was gone, his mind was fragmented to the point that Val wasn't even sure if he should keep the pace they'd set or just let go of the keys and collapse into a puddle on the floor. The idea of not finding release now seemed almost more merciful than to continue consumed in such blinding, painful pleasure.

If Trist had a book of memories, things he'd save for when he was fully insane to flip through and remind him that life didn't always hate him, seeing Val arched backward in one long, graceful bridge between their hips and the piano would be close to the front page. There was no hushed moans now, Val's mouth moved but no words formed and the moans that slid past his control were loud. The sounds grew desperate, the look on Val's twisted up face was moving into one of pain and Trist took mercy upon him and really, fully pumped the neglected cock trapped between them.

It didn't take much, a stroke or two and Val was gone. Trist tried to hold on, to the writhing, shuddering, gasping sweat slick body that was entrapped in his arms, to his own control, trying to ignore the startling pleasure of Val's release on his own need. He held to the moment and

memory, wanted to crawl inside this single instant and never emerge into the harshness of day to day reality. He prayed to a god he couldn't believe in for a chance to have this for just a little longer and even in the silence of his own mind he wasn't sure if he meant a little longer right now or for just a few more days, weeks, months.

God didn't listen. Slick and hot inside of Val's trembling body, lost in the keening, desperate cries of his climax, Trist lost his battle for control. As he pushed himself deeper, tumbled into shivering delight, he gathered the exhausted and limp body of his lover into his arms and held him tight. Val's arms snaked around his head, pulling them closer still while Trist finally knew he hadn't just died.

His cock was soft inside of Val's body and he knew the legs still folded outside his own had to have been cramping up by the time Trist found his voice. "Now, now, we're finished." He whispered into the neck his face was buried in. The sweat on his body was cooling and he was starting to shiver in chilled cold.

Val clung desperately for a moment, struggling to gain control of his emotions now that his heart was no longer trying to beat it's way free of his ribs and his breath short and gasping. The physical was so much easier to control but Val had long experience reigning in his emotions. He let his hands stroke one more time through the loose silk of Trist's hair before he nodded.

"We should try to sleep, tomorrow will be a long day."

They'd just had stunningly wonderful sex and already Val was retreating. Trist's cock was still tucked, slightly, in Val's body and already the man was hiding emotionally. Trist pulled away, caught the sides of Val's face and forced him to lock his eyes on him.

"Know that no matter what happens, I love you." He wondered if he said it a million times if he could get it to really sink into Val's stubborn skull.

Val nodded but glanced away.

Trist just shook his head before he swooped in to plant a soft kiss on the tip of Val's nose and smack a hand on his bare ass. "Off of me, if you can. Your legs have to be cramped up."

They slowly untangled and Val rubbed the cramps from his thighs. He forced a smile as he accepted the small pile of tissues Trist handed him. "I knew all those hours biking would pay off." He tried to make it teasing.

"It's okay." Trist whispered as he turned his back and pulled his pants on. "I know, it's okay. Let's get upstairs to bed, I feel like snuggling."

Val stopped, frozen for a moment. He wasn't sure just what Trist knew, he wasn't even sure what he knew himself yet but he felt soothed at the words. He knew he felt vulnerable right now, exposed more now that they were redressing than when he was naked and being fucked on the piano. He knew something in his chest felt like it was bleeding. What he didn't know was what any of it meant, not yet, he wasn't ready, but it was okay because Trist had said it was.

Val found his shirt and tugged it back on, somehow Trist was dressed already and moving toward the music room door, pausing with his hand on the light switch. "Do you think they heard?" He felt a blush creeping across him at the thought.

Trist just shrugged and turned the light out as Val joined him. "Don't care." He slid a hand into Val's and half tugged him out into the hallway. They paused in front of the parlor door and he glanced in. "We're going to bed."

Valinski glanced up from where she still sat close to Shultz and nodded. "Sleep well, you two,

and don't worry, we're right here."

"Thanks." Trist nodded because Val had his head down, his eyes lost in thought. Shultzzy had his head down too, only he was blushed bright red. There was no doubt they'd heard. He tugged on Val's hand and his brooding lover followed him to bed silently.

Part Forty Three

The bedroom upstairs was one of the ones Trist had said was a guest room, not clarifying if it was the room he normally stayed in or if they even had a room that he felt was his. Val didn't care, it had a small bathroom connected to it and a bed wide enough for two if the two were willing to sleep real close. They washed up with few words spoken and soon were sliding under the crisp, chilly, covers in the darkness.

There wasn't even a thought to it, Trist just slid over and curled up along Val's side, hugging him with arm and leg and tucking his head against a tense chest. He sighed as Val relented and gently stroked at the loose fall of hair.

"Trist?" Val ventured into the safety of the darkness.

Trist just sighed. "Stop thinking."

Val swallowed. "What you did, it was wrong." He forced out in a whisper, needing to draw a line and put some distance between himself and the memory of Trist's tongue fucking him.

"I enjoyed it, you fucking well enjoyed it, explain wrong?" He kept his head tucked to Val's chest, knowing the other man couldn't stand to look him in the eyes, even with the shroud of darkness, right now.

"It's just..." Val started and stopped. "I'm not..." again the words died. "I can't..." third try ended with a sigh. "I'm not a good lover for you." The words tumbled out over themselves.

They made Trist laugh outright. "Fuck, that's funny right after the best sex of my life! If that wasn't good, sweetheart, I'm going to die from okay."

Val sighed again in exasperation, both at how lightly Trist was treating this and his own inability to express anything. "It's just, it felt, it made me ashamed."

The laughter stopped. "Because you enjoyed it."

"And I can't, I don't think, I can't ever, I don't think I'll ever be able to..." He felt himself blushing in the darkness. "Exchange and I've never, God, you know, I'm not sure I'll ever want to take you and that's not right." He felt selfish, always being the one offered such consuming pleasure of being taken and never offering to switch places and be the one doing the taking.

Trist pushed himself up to lay across Val's chest and try to see his face in the shadows of the moon from the window. "You never have to do a fucking thing you don't want to. It doesn't matter anyway, I don't like having my ass played with too often and I don't really like bottom anymore." He dropped forward and pressed a quick kiss to Val's mouth.

It seemed inconceivable that someone wouldn't like to be bottom until Val remembered. He half thought he shouldn't but the darkness felt safe. "Because of the rape?" He kept his voice as gentle as possible but Trist still instantly went tense.

"How'd...?"

It was a touch ironic, the man that knew everyone else's secrets being so startled when someone knew his. "When you were over at Mercy, they ran a full work up on you to make sure you were okay. It showed you hadn't been sexually assaulted but sometime in the past it was likely you had been. It's okay you know, you don't have to talk about it, but if you ever want to, you know I'll listen. Trust me, there's nothing you can say that will shock me, I've heard everything."

That was the truth, Trist could see it sometimes. Val carried the ghosting touch of a thousand sins and pains that weren't his own. Confessed and shared with him all from people seeking healing, forgiveness, comfort and somehow the man so bad with his own feelings was so good at others. The man unable to process his own pain, carried the weight of his clients pain without flinching.

"It wasn't rape." Trist settled back onto the warm chest. "I, damn, look, I don't have a huge pool of lovers to pick from, no ones ever been as kind as you are."

"Shhh," Val stroked a hand across the glossy soft hair. "It's okay, I shouldn't have asked."

"No, I, it's just I fucking get lonely. I know better but, I'm not like you, I hate being lonely. My first blow job? I was thirteen and doing a two week stint in a loony bin. I started blowing the night orderly so I didn't have to take my meds. He got off on the fucking abuse of power control bullshit but I got off sucking him." He'd never even told Gavan that.

"Anyway, when Gav was in college there were always people around and one of them got off on the whole seer thing. When I'd have a vision, he'd get turned on, he fucking liked it when I was out of control, like to take me that way." He shrugged slightly against the warm body and tried to pretend it didn't matter. "The final straw, one night he was drunk and I had this horrible fit, seizure and all and he got rough. I kept fighting him, he got rougher. Gavan was on a date and it got bad. He pumped me for of sedatives afterward and that's when he saw how badly he'd hurt me. His brother was a med student so he called him in and the two of them patched me up. Don't tell Gavan, okay? He doesn't know, I don't want him to. No one does, I, I haven't fucking wanted anyone to know. It's fucking pathetic." It felt better to tell someone even if it made his chest ache and he knew he'd added another link to the weight Val silently carried.

"I won't tell a soul, I swear, but, Trist, that's rape. You said no, he didn't stop."

"Don't you get it?" He snapped back, almost sitting up. "I liked him to use me, I wanted him to. I asked him to fucking hurt me, I needed that and he only did what I wanted. It just got out of hand and dumbass me got hurt. I'm that fucking messed up that I'd beg someone to hurt me! I let him be my lover because I knew he would!"

"Shhhh." Val soothed and pulled Trist back down tight against him. "It got you through that time, helped you find your way here, it's okay."

Trist shivered but struggled after his own control. "It just makes me touchy about bottom, so don't worry about it. That and I can't seem to get enough of fucking you into the ground."

Val let Trist retreat. "It's just, I feel guilty, being the one to feel so good."

That worked, Trist chuckled again. "Baby, if you had any fucking clue how good it is to take you..." He sighed and settled into the secure warmth Val offered. "Trust me, I won't get bored."

"Better not, I'll never look at a piano without blushing again because of you."

Part Forty Four

It was the smell of coffee that drifted Val out of restful sleep a moment before the voice woke him. "Come on guys, up and at 'em."

"Fuck off, Valinski." Trist muttered and burrowed deeper into the covers.

It wasn't so easy for Val, his sleep had been restless and filled with dark dreams. "What time is it?" Val managed to ask, shaking off the cobweb touch of dreams and trying to disentangle himself from how enwrapped he was with Trist.

"Five thirty, we've coffee made."

"Don't have to be up until six." Val forced out around a yawn.

"No, we're wiring you at six. If you want to shower and such before than you have to get up. Come on, none of that." She tugged on the covers a little and hid a smile.

"Pretty ballsy coming in here." Trist sat up, and stretched. "We could have been all naked or better, fucking each other's brains out."

"Wake up or be stinky, I don't care." She shrugged and stood but caught Trist's odd and sleepy eyes as she left the room. "But I figured it was safe, after the way you two went at it last night, no one could have been ready for another round so soon." She teased.

"Speak for your self." Trist yawned again. "Coffee, need, coffee." And got his feet on the floor.

"Don't dally." She warned flicked on the lamp by the bed and left, leaving Trist sitting up and awake and Val still laying flat but his eyes open.

"Trist?" Val whispered into the suddenly dimly lit room.

The whisper stopped him mid-scratch. "Hmm?" Another yawn split him and he shook hair out of his eyes.

Val forced himself to sit up, awake and cold. "Any bad dreams?"

The solemn tone left no room to question Val's real meaning. "Nothing, I can't see today."

"Say the word, just a whisper and we'll go out the window. I hear Costa Rica is lovely and Belize has a large English speaking population." He wanted to run, to wrap his arms around the only thing left in his life that matter and just head like a rabbit to some safe hole some where.

"I want to see this out, for Gavan and Violet and all the people they've hurt."

Violet, could he live with himself if he ran away now and left her death listed as accidental? He wasn't sure but getting Trist hurt, he refused to think of worse, wouldn't bring Violet back. It wasn't his job to settle the injustices done to the dead. He reached out and clutched a hand, it was already chilled from the morning air. "Promise me, if anything happens, you'll get down and out of the way. No matter what, promise me."

The chilled hand slid from the tight grasp and soothed across Val's stubbly face. "I promise, now come on, if I don't get coffee I'm going to kill someone."

As requested, Trist found himself still yawning, sitting shirtless, at the kitchen table. A steaming mug of coffee sat on the table, even heavily laced with sugar and cream it was still too hot to

drink and he swore it was mocking him. He was eyeing it with suspicion and ignoring Valinski's careful preparations of little bits of tape and electronics. They were alone in the kitchen, and Trist knew Val was in the living room getting similarly prepared.

"I make them that uncomfortable." He spoke mostly to himself.

Valinski shrugged. "Some, yes, some are securing the area, some are checking the bugs in the house. We're sort of doing this with as few people as possible. These are some ugly bruises."

He just shrugged. "Getting better." He wasn't sure he liked Val sitting shirtless in a room full of men, knowing at least one of them would have to touch his Val to put the wire on. "You're really in love with him, huh?"

The tape curled over on itself and she glanced over. "What?"

"Please, Shultz, the two of you need to stop pretending. It's like some fucking dumb ass cop show. Just get him drunk or something, he's crazy mad for you."

"We could use someone like you at the bureau. Can you really see things or are you just that good at reading people? I mean I don't care either way, both skills would be helpful."

"Sorry, not really a team player." He was too stressed to play the 'prove your psychic' game.

"Think about it some."

"Got to get past today first." He muttered. "Promise me something, since you're the one in charge."

"If I can."

"Promise me you'll keep Val safe? I don't give a rat's ass about me, might be a mercy if one of these fuckers kills me, but Val? Don't let them hurt him."

"I promise to do everything to keep both of you safe."

"But if it comes to it, him or me, you'll take your people toward him."

That wasn't a promise she could or would make. "You really love him." She turned the tables on the slender man.

Trist just nodded. "More than anything."

"He seems as much in love with you."

That made him snort and shake his head. "Not likely, Val isn't fucking likely to ever love anyone again."

"Aw, come on, I've seen how he looks at you."

He glanced up and caught her eye. "The pain you felt when your father was killed? Imagine who you'd be if you'd lost your mother too, than you uncle, your sister, her husband, their two kids and your first love." He couldn't hold her startled, frightened face with his gaze. "Val will never be able to risk that again. Especially not for me. It's too much to ask, I'm just fucking happy he lets me as close as he is."

"You really are, aren't you?" She whispered, not a woman to believe in anything that couldn't be documented.

"I'm fucking freezing, can we get this finished?"

Wired up and tested, there was little left to do but wait and know every word they said was being listened to. Trist paced but Val sat silent and brooding, knowing the small police force would be counting on him more than anything and sick with worry about Trist. He wasn't sure just how he was going to be able to hide his personal concern, he wasn't sure even he had that much control.

"Don't be stupid." Trist answered the unspoken worry. "You're brilliant."

It was eight thirty and Val was regretting his choice to eat a light breakfast. His stomach was so tightly twisted he was afraid he was going to throw it up. He stood up and got in the way of Trist's pacing. "I want you to go upstairs, to the bedroom and wait there."

"No fucking way!"

"Trist, do it. You're supposed to be crazy, unpredictable. You should be safely tucked out of sight. They'll ask for a demonstration of my control over you, I want them to see that I can put you aside until I need you. If you wait upstairs, I'll be able to show them that." He tried to sooth a hand over the tightly knotted shoulders but Trist shrugged his touch off.

"And leave you down here alone with them? No fucking way!"

"Trist, please, for me." He glanced down and caught the wandering eyes. "When I take them upstairs, try to act out of it. It's the best logical course of action."

"Who am I to fight your logic?" The words dripped acid but it wasn't from malice but worry. "Okay, but only cause I agree with you. I don't like it though." He left still grumbling and climbed the steps unhappily.

Val let go of the breath he hadn't know he was holding. Trist was too random, too unpredictable and it was Shultz's strong suggestion to get the man tucked away upstairs before their company arrived. It was why they'd wired them separately, they'd laid the idea out in logical suggestions to Val, knowing that he'd be able to get Trist to agree. The bottom line was he didn't need to be convinced. Trist out of sight and safely upstairs made him feel better.

Seven minutes to nine two black SUV's slowly pulled down the long lane and Val watched them turn in from the road. His stomach settled at the sight, his nerves dissolved. There was no going back now, no hiding or running. It was on his shoulders and the weight was a heavy one. Violet had stood up to that weight, he couldn't surrender and do less than his big sister. Of course she'd ended up dead, Val asked for silent help to anyone listening that he'd not come to the same results.

The cars rolled to a stop and eight men stepped out, dressed in dark suits with shiny shoes and they moved in the same way that the law enforcement had. Val watched them carefully scan the yard, looking for any signs anything was out of place before they came to the porch.

Val held the door open and recognized the man in the lead. "My secret informer from the park." He labeled and smirked in what he hoped would be an ironic way. "Why am I not surprised to see you?"

The man paused on the porch and nodded. "Mr. York."

Val pushed the screen door open. "Come in, let's get this over with."

The parlor seemed unusually small with so many tall, strong men dominating it. Two broke off and started searching the downstairs.

"I'm alone, Tristram is upstairs, he's having a bad day, I'd highly recommend not disturbing him without my presence." Val didn't sit and neither did any of them. "Did you bring what I asked for?"

Informer held up a computer disk. "The names, locations and confessions of the operatives that dealt with the security breach your sister was involved with. Including the deepest sympathies of the Power of God Church for the mistakes of a deviant minority of it's membership. Satisfactory?"

Val nodded slowly. "If it is what you say it is. I'll want to see it before you leave."

The man flipped the disk back. "First, the files you secured from your sister and Tristram Maddocks."

"I don't think so, let's talk cash."

"We're prepared to offer you residence with Mr. Maddocks in a controlled setting."

"Church owned I assume."

"That would be a safe assumption." The man smirked. "With an annual salary of say, a quarter million for acting as his handler?"

"Half. He's a pain in my ass."

"It's open to negotiation."

That made the hairs on Val's arm stand up. They shouldn't have been willing to negotiate. "And for the return of the files?"

"Consider their return a tithe to the Church for all the difficulties you and yours have caused us. We'd consider their return a sign of goodwill."

That was more like it. "Well," Val locked eyes with the man. "That's open for negotiation as well." His heart was beating too fast. "One last thing, he may have difficulties being housed with anyone else you've... recruited."

"Things can be arranged. Now, I want to see him and I want to see that you're worth so much cash."

"He's upstairs, the whole goon squad should stay here, he's a touch excitable."

Informer nodded to two of them to stay behind but the others followed and that made Val very, very nervous. "Really, six of you just to see him jump through a few hoops is a bit much." He complained trying to let Valinski and her team know how many were upstairs and how many down.

"We don't like to take chances."

Val turned and smirked again. "Yeah, he told me about how he made your men run like little girls when you shot his cousin. Spooked you right good didn't he?"

"We were unprepared that time, we aren't now."

And that was cryptic enough that Val was hoping Valinski had what she needed and was on her

way inside. "He's in here." Val sighed to see one of the men waiting at the top of the steps. That narrowed it to five. He knocked on the bedroom door. "Trist? I'm coming in and bringing friends." The word nearly choked him.

Just when he'd lost focus, Trist couldn't say. He'd been pacing the room, trying to watch for cars and bit by bit his reality had eroded away. It was Ziya, Val's dark eyed, silent niece. She stood there, with those bottomless sad eyes until he finally gave in and paid attention.

"Why don't you leave me alone? I did what you wanted, I told him, go away." He begged, aching with her grief and pain. "What more do you want? I can't help you if you never speak again, please, not now!" He had to stay focused, he was only supposed to be pretending to be out of it.

That was far easier said than done. His legs folded under him and ended up sinking onto the floor, eyes locked to silent brown and reality got fuzzy. She wasn't speaking, not like before in her tiny too grown up child's voice, be she wasn't silent either. Trist saw it, the strange men shouting at her father, hurting him. She had watched, sobbing so much she'd become sick, when they'd drowned her brother. Trist saw it now too, how his legs had kicked and his arms flayed and still they'd held him under the water.

Worse, so much worse, Trist felt the hand on the back of the tiny head. The feel of the water swimming up around her delicate face, over mouth and nose. She'd kicked as much as her brother, only her thinner body was more easily controlled. The distorted sounds of her father's begging sobs echoed under the water. Light from the afternoon sunshine had bounced in wavy reflections along the bottom of the bathtub. Eventually, the cool water had been welcome to put out the fire of her burning lungs and it slowly stopped hurting, stopped being scary. Things faded to hazy half awareness and still she stubbornly refused to go.

Over and over the memories showered across him and no matter how he tried to look at it, it gave him no further clues to what the girl was looking for. Why she'd stuck around when the rest of her family had moved on remained hidden. She didn't seem to want anything more than to share and maybe, witness the final part of the little drama she'd been caught up in. It was too much, it was draining and left him worn, broken hearted and confused.

Distantly, he heard Val's voice but it was foggy and dream like. The door to the bedroom opened and he felt more than heard the footfalls. His heart began to pound in unfocused panic until one of Val's hands shook his shoulder, roughly. Ziya's gaze left him, she glanced to the men in the room and screamed. It was piercing, shattering, the child that had lost her voice, lost the will to speak above a hushed whisper had been found and with the discovery she'd found her anger and hate.

Trist was screaming with her. Voices surged around him, angry, deep and male as well as a chorus of voices only he could hear. None of them made any sense, there was no focus but the anger, the panic. Strong hands fell on his shoulders and he fought, bucking and failing in childish motions and not with the strength of even the slender man that he was. Large hands caught his wrists and twisted his arms around behind him before something cold and biting closed over them.

He fell forward at the ratcheting clicks of the handcuffs. The large, sad eyes, were forgotten, the screaming voices grew distant in lightheaded buffering, his own need to focus for reasons he'd forgotten all fell away in the face of his own very real phobias. Being bound, being shackled, was bad, it was a terrible thing, it shattered his slipping hold on sanity. He was screaming again now, cursing, fighting in renewed fear. His fear was great enough that he felt slick blood on his hands from where the metal cut into his wrists.

Something hard and metal hit the side of his head and knocked him to his side. They wanted him

to be quiet and be good. Trist struggled for control, struggled for memory. He was whimpering, lost, confused. Hadn't he done this already? Nothing was making sense and the blow to his head made focusing harder. There was a reason he had to stay focused.

"WAKE UP!" A very angry, very stubborn little girl screamed at him, cutting like a sharp knife at the haze of confusion.

And Trist remembered. Val, Violet, the feds listening in that should be on their way to save them, all the chaos of the last few weeks all came pouring back. In with it was why he felt he'd done this before, because he had, in a dream. A dream where Val was killed, where he'd been shot in the head.

His eyes flew open and he saw in sharp detail and crystal clarity. Val was bloodied, angry, speaking in harsh, sharp words with a rage and pain that no warning from Trist would manage to get shut down. As he watched, Val forced himself to stand and his eyes didn't even flinch when the gun in one of the men's hands swung his way.

Trist was proud of him in that moment. Proud of his strength, his courage, proud of the total lack of fear, like some cornered lion still trying to win a losing fight. His heart shattered with love in that heartbeat, and from somewhere he found the strength and grace to move.

There was no need to wait to see what would happen, no precious seconds lost to indecision. Trist knew. He charged Val, full speed, surprising the men that had been assigned to watch him and gaining that moment of broken action to change things. In that single moment, as the distance between them narrowed, Trist saw Val's eyes widen at both the gun and Trist charging between it and him. There was no time for protests because Trist didn't slow or stop, he tucked his head down and ran full speed into Val.

Momentum and gravity did the rest. The gun fired, bullets, not just the single shot in his dream but many, sprayed out. The hundred year old pane of glass in the window behind them shattered as their combined weight hit it. Pain flared and blood flowed and all Trist knew was that they were falling.

Forty Five

Voices drifted into his world, they sounded tinny and distant. His mouth tasted like he'd been sucking on a copper penny and his head throbbed, pounded really and blocked out any rational thought or memory. Nothing made sense, his chest hurt, his stomach too but it was deeper than just indigestion and while the pain was wrapped in cotton it still sung in sharp discomfort.

His eyelids were too heavy, weighted and held down and because of that everything was blackness. Even licking his lips, which felt sandpaper dry, was impossible. The only thing he could do was try to focus on the voices, talking softly around him but he could almost tell not at him.

They were female, mostly anyway and some of the words didn't want to make sense. Spanish, someone was speaking Spanish near him. Those voices were easier to focus on because he didn't have to strain to understand. Maria, it was Maria and another woman, a voice less well known. Inez, his hazy mind produced, why were Inez and Maria talking in Spanish when his head hurt so badly?

Answers refused to arrive but that made the other voices easier. Lisa and Edward were talking softly, to his right. Inez and Lisa, Maria and Edward, the four of them in a room when he felt so

badly didn't add up to a happy picture. He scrambled after memories, struggled and then it all clicked.

The Power of God Church, Violet's death, the meeting. They'd never intended to make a deal with him, their only goal was capturing Trist. As soon as they'd laid eyes on the slender psychic their only interest in Val had been to find the disk Violet had hidden for him. He'd tried to reason with them, they made it clear they had ways of getting people like Trist to co-operate, as they had ways of making him co-operate. They'd hit him while Trist screamed in frightful horror. He'd bit his lip and held on, knowing that Valinski's men were on their way.

They'd asked again, making it clear he was just as useful dead and they were unwilling to take any more time. He'd struggled to stand and refused. The gun, he remembered the gun, swinging menacingly his way. There had been no time to be afraid and frankly he was too angry for fear, even as he saw Trist charging him like a line backer, head down, shoulders braced, he hadn't been afraid. Gunfire had popped as they'd fallen backwards.

There was a clear memory of seeing the wood of the windowsill splinter as it took one of the bullets. Trist's body was warm against his own but all he could see was the top of a dark head as they tipped back, glass shattering across his back. Sharp edges sliced like knives, tearing into cloth and flesh and Val remembered bringing his arms out to wrap around Trist and closing his eyes as they tumbled into the cold February air.

That was it. There wasn't anything more. No clue where he was or where Trist was. No idea if Valinski's team had what they needed, if they got there to arrest the thugs that had beaten him up and killed Violet, shot Gavan. Nothing. It was as if his mind had a switch and somewhere after going out the window it had been switched off.

Only, Lisa and Inez were there, sitting in whatever room he was in. Inez who was hugely pregnant and advised not to travel. They were sitting with Maria and Edward, all of them talking in hush, soft tones, just them.. There was only one reason why he could imagine the four of them would be hovering around his sick bed and Trist wasn't.

There was no point to struggling to make out what was being said. Trist was dead, he was gone. Val knew it, he felt it. His chest shattered in a pain sharper than any of the dull aching pains of injury. There wasn't any point to even trying to wake up now. Trist was gone. He couldn't get back up from that. There was no moving forward, no tomorrow, no next hour, all of his life literally stopped.

Regret became a pain deeper than loss. He'd been so frightened of having to face this moment, this horrible loss that he always had to face when he loved anyone, that he hadn't let himself feel love toward the crazy, half mad, seer. That hurt twice as badly now, all the mistakes and missed chances, the distance that he never should have allowed. It swallowed him whole and left him with not even sweet memories for comfort. He'd been a fool and wasted the only time he'd ever been with someone that he loved.

Tears leaked from eyes he no longer wanted to open. The tiny sob that slipped from his chest made everything light up in sharp physical pain but he hardly felt it. The voices around him stopped and he felt the weight of someone sitting on the bed. A hand stroked the side of his face and wiped tears away.

"Val?" Lisa asked carefully. "Shhh, Val, it's okay, we're right here. Are you in much pain?" It seemed like a silly question to ask since he was openly weeping. "Maria's getting a nurse."

He wanted to snap at her to go away and leave him alone but even that took too much concern, too much interest.

"Val, come on, can you open your eyes? We need you to open your eyes if you can, Val, okay?"

The doctors need you to.”

He hated this, he wanted her to go away. He forced his eyes open and it took a second but they focused on her worried but suddenly excited face. She smiled brightly, her dark, straight hair still cut with Bettie Page bangs and the same clunky glasses sat on her face. He watched as she glanced off to the side to share the smile with someone else but it was too much. Seeing her happy when he wanted to die was too much and his eyes slid shut again.

“Shhh, Val, shhh, it’s okay. Where does it hurt? Can you tell me so I can tell the doctor?”

She kept pestering and touching him and it made him want to scream, instead he whimpered. “Stop.”

“Stop what Val?” She snuffled back hopeful tears.

His voice felt as dry as his lips. “Trist…”

“Are you in pain?”

He shook his head and tried to push her away but his body felt too limp to want to move. “Oh, God, Trist…”

“Should we tell him?” Lisa asked one of the others in the room.

“I think you’d better.” Edward answered gently.

“Val? Still with us?”

The tears wouldn’t stop but he nodded.

“Trist knocked you both out a window, do you remember that?”

He nodded again, wanting her to just say it and get it over with.

“Valinski and her team they got there about the same time but you were already headed out the window. Those men, they tried to shoot you, Trist got in the way. He got shot and lost a lot of blood and the house is a long way from a good trauma center.” She tried to speak gently. “You nearly cracked your head off, they had to airlift you back here to Mercy.”

He needed someone to say it and if she wasn’t going to, he would. “Trist’s dead.” He choked on the words but got them out but they didn’t make it hurt less to have it in the open. “Oh, God, oh.”

“No, no, Val, hush, no, he’s not, shhh. Trist’s not, really.”

For the second time since waking up his world stopped, shattered and reformed. “What?” His voice broke.

“He’s not dead. He was shot, yes, in the leg. It missed the artery but hit the bone. They took him by ambulance. There have been complications, they still aren’t sure he’ll be able to keep that leg, but he’s very much alive.”

One hand was willing to move now, and he raised it to rub at his face. “Where.... I need to see him.”

“Shhhhh, it’s okay. Val you need to take it easy. You’re the one we’ve been worried about, you nearly died, the doctors weren’t sure when you’d wake up, if you’d wake up. You’ve been out for almost a week.” She brushed at more lost tears.

"A week, where's Trist?" He demanded again and forced exhausted eyes open to look at the worried glances shared around him.

It was Edward that moved forward by some unspoken agreement. "Val, Kelly is back. She's saying she's your fiancée and with no other family, she's calling the shots. We tried to explain to her but she hasn't wanted to hear. She's flatly refusing to allow Trist in the room."

"What the fuck?" Val muttered.

The casual swearing made Lisa chuckle and she leaned over and pressed a kiss to his forehead. "I like you on morphine. She's run down to get coffee but she should be back soon."

"But Trist..."

"Is fine."

The relief was more than he could feel. It left him trembling and exhausted. "So tired."

"Than sleep, we'll be here when you wake up."

Trist was alive, and safe and that was all that mattered. Some miracle had been performed, some wish granted and he had a second chance. The man he loved, the one person he couldn't live without, was alive. He vowed, as sleep clawed at him and dragged him back into blackness, that he would do his best not to waste this second chance.

The next time he woke up things felt better. His body hurt, yes, but no longer felt so groggily disconnected and limply weak. Better, his mind felt sharper, there was no distorted tinny sound to his hearing and his eyelids didn't feel made of lead. It felt more like waking up after a sound nights sleep and less like clawing his way out of blackness.

Trist was alive. That alone was worth waking up for, he couldn't see the other man if he slept all day. Lisa and Inez were out visiting too. He'd been told he'd nearly died and that thought didn't seem to matter. If Trist had been killed, he would have already been dead.

His eyes opened slowly and focused on the room around him. Plain, small but private. The tv over the bed was turned off the lights as well, sunshine was slipping in around the pulled blinds. The light felt sharper because of it, instead of filling the room with a warm glow, it sliced into the dim shadows like blades.

Val blinked a little and had a sense that a conversation going on around him had suddenly stopped with the opening of his eyes. A fight might be more properly said, since Lisa was on her feet looking stubborn and Kelly hovered at his side, clutching his hand too tightly with the tight pissed off look around her eyes.

"Now see what you've done? You've woken him up!" She hissed at Lisa who just tossed up her hands and left the room. "Hey, you." She smiled sweetly at him.

The smile made him frown. Her short cut hair was tussled and un-styled, washed and left to hang how it wanted to dry. Her face was bare of the normally carefully applied make up and not even lipstick coated her mouth. "What're you doing here?" He managed to ask, his throat painfully dry.

She fished an ice chip out and slid it past his lips. It melted and soothed in cool comfort. "Better?"

"Thanks." He sighed and accepted another ice chip, a little unnerved at having her feeding them to him. "What're you doing here?"

"They called me and told me you'd been hurt, I came right home."

He glanced to the empty room and to the door. "Trist..."

"Hush, don't worry about that, we'll discuss all that when you're stronger. Don't worry, I forgive you."

She forgave him, his mind had to stumble after what he was being forgiven for. When it clicked he frowned and refused the next ice chip. "Kelly, I'm gay." It was amazing how much easier it was to just say that now. The comfort was from either his crushing relief at knowing Trist was alive or from the brain injury, he wasn't sure and didn't care. It felt really good to be able to say.

"You think I haven't suspected for a long time that you were bi? It's okay, I understand you got it out of your system. We both had things we needed to work out but we have and we can go on from here. You were right, Val, you really were. What we have is good, it's safe and comfortable and it's enough. What I wanted was childish and silly and I know that now." She smiled gently and kissed the hand she was still holding on to.

He shook his head. "I'm not bi, I'm gay."

"Nonsense."

"Kelly, a like men."

"But you love me."

He shook his head. "I'm fond of you but that's not love."

It was her turn to look hit by a truck. Val knew the look, he'd worn it weeks ago in his apartment when she'd claimed to not know him and set her engagement ring on the counter. "Val?"

"You were right, God, Kelly, you were right." He sighed and let his eyes close for a moment. He hated having to do this but he needed her to understand that he had to see Trist and why. "That kind of everything love you wanted, I can't give you, but you were right, it's real. I know it is, I've found it, you deserve to find it too."

"What? With that scrawny, crude, insane little..."

"Don't." He stopped her, not sure he'd be able to forgive her if she went further. "Don't ever run him down where I can hear you."

Kelly stopped, frozen in place by the sheer raw emotion that flashed in Val's brown eyes. They were always steady, never changing. Ever. He'd never shown such emotion about anything, even his grief for his sister had been muted.

She swallowed hard and refused to retreat. Something had cracked her fiancée's emotions open and that gave her a chance. "He nearly got you killed."

"No." Val shook his head. "No, he saved me." In so many ways.

"Val..."

"Please, please I need to see Trist, please." He wasn't sure how tightly his hold on wakefulness was going to be this time and he needed Trist. "Please." He whispered.

"Shhh, we'll talk about it more when you're stronger. You need to rest now."

The logical part of his mind knew she was trying to protect him but he was grateful he was so weak because he wanted to strangle her stubborn neck. The truth was, he was too exhausted, too sick and weak to fight too much. He struggled to stay awake, hoping if he did, while pretending sleep, he could call a nurse and demand that Trist be allowed access to his room.

He heard the door open but instead of Kelly leaving, it was Lisa coming back.

"Shhh, he's asleep again." Kelly warned.

"Look, I'm sorry, I just want him to be happy." He heard Lisa explain. "If it ends up that you can do that, I'm all for it. Truce?"

There was a pause, Val could picture Kelly pursing her lips and considering it. "Truce. I'm just so edgy, we came so close to losing him."

"I know, look, you've been here all day. Why don't you go out for a while. Inez won't be expecting me until later tonight. Go for a walk, get some coffee or something, he'll be asleep now for the rest of the afternoon anyway."

You couldn't call truce and refuse help in the next breath. "Some fresh air would be nice." She sighed. "I'll be back within a half hour."

"Deal." He heard the smile in Lisa's voice. "Enjoy yourself."

There was the shuffling sounds of fabric being rustled and handbags gathered. A chair scraped along the floor before the door opened and closed again. Val struggled to get his eyes open and find the call button. Before he could, Lisa was beside him.

"Knew you were faking, you sneak."

"Hey."

"Hey yourself, think you can stay awake long enough to sign something for me?"

"Lisa, I need to see Trist, I... Kelly, she's..."

"Being a controlling bitch, which is why I need you to sign this. It's a power of attorney, which you're giving me and hiring me to represent you." She pulled the makeshift table across Val's lap and carefully placed a pen in his hand. "Come on, Val, can you sign it? Fiancée trumps friends legally without this paper, since you don't have any family."

He nodded but the action of lifting his arm to line the pen up was exhausting. It hovered there and he wasn't sure how to sign his name. For a frightfully long time he had no clue how to form the letters, how to get the name from his brain to his hand. He was starting to panic when the pen began to move and that part of his shaken brain woke up and started functioning again. The signature was shaky but legible and when he let the pen drop from his hand to skitter away, Lisa bent down and kissed the side of his face.

"Bless you, we've been trying to get you lucid long enough to sign that for a week. It's not foolproof, she'll be able to contest it but I doubt she will. Now, how awake are you?"

"Tired." And heartbroken but he didn't want to add that much.

"Too tired for company? If even for a moment?" She didn't like the confusion and heartbreak in

the distant eyes. "Trist is in the hallway, we snuck him down."

"Trist!"

She smiled. "I'll take that as a yes, stay awake."

He nodded like a child but she didn't see it since she was hurrying out into the hallway. It took a second to get Trist to him from wherever they'd hidden him from Kelly's eyes but soon enough the door opened and in he was wheeled. His Aunt Mary was pushing the chair and one of his legs was elevated as best it could be and completely covered in bright white bandages.

"You're alive, oh God, you're really alive." Val muttered and struggled with tears again.

"Help me up." Trist demanded of the women.

"You promised you'd stay in the chair."

"Fuck promises! Help me up or I'll hop around until the damned thing falls off!" His eyes were flashing and neither woman was willing to fight too much with him. Together, they got him balanced and seated on his good hip on the side of Val's bed. He was wincing and shaky when he finally was left to half lean, half lay beside his lover. "Give us a second?" He tossed a needy look to his caretakers.

"I don't think we should." Mary warned, frightened Trist would lose his balance, again, and do more damage.

"Come on," Lisa tugged at the older woman's elbow. "He's not going to be trying to go anywhere."

As soon as the door shut behind them, Trist was raining feather soft kisses across Val's face. "Oh, baby, you look like shit." He teased, snuffling himself at seeing the tears slipping out of Val's tightly closed eyes.

"I thought, I thought you were dead." He forced out no longer sleepy, just exhausted.

"Shhhh, no, no, I'm fine, it's you that's had us all scared." His fingers brushed the bottom edge of the bandages on Val's forehead. "You're going to look odd all shaved and bald."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, it'll grow back."

Val shook his head lightly. "No, I'm sorry, I'm an idiot."

Trist's mood was so high, so giddy with hearing the voice he'd missed, even if it was weakened, that the apology made him chuckle. "My beautiful Valentine."

"Trist, please, I'm sorry, I was stupid, I was so scared." He wanted to be romantic and flowery, wanted to say all the cold, broken fear and shattering regrets he'd felt when he thought Trist was dead. It didn't work that way when he was thinking his clearest, now he had no hope. "I can't lose you, I can't."

"Shhhh, I've told you, you never will. We were more worried we'd lose you."

"No, no, I love you." Which wasn't the wonderful romantic words he wanted but they came tumbling out anyway.

It was the most romantic thing Trist had ever heard. "Now I know you cracked your head open."

He teased and kissed Val's parched lips again. "You're talking nonsense."

"No, Trist, oh, God."

It set a glow of warm hope in Trist's chest, one he wanted to kindle and hold close but was too timid and uncertain to get near. "We'll worry about that later, okay? Just, get better, promise me."

"Promise." Val sighed out. "How bad am I?"

"You'll be okay now. You got shot, do you remember that?"

He only shook his head, clutching as tightly as he could to Trist, trying to pull the slender man closer.

"In the side, it wedged in your liver. You nearly bled to death internally, fucking should have killed you without the cracks to your noggin. Broke six ribs, all in the back, when you landed, and your head." That had been terrifying. Hitting the ground, cushioned in Val's arms, his leg screaming in pain and then looking and seeing Val. He'd been awake at first, asking after him, and then he'd started talking but not making any sense. Within a moment, Val's eyes had rolled up and he was slipping away. It had been Valinski's quick thinking to call a helicopter right away that was the only reason Val lived.

But even that wasn't a promise. The doctors had been careful, cautious, preparing them for the worst. They'd gone on about brain injuries and swelling, how they'd opened Val's skull to make room for his brain to expand. They'd used small words to make it clear that adults bounced back for less easily from such severely traumatic wounds than kids did. They'd warned the small group of friends that even if, not when but if, Val lived, he may never be the same. He might not be able to speak, or move, or remember who he was. If he lived, which they weren't willing to put bets on. Trist had been. He'd known Val wasn't going anywhere and he'd known that if the man was clinging to life, his will was strong enough to force his flesh to recover.

"Will I be okay?" That was the question he knew only Trist would answer him honestly.

The dark head nodded slowly. "Yeah, you will." It wasn't a lie, every day Val was recovering. The near paralysis of his left side was decreasing, day by day. His moments of lucidity were longer, his sleep more stable. He was beating the odds and healing. "You'll be sick for a while, physical therapy, shit like that, and bald but you're going to be fine in no time."

That took a huge burden from his mind. The worry had been nagging and he didn't care if Trist was being hopeful or had seen it. His love had told him and Val believed he would fine.

"And you?"

"Val, I'm fine." More than fine, Val had said he'd loved him, even if it was the painkillers talking.

"Your leg?"

"Val, I..." he was so damaged already, would Val still love him missing that leg? It was easier to accept illness that couldn't be seen sometimes. "I might look silly as a tripod."

"But, you'll live?"

He nodded, trying not to worry about his leg, believing that the antibiotics they had him on that were making him so sick would stop the infection. It was already looking promising but it had the last dose of them as well. "I'll live, just, there might be less of me." He tried to force a smile

Val's eyes shut and he shuddered. "Don't care, so long as you live, they can take both legs, just,

please, don't leave me."

"Never." He promised and brushed forgotten tears aside, off his own face as well as Val's.

"Don't want to sleep..." Val sighed but his fight with sleep wasn't one he could win.

"Sleep, you need to rest to get better, I swear, I'll be here when you wake up."

"Promise?" He muttered like a sleepy child.

"Promise."

Val sighed and drifted to sleep with Trist's warmth next to his own body. The scent of his lover drifted across him like a security blanket and he knew everything would be okay.

Val's awareness was sketchy. He recalled being poked and prodded by doctors, tests and scans that he half drifted in light wakefulness for. There were voices, all comforting ones of friends, floating around him and sometimes Trist's voice slipped across his healing mind to comfort him. It felt like weeks, it was only a few days.

This time when he woke up, it was fully. He was rested, more comfortable than he'd been since the accident. The room was dark around him, a lamp was lit and he could tell from the sounds it was a different place. A television talked near by and he cracked open his eyes to focus on the news report.

Camera's flashed around Valinski, she stood looking professional but Shultzzy hovered in the background. "We're currently working with the legal representatives of the parties named in the warrants. Right now, we're searching and seizing evidence in connection with the kidnapping, murder, blackmail and conspiracy charges only. It's our belief that, yes, there will be more arrest warrants issued in the coming days and weeks. The details of our investigation, our ongoing investigation I might add, are, as of this moment, undisclosed. When it becomes appropriate to do so, a press release will be issued. Pastor Kent and other leaders of the Power of God Church have been co-operating fully but as of this moment no one has been cleared and every paid member of the Church is part of this massive investigation. Rest assured, we will not stop, nor will we be intimidated into anything less than a full investigation."

The volume was turned down. "She won't be able to keep their names out of the press for too much longer." Val heard Gavan saying and he tracked the voice to his left and saw the man in a chair, dressed and looking almost healthy.

"She'll do what's right." Lisa answered. "Oh, look who's awake again. Are you really here this time?"

Val nodded. "Where am I?"

"In our private room, Lisa moved you as soon as you signed those papers." Gavan stood and came to Val's bedside. "How're you feeling?"

"Where's Trist?"

Lisa grinned over him to Gavan. "He's fine. Val, Trist's in surgery, he should be back soon."

"Are they...?" He couldn't quite bring himself to ask.

"No, the infections stopped, they're setting his leg properly now. They say he'll be fine, might

have to walk with a limp or a cane but the leg is staying.”

Gavan chuckled. “He’s already planning on what kind of cane, something flashy with a crystal ball on the top is in the running right now.”

It was almost too much, his head hurt. “Violet? Did they find who killed her?”

“Shhh,” Lisa soothed and shook her head. “The bad guys lost, some of the ones that hurt here were shot at the farmhouse, some arrested. You two did it, you got Valinski the evidence she needed, it’s a huge scandal. It’s all any of the news channels are talking about.”

The door opened and Sanaa popped her head in. “Ready?” But her eyes fell on Val and the smile that split her face was huge. “Oh, Val! How’re you feeling?”

“Confused but okay.”

“I’ll get Sleeping Beauty caught up, you two go have dinner.” Lisa shooed. It took a little convincing but the pair soon were out of the room.

“What’s going on?”

“I think they’re falling in love.”

“Gavan and Sanaa?”

Lisa just nodded. “They’re cute together, for, you know, a straight couple.”

Couples, Inez was hugely pregnant, Lisa should be with her. “Where’s Inez?”

“Oh, well, don’t be mad, we’re staying in your apartment, but don’t worry, we should find our own before the baby gets here.” She fussed at Val’s covers, tucking them in and fluffing pillows.

“You’re having the baby here?”

She nodded. “Yeah, we got to talking. Life’s too short, you know? And we want our baby growing up around family. Inez’s cousin and his wife live here and there’s you and Trist, Gavan and Sanaa and we’ve gotten really close to Maria and Edward. Even crabby Mrs. Maddocks isn’t all that bad so,” she shrugged. “We’re moving back home.”

“Family.” Val heard himself whisper. It was an odd concept to someone that had lost his entire family. He’d spent so long buried in the idea that his family had been stolen from him that he’d never seen that he had a second one just waiting for him to invite in.

The door opened and a pair of nurses wheeled a bed in. Trist lay with open eyes and a groggy grin, his leg wrapped in bandages and soft casts and slung up in traction to hold everything in place. His eyes fell on Val and was surprised to not only see the eyes open but alert.

“Hey, baby, you’re awake.” He slurred out, still drifting from the anesthesia.

The sight of Trist made Val’s heart sputter. “So are you.”

“Barely, but surgery is a bummer when awake.” The nurses wheeled him into place, within arms reach of Val and got out of the way. Trist reached out as he’d been doing for the last couple of days and gathered up Val’s hand. “Hey, baby, I’m thinking we should get a cat.”

Val sighed as the slender fingers wrapped around his own. “God, I love you.” Family, this was family and it was worth any risk to have for even an instant.

"Love you too, baby." The hand tightened around his own. "Does this mean I can get a cat?"

The End

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