

Visions & Shadows  
by S.A. Payne

Teagan Walsh's health has always been fragile so he's turned his life and world to one more solitary, more within his reach. It's the ideal of an Ireland free of English rule and the harsh penal laws that spurs him onward, plotting rebellion has become something of a family hobby. Until he meets Daniel O'Raian, a man of few words and many thoughts. The stubborn man's very presence forces Teagan to see the world about him as it really is, not just how he wishes to dream it into being! For Daniel, the ill man offers him something he hasn't found in far too long, acceptance and maybe even love.

Visions & Shadows

Chapter One

The nails pinched in a line between his lips gave Teagan's mouth an iron tang but it wasn't unpleasant. The sun had warmth and the morning's chill had burned off under its strength. Below his boots the grass was showing peeks of green and there were buds on the trees. Spring was coming early this year and he happily drove home another nail in an ongoing effort to repair the crumbling fencing around the pasture.

It was futile, really, the task was too large for him and it wouldn't be finished until his uncle sent someone down from the main house to do it but a start had to be made. As he pounded another nail into place he knew it was another he had made and that felt better than waiting. Maybe, this year, he'd get the spring repairs done before his uncle could spare someone and wouldn't that surprise him to no end.

As if his thoughts had conquered the man, the sound of a horse caught Teagan's ear and he stood up from his crouch. It wasn't a surprise to see his uncle riding down the lane from the road, neither was it a surprise to spot the second rider following a half pace behind him. Teagan felt his shoulders tense but he crouched back down and hammered his frustrations out on another nail.

"What do you think you're doing?" His uncle's raspy strong voice rolled out even before he hopped his rounded body from the saddle.

Teagan spat out the nails and didn't look up. "Spring repairs, Uncle Robin, as always."

"Spring repairs! Good god child are you trying to kill yourself? Or me?"

"Really, Uncle, there's no need to be so dramatic."

"Dramatic? You look like a corpse!" Robin hurried over and took up his nephew's hands and wasn't surprised to see his fingernails were tinged blue. "How long have you been out here?"

Teagan felt his mouth tighten into an unhappy line. "I'm fine."

"Stop, now, and get some water."

"Uncle." But he'd long since learned not to debate it too much, his Uncle just made him feel more

exhausted if he fought him. He placed the hammer back into the wood carry box and dropped the nails back into their pouch. The older man had already moved to the scoop a tin cup of water and was hurrying back. It gave Teagan a moment to study the other man, the one left holding the reins. He wasn't a face he knew from his uncle's estate or from the town and it made him curious but he knew better than to ask.

"Here, and sit down!"

He accepted the tin pressed at him but refused to sit like some child. "Thank you." He was tired and he knew he must look like a two day old corpse. He'd been pretty pale when he'd woken up, surprised by the dark circles under his eyes and he knew being outside working hadn't made him look hale and healthy. "What brings this visit uncle, not that it isn't always a treat to have you come by."

"Ah?" He glanced over his shoulder. "Come up here boy, he doesn't bite."

The man holding the reins nodded and moved first to tie the horses off to one of the sturdier fence rails before he came to stand behind the elder's shoulder. It gave Teagan a better look at the fellow, taller than he was but not by much, quite a bit wider in the shoulders and a lot of that was muscle from how the man moved. His hands were rough, his skin was tanned with a slight sunburn across his nose and cheeks. His hair was an unpopular length, too short to pull back into the single tail most men were wearing but too long to hold any real style. It fell in shaggy layers when he swept his hat off his head and glowed copper red in the sunlight. Green hazel eyes that watched silently but didn't appear dim witted or dull were squinted against the late morning sunlight. Even though Teagan had pulled on work clothes of simple style and cut, the silent stranger was dressed more poorly, truly in work clothing.

"Here now, Teagan, don't let his scowl worry you, he's a good sort."

"Uncle?"

"Daniel O'Raian, this is my nephew Teagan Walsh." The silent Daniel inclined his head but said nothing. "Daniel is my new woodsman, he's going to catch poachers and the like."

"Since when have you worried about poachers, uncle?" He raised an eyebrow. The stranger was used to hard work, that was obvious from the strength in his shoulders and arms but he looked too gruff, too cold for a woodsman.

"True better said to make sure no one poaches too much." Robin grinned and smacked Daniel on the shoulder in a friendly way. "I figured since you're too stubborn to come up to the house or into the town and he'll be only three miles away, it made good sense to have him come by and do the chores that need doing about here. When he's not busy with his... woodsman duties that is."

It was a small pause but Teagan caught it and started to have a good idea that Daniel O'Raian wasn't under his uncle's employee to stop poachers. "Really, I don't need that much help."

"Poppycock, boy! Don't be so proud. He's a strong lad, in a month you won't know how you got by without him."

He sighed and knew better than to debate the issue. "There is a lot to be done this year." He admitted and his uncle would have to send someone.

"Good, now get inside and rest, before you fall down. I'll show Daniel around the place and he'll be by tomorrow. Want to get him introduced around and settled in to Henry's old cottage before nightfall." Robin grinned at winning another battle and patted his nephew on the side of his pale face.

"Thank you and Mr. O'Raian, take your time settling in. In spite of what my uncle may have told you, I manage quite well." He knew he was being dismissed so that his uncle could tell the stranger all about how dire and ill his health was and frankly Teagan was too tired to bother protesting.

The stranger nodded again and muttered a small, "Yes sir" with a deep but barely audible voice. He followed the slender frail man as he carried the wooden tool box toward the barn.

"Walk the fence with me lad." Robin clapped the taller man on the shoulder again and Daniel followed silently as they walked along the old pasture. "Teagan is my sister's child, poor thing, she died of a fever after birthing him, he never knew her. Looks just like her though, not a lick of his father in him, she was always frail and sickly too."

Daniel nodded but was keeping a keen eye on the pasture. The fence was a mix of wooden rails and stonewalls and both needed repairing.

"Boy's father, was a good man, a loyal man, he died of the dreaded cough a couple of winters ago, left poor Teagan alone out here but the boy is too stubborn to move closer to people. Just sheer luck he's not caught his death yet, his blood's too thin."

"Fields won't give enough hay." Daniel broke in softly.

"Ah? Oh don't mind that, I'll send down plenty of fodder for him and you both, just get the barn dry and patched up." He was a touch winded now, he'd followed the fence up the gentle hill at a quick pace and had forgotten he was an old man now. Robin stopped and stared out across the acres he'd given his sister when she's wed, the fair sized house and barn, the square patch of garden and the pastures. Most was fallow now, in disrepair since his brother in law had passed away and Teagan had been too proud to say just how much help he really needed.

They could have stood silently like that for a day or a year and he doubted the young man beside him would break it. Robin sighed. "He's a good man, but proud, stubborn. I've children now but I think of him as my own, Daniel, do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir."

"The doctors told us four or five times he'd never live out another year and yet here he still is. He keeps to himself too much, I don't want you to just see the roof is mended and the horses tended. I know we've only met a few times but I hear you're a good sort, someone to be trusted with anything. Keep your eye on him for me."

"Yes, sir."

Robin glanced over to the young man and had to scold himself. He'd been thinking of Daniel as older than Teagan but his nephew's fragility was as deceptive as Daniel's too old, distant eyes. If the man beside him was twenty five he'd be shocked cold with surprise and Robin lowered the silent man's age down to closer to twenty. It was his eyes, so distant and wary with little warmth in them that made him seem so much older. That and the sense that the quiet man could literally handle anything that crossed his path with steady nerves and strong hands. Poor Teagan was older, by several years if his guess was correct but his smaller, thin frame and bright hopeful eyes made him seem so much younger.

It had been his wife that had insisted that he ask Daniel to check on Teagan, but not for the reasons Robin had assumed. He'd thought it was a great idea, that Teagan would gain so much from regular social contact that he'd lacked since his father had passed away. The fact that Daniel could get the farm back into good order was a happy side note but his wife and shaken her head and scolded him. It wasn't for Teagan's sake she'd made the suggestion but for

Daniel's. When he'd asked her to explain, she'd rolled her eyes and cursed all men as fools. It had been the only time he'd questioned his choice to marry such a younger woman but since he valued her insight, and thought his own reasons stronger, he'd brought Daniel to the farm.

"Come along, Daniel, we've still several stops to make before tonight."

Daniel nodded and followed his employer back down the hill toward the house and horses. As he gathered up the reins and moved to hold the bridle so the older man could mount the steady horse with greater ease, he caught sight of movement on the porch. He glanced up and spotted the frail, dark haired man standing by the door.

"You won't stay for lunch, Uncle?"

"Can't, m'boy." Robin groaned as he swung himself back into the saddle. "Expected over at Mallory's for lunch, promised him a word when I was by again."

Teagan nodded. "Very well, thank you for stopping in Uncle."

"Take care, lad, I promise I'll be by again soon and come up to the house. Elizabeth wants to make sure you're getting enough food sent down, you know how she worries."

That made Teagan grin a little. His uncle's wife was barely older than he was and had grown up in the town teasing him when they were children. She was a good woman but he knew which one of them worried more. "I'll ride up there soon."

"Good! Send word if you need anything."

Which was how he always said goodbye. "Travel safe, uncle." It wasn't his aging, rotund uncle he watched but the silent new woodsman. The man slipped into the saddle with ease and sat the horse like an expert as the pair rode back down his lane to the main road. He would just have to find a way to convince his uncle he didn't need a watch dog once the spring chores were finished. As he went inside to rest for a while, he wondered if he could talk Elizabeth around to his cause.

Teagan woke as he always did, at what his sister had called an indulgent hour. He was always just too tired to wake at dawn, even after she'd left and it was just himself and his father. Since he didn't have a cow to care for any longer and the chickens didn't mind waiting, there wasn't much worry if he slept a bit later than was decent. He yawned and dressed, shaved and washed up and stepped out into the warming spring damp to attend his chores, and nearly tripped over an upturned hat filled with eggs.

That wasn't a normal occurrence. He bent down and picked up the hat and carefully took the eggs inside transporting them to the basket he normally used. It wasn't many but the hens were laying very well this year and he'd taken to saving up some of the extras for his visits up to the manor house. Elizabeth traded him milk, butter and cheese for the eggs even if she would have sent them anyway.

The hat, now emptied, turned over in his hand and the number of people that it could belong to was fairly limited. Teagan found the owner in his barn. The silent man's coat was off and tossed over a stall door and he had one of the draft horse's hooves raised up and caught between his knees. Daniel didn't look up but Teagan knew the man knew he was there. He waited until he let the hoof down, one strong hand patting the animal's flank.

"I've your hat."

"Hmmp." Daniel grunted before clucking at the horse and lifting another hoof.

"I can do my own chores just fine." He dropped the hat on top of the man's coat, balancing it on the rail and moved to break out the feed for the horses.

"They're fed." Daniel muttered, checking the work with the pick before dropping the hoof. The horses and chickens were surprisingly well tended and it had only been the hooves that had shown any sign of the slightest neglect. He couldn't picture the slighter man muscling the large draft horses into raising a leg even if he'd wanted to.

Teagan sighed, tried not to sound huffy and moved to start mucking out the stalls.

"Done that too." He moved to the draft horse's head and scratched at the beast's ears. That earned him a whicker and some soft nuzzling.

"Careful, Buttercup is a nipper."

He gave the horse a few more pats and scratches before clucking some more and guiding the last of the three horses to be turned out in the smaller, better repaired side pasture. "We worked that out already." He swatted the lazy horse's rump and left it to trot off startled from the barn.

"You don't need to tend them." Teagan folded his arms across his chest and tried to look stern. It must not have been very effective because his new farm hand just stood quietly for a moment and met his eye.

"They're well cared for."

It wasn't what he had expected to hear. "Thank you." It didn't change the fact that he wasn't helpless. "I can tend my own home."

Daniel nodded. "Yes, sir." And he moved to gather up the box of carpentry tools and out back to fix the loose shingles on the chicken coop. Animals secured first, so coop and barn, that was a given, then he would clear the house's garden and get it tilled and ready for planting before moving to repair the fences. That should take him to getting the vegetable plants in and he'd focus on the repair work the house needed. After that he'd worry about firewood and harvesting. As he walked past the slender man to do his job, he saw storm clouds in his dark eyes. They weren't brown, he noted, but an odd deep, dark green.

It left Teagan standing alone and caught between indignation and anger. He kicked a clump of hay and cursed but the hay kicked up dust and he sneezed violently. There just wasn't anything to be done. He couldn't fire the man, because he hadn't hired him. It wasn't like he could scare the man off, the new woodsman didn't look like he scared easily. Apparently telling him not to do things didn't work either. In the end he was left standing alone, feeling like a pouting child, before he gave up and went inside to try to pretend that the work he should have been doing was being done for him.

It was a short while to pretend, when Teagan had gotten over his anger and went outside close to noon to see if his visitor would be interested in lunch, he found the man and his horse gone. He'd arrived and left on his own and with just as little notice. Teagan found himself checking the horses and the chicken's coop just to be fussy but there was nothing with the man's work he could find fault with.

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Chapter Two

The next morning he found the hat again on his doorstep, again filled with eggs. He brought them inside and carried the hat out with him in an angry fit. One day he could forgive, the man didn't know, but when he'd told him he'd tend his own chores and he'd done it anyway, well, that just made him angry.

Again he found the horses groomed, fed and the stalls cleaned and he rounded the house ready for a fight. He found Daniel in the coop, prying old half rotten boards off the nesting boxes. Teagan threw the hat and it hit with a satisfying whap against the man's strong back.

"Had to get the eggs out before working on the boxes." Daniel said as another board pulled away. "Won't step over my bounds tomorrow, sir."

Which entirely stole all of Teagan's wrath. "Well, good!" He tried to sound angry but he'd always been a lousy liar. With nothing pressing to do, he went back inside and ate a grumpy, solitary breakfast. The day repeated itself and when he went back outside before noon, he found his yard empty.

He never found a hat full of eggs outside his door again and the chickens looked very put out at having to wait until he'd gotten awake to be fed. He found himself less angry at the stalls being already mucked clean and the horses fed but none of the grooming had been finished. It was a good compromise and one he thought he could live with.

Daniel had spent the morning cleaning the leather of the harnesses and tack and had moved on to the wagon by the time Teagan had emerged from the house. He nodded at the slender man's greeting but kept his focus on the job he was doing. The wagon was a decent size and in good repair but the maintenance had been over looked. He jacked it up to wrestle the wheels off to re-grease the axils.

The slender man returned while he was still busy struggling with the wagon and from the corner of his eye he saw Teagan sit down on an old milking stool, basket of eggs carefully placed beside him. For once, the darker haired man said nothing and Daniel dismissed his watching to check the front axle and smear the thick grease in place.

As with any project, nothing went smoothly for the whole affair. One wheel just didn't want to return to its place and Daniel struggled with it. It really was a two man job but then, it wasn't his nature to blame a missing pair of hands for his troubles.

A second, paler, set of hands braced themselves near his own and he glanced up to meet stubborn deep green. There was a challenge in them and he frowned, knowing this wasn't what his employer had in mind. It just seemed stupid to fight over it, if Teagan thought himself capable of it he'd accept the help. Daniel stayed frowning but he nodded and together they angled and wrestled the wheel back into place. He didn't even try to refuse the other man's help on the last wheel.

The work left them both panting and tired and Daniel happily flopped down onto the wood plank floor beside Teagan once he'd gotten the jack lowered and pulled away. The other man was paler than he had been and he had his head propped back against a post support beam, eyes shut.

Daniel almost asked him if he was okay or if this was normal for him or just what was wrong with him but he wasn't comfortable prying. "Your uncle has a load of lumber for you in the town. I'll pick it up this afternoon, be back before dark."

"Lunch first?" He lifted his head and it felt light.

"No, sir, will lose the light." He pushed himself to his feet and moved to get the draft horses in the harness. When he had the wagon ready, Teagan's coloring had improved and the man didn't look quite as much like a corpse. He nodded and got on his way.

It was late when the wagon returned, the sound of it woke Teagan from where he'd drifted to sleep curled up in his father's chair by the fire. The sound carried in through the open window and he awoke chilled from the cool spring breeze. He shut the window and straightened his clothes before, getting a drink and going out to help unload the wagon.

When he pulled the door open he caught Daniel almost on the threshold. He thrust out the wrapped package he was holding. "Mr. Roberts' said to have this sent to you when I picked up the lumber." He pressed the package of fresh meat at the slender man and ducked his head as he moved back to the barn to unload the wagon.

Teagan took the wrapped bundle and shook his head. His uncle nagged at him to eat more fresh meats and he was half frightened it was more liver. He hated liver, with a passion, and was forced to eat it for his health most of his life. The paper peeled back to show it was fresh pork, not liver and that was a better choice. It would be plenty to keep him fed for days and a thoughtful touch on his uncle's part.

The wagon unloaded quickly with two working at it and Teagan moved to help as much as he could but Daniel worked with single-minded focus. The man simply never spoke and Teagan wasn't sure if any conversation would be welcomed. It didn't seem like Daniel wanted to be friendly, let alone friends, and he could respect that.

"I'm going to make dinner, would you care to stay and have some?" The sun was setting and it would be dark soon.

Daniel got the latch closed on the last stall door, finishing what he was doing as if he hadn't heard the offer. It wasn't until the horse was secure and safe before he spoke. "Thank you but I should get home, sir."

It hadn't even occurred to him that the silent man might consider it awkward to stay. Or, maybe, he had someone waiting for him at the woodsman's cottage he'd moved into. He really did know nothing about the man. "Of course, well, thank you."

"Yes sir." He nodded and dropped his eyes but it wasn't noticed, the slender man had turned and retreated from the barn, leaving Daniel to find his own way home.

He knocked on the door but didn't have to wait long for it to be opened. The housemaid smiled broadly and Teagan grinned back at her. "Afternoon Mary, is Mrs. Roberts in?"

"Of course," she smiled wider trying to be mannerly but turned her head and shouted. "Miss! Master Teagan's here for ya!"

"Mary!" Elizabeth scolded instantly, she'd been hovering in the door to the parlor. "That's no way to introduce guests."

"He ain't a guest, miss, he's family."

"Still! Shouting like that..."

"Sorry, miss."

"It's okay Lizzie." He held out the basket he'd brought with him. "I have far too many eggs, thought you could use them."

Lizzie took the basket and tsked at how full it was. "Did you save any for yourself?"

He peeled off his outer coat and hung it on a peg inside his uncle's foyer. "The hens are laying too well, they'll just go to waste at my house. Please, take them and put them to good use. Make that custard Uncle Robin loves so much."

"Well, thank you." She passed the basket to Mary. "Bring in tea, please Mary. You will be staying to have tea, won't you Teagan?"

"Right away, Miss."

"I've no other plans this afternoon."

"Good." Lizzie took her nephew's arm and led him into the parlor. "I was just sitting her bored silly with the mending and praying someone would come by to entertain me."

"Where are the children?"

"Cece has them outside, playing in the sunshine to spare me a headache." She tried not to fuss at how pale he was or the dark circles under his eyes as she pressed him into a chair. As children, she'd been quite taken with him; he was quiet and thoughtful when the other boys were rowdy and loud. It wasn't until she was nearly a young woman that she understood why he didn't run around like so many of the other children and it was her father that warned her that there was no future with a husband that wouldn't live long enough to see children, let alone grandchildren.

They chatted about non-important things, gossip about family and the town until the tea arrived and Lizzie pulled her legs up under her on the chair and balanced the fine china cup in the palm of her hand. "Well?" She prodded now that there was no further need for any of the servants to bother them and she could stop acting like the lady of the house. "Tell me about him?"

"About whom?" Teagan raised an eyebrow and sipped his tea.

"You rat! You know who I mean, Daniel O'Raian of course, he's all the town will talk about."

"There's nothing to speak of, he works like a dog and says as little."

"He is quite silent."

"You've met him?"

"Of course I have, your uncle brought him by here the day he came home with him. Told me if I ever needed anything that Mr. O'Raian was utterly trustworthy." She held back that it had been her suggestion to sic the quiet man on Teagan. "He seems quite dashing."



"You're married Lizzie." He reminded her with a grin.

She waved the reminder off. "I only speak so casually with you and your uncle. I may flirt about other men but honestly, your uncle has my heart." She brushed auburn curls back from her shoulder and smiled warmly. "Now, he's been here over a week, tell me of him."

"Nothing to tell, Lizzie, he works hard and barely speaks. I did finally get him to eat lunch today, he's been up on the barn roof doing repairs. He refused to come into the house to eat but sat on the porch instead."

"You're not giving the poor thing a hard time of it, are you Teagan?"

He looked insulted. "Me?"

She raised her eyebrows at him and looked stern.

"No, I'm not. It galls me to admit that I need the help but I do. I don't like having the reminder of what I should be so obviously in front of me but when my sister was more of a man than me, I've learned to accept my limitations with as much grace as I can muster."

"Oh, listen to you. Rebecca was as strong and healthy as an ox, and twice as stubborn and you spent most of your childhood a-bed. Can't help that, dearest."

He covered his distaste with a sip of the tea. "And what's this poor thing comment? The man is as solid as a stone wall, nothing poor about him."

She placed her cup down. "You haven't heard?"

"I haven't been to town in quite a while."

"Oh, well, Mr. O'Raian was a conscript. They took him into the army when he was barely fourteen and sent him to fight in the colonies. When he came back, his mother and sisters were just gone, all of his family, simply vanished. He's not a soul in the world to care if he lives or dies. Isn't that the saddest thing you've ever heard?"

He wasn't sure it was the saddest thing he'd ever heard but it wasn't a cheerful bit of the man's history. It explained some of the silence and the distance Daniel carried and it made Teagan a little more willing to see it as just how the man was and not a snub. He always automatically assumed it was because of his own nature. So many people were just disturbed by him, of the reminder of how fragile their own health was, that he had gotten used to assuming cold distance from strangers was his own doing.

It surely gave him a great deal to think about. So much so that he wasn't as firm as he normally was when refusing the food Lizzie tried to push him to accept. He found himself laden down with butter, cheese, bread, milk, jam and dried apples. So much food, in fact, that he had to borrow a larger basket to get it all home in and so distracted was he that he was half way there before he saw just how much she'd sneaked into it.

He was prepared today, the glut of food demanded that Teagan get some help eating it and he had cooked up a hot stew to go with the chunks of bread and butter Lizzie had sent home with him. It was ready before noon which gave him an advantage, he'd had to almost blackmail the silent woodsman into eating lunch with him before. Today he was going to try a simpler approach.

"Mr. O'Raian?" Teagan called up toward the barn roof, not trusting himself on the tall ladder. If he got dizzy or light headed halfway up he'd have to be helped down like a child.

It took a second, Teagan was learning that nothing moved the man until he'd finished whatever work was before him, but he didn't have to call twice. Daniel walked within view. His waistcoat had been discarded and his shirt hung loose around his collar. His sleeves had been rolled up and his hat was sitting on the back of his head. He looked a hundred feet tall and like some mythical demi-god capable of anything. For a moment, Teagan forgot what he was going to say.

"I've lunch ready, come eat." He phrased it as an order not a request.

Daniel paused, hammer in hand and finally nodded.

"Well, that was easier than I'd feared." He muttered to himself and lingered to watch the silent man ease himself gracefully onto the top rungs on the tall ladder. Strong hands gripped old wood and with no fear and solid strength, Daniel scurried down the rungs. It made Teagan think things he had no place or right to think and he shook his head and turned away.

They ate in silence, on the porch because Teagan refused to eat inside when his company ate outside. Daniel sat on the edge of the small wood porch, hat sitting beside him and ate with what Teagan thought was enthusiasm.

"Lizzie, my Uncle's wife, she said that she heard the United Irishmen caught a spy last week, over in Dublin." He made an attempt at conversation. He had no idea, really, where the silent man's loyalties were but he trusted his uncle's. Daniel didn't even flinch or glance up. "I'll never understand what makes a man betray his people like that."

Daniel put his plate down, empty but that was simply because he had inhaled the last few bites. He stood up and gathered his hat back. "Thank you for lunch, sir." He answered softly and moved to leave before he spoke out of turn.

There was something different in how the quiet man was holding his shoulders, or maybe it was in the soft control to the tone of his voice. Teagan put his own plate down and stood up. "I'm sorry, Mr. O'Raian." The words stopped Daniel a few paces away. "My family has always told me to never speak of politics or religion. It's just..." he shook his head. "It's the only bit of gossip I have that might have interested you. I can't see you being concerned with Mr. Dunne's cow having whiptail or the Sullivan's sheep getting loose again."

Daniel crushed his hat in his hands but his back was to the slender man. "I've no interest in politics or talk of rebellion." He said flatly but couldn't leave it there. "You asked why someone would do that? Fear, sir." He wasn't in the mood to explain further and walked back to the barn to try to get the section of the roof he was working on finished.

It gave Teagan a lot to think about. Not just about the nature of spies and traitors but about his silent handyman too. The answer was so much further thought out than Teagan had ever expected that he had to wonder. He'd thought the man's silence was just his nature, then, taken with what Lizzie had told him of the man's history, his nature and his military training. Anyone fairly raised by the army would learn to hold their tongue and keep their silence, and Daniel did follow orders easily and without question. Now, he wondered if the man's quiet way covered deeper thoughts and a surprisingly intelligent mind. The mystery of it was almost enough to make up for the intrusion of the man into his life.

The pen twirled easily in between his fingers which made for a pretty spin but didn't get any words onto the paper. The right phrases just weren't coming out and Teagan sighed again and scratched his nose, unknowingly smearing a spot of ink. His plan to write up a new stirring

pamphlet for his uncle and his friends wasn't as easy as it sounded. He knew what he wanted to say, what comparisons he wanted to draw but when he sat to write it all he could hear in his head was Daniel O'Raian saying the caught spy had been afraid.

A knock on his door broke his thoughts and startled him so badly that the pen dropped. Luckily there was no ink still fresh on the quill and nothing splattered on the paper. His uncle didn't knock, none of the neighbors ever came by, not since his father had passed away. The very oddity of the knock had him hurrying to the door.

Daniel stood on the other side, waistcoat and jacket back on, coat tossed over an arm and hat in hand. "Sir."

"Mr. O'Raian?"

"I'm finished today, sir." Daniel swallowed hard and nodded to the roof. "Worst is fixed."

Teagan frowned. "Thank you."

"It's just, your Uncle, Mr. Roberts, sir, he's work for me. I won't be by tomorrow, sir."

"Of course."

"Might be gone for a couple of days, I'm to accompany him on his travels, sir."

Which wasn't the duty of a woodsman. "Well, travel safely."

"It's..." Daniel drew a breath and had to drop his eyes. He just couldn't keep his thoughts straight with this wide, dark green eyes watching him. "I was looking at the garden sir. It's about a third what was once ploughed, yes?"

He nodded. "Yes, while my father was alive. I can't, the plough is too much for me, I can't till it. I've had to let it go fallow and just keep what I can maintain."

"I thought, since I'll be in town anyway, to pick up seed potatoes, grain, squash and beans, things like that. Won't take much to get that other part back in order, sir." Which wasn't a lie, it would be work, yes, but one that Daniel didn't mind.

"I don't know if my Uncle intended you to farm, that seems like a lot of work beyond the repairs."

Daniel shrugged. "Wouldn't mind it and my orders are just to see to what needs tending."

He remembered how it looked, when his father had been alive and the garden had been heavy with fresh produce. It had been nice to not have to go begging to Lizzie's kitchen for an onion because he'd run out of what he'd been able to grow on his own. "Thank you, I'd be grateful for the help, on the condition that you take some of the harvests with you."

"No, sir." He glanced up and prayed that his face didn't show how the sight of ink smudged on the side of the pale nose made his heart beat faster.

"It's only fair. You'll be doing more than half the work. I'm sure my uncle warned you, I'm stubborn, it's the only way I'll accept such help."

"As you say, sir." Which wasn't entirely an agreement but he knew better then to stand around and debate the divvying up of as of yet un-grown vegetables. "I'll be by when I get back."

"Thank you for letting me know." The wind gusted and swirled around the house, puffing up across Daniel and drifting across Teagan. On it was the smell of rain and something more, hay

and sawdust, sweat and strong, vital, powerful male. It hit him like a dropped brick and Teagan knew it wasn't his thin blood or weak heart that made his knees suddenly feel weak. He stood, stunned, like a fool, in the door way as Daniel nodded and turned to leave. He was still standing there long after the man had ridden from sight.

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Chapter Three

Spotting the small town he now lived a couple of miles outside of, was one of the best sights Daniel had ever seen. He was beyond tired, he'd fallen into exhausted and hadn't slept in almost two days, the better part of which he'd spent in the saddle. He was hungry, dirty and wanted a pint or three before sleeping a good solid night. There was no way he was going to be able to cover those last miles home, make dinner and tend his horse before he fell over asleep. Which meant the tavern in the town was the best option. It wasn't large but it was loyal and safe.

The sack of seed potatoes thumped his back again when he dropped like a rock from the saddle in the stables. Grateful that he'd been friendly with the stable hand and knew the man was capable of getting the saddle off without spilling seeds and potatoes everywhere. It seemed everyone in the small town knew what he really was doing for Robin Roberts and his group of plotting old men and while he'd never willingly admit it to them, it made it easier.

"Back safe?" James, the stable man, asked as Daniel stretched the kinks from his spine.

"Aye."

"All go well?"

He caught the slender man's eye and he swallowed hard over just asking. Daniel softened his face and gave the man a half grin. "As well as it could, glad to be back. Mr. Roberts make it home?"

"Yes, sir, several days ago."

"Good." Which was one less worry he had to juggle. The couple of days had turned into over a week and he was bone weary tired of dealing with all the nonsense. "I'll be staying the night." He'd promised the men that hired him he wouldn't get drunk as often as he had been while still in Dublin and he had kept that promise but tonight, he was going to get so drunk he didn't have to think. That was something he'd earned.

The chatter in the tavern stopped for a heartbeat when he came in but quickly picked up again as if he had been a born and raised local. The few stares that lingered didn't bother him, he was used to those and he made his way toward the back corner away from most of the gossip and

laughter to a small table that would let him have his back to the wall. He was always armed, the knife strapped to his waist now was larger than the one he carried in his boot but he had been traveling, but a knife only helped if you saw trouble coming.

The woman that brought his dinner and beer smiled warmly at him, she'd been flirting pretty heavily the last time he'd stopped in for a few drinks. Fortunately, he must have looked as worn out as he felt because all she did was smile at him this time. He wasn't sure his temper could handle her attempts at seduction tonight. It left him to focus on the food and drink she's brought instead.

Which wasn't much worth focusing on. The beer was good but the food was greasy even by his standards, no where near the good fare he'd gotten for lunch before he'd left. The beer made up for it and was really more of what he was interested in. As soon as he got the food into his stomach, he'd think about something stronger than the ale.

It wasn't to be. Just as he was feeling his shoulders unknot and his stomach uncramp from days of worry and stress, James hurried into the tavern. He scanned the room and came quickly over to where Daniel sat. That was never a good sign and the food in his stomach churned.

"Danny," James whispered.

He glanced up and the stableman fell silent but it didn't scare him off.

"Something's wrong."

He shrugged. "Not my concern."

"But, it's the courier." James hissed lower, glancing to the door way.

"Not my concern." He repeated slower.

"But, Danny, Mr. Roberts and the others? They're in meetings, the kind the likes of us ain't supposed to know about."

He knew he was going to regret it but he asked anyway. "What's wrong with the courier?"

"Billy O'Mally? He's a drunk, aye, but an honest one. He was stumbling across the fields, he seen Jakey Finn and some of the boys he runs and he goes quiet and listens in to their bragging. They're going to lay an ambush for the courier tonight, in Mr. Robert's region. We figured, since you're his man, you could do something." James half nodded to the knife Daniel wore.

The woodsman downed the last swallow of his current beer. "I haven't slept in nearly two days, this is the first solid meal I've had in three or more. I'm worn out, James, and besides, Mallory is a good rider and fighter. No thugs are going to spook him, he'll ride right over them on that horse of his."

James glanced around nervously. "That's just it, ain't Mallory tonight. His wife, she gone into labor early, he had to ride over to fetch old lady Jenkins to act as midwife."

That put a sick feeling that wasn't just the greasy food hitting his empty stomach. "Who's taking the run?"

"Teagan Walsh."

That was the last name he expected. He tried to picture the frail man making the long run and couldn't. When he added in an ambush he knew it wasn't going to end well. "Who's fool ass idea was that?" He snapped back at a whisper.

"His and he were the only one with a horse strong enough and skill enough to make the run during the dark moon."

He swore under his breath. "Get my horse ready and where is this ambush supposed to be? Lots of places along that road good for jumping a lone rider." He let James hurry him outside where he shrugged into his coat and smashed his hat down onto his head. The spring night time rains that had been threatening were just starting to drizzle a little and it wasn't looking to be a pleasant or restful night.

James pulled the bridle of the horse away from the boy that worked with him and shooed the young man away. When word reached him he had the boy get Daniel's horse ready, knowing the quiet, dangerous man would be wanting to ride out without delay.

"Stupid, foolish idiot." Daniel muttered and tried not to picture pale skin and blood. "Where's the exchange supposed to be?"

James shook his head. "Half way cross the county, no way you can make it there before lessen you've learned to fly."

"Damn it." His horse was tired too and the short hour of rest wasn't going to do either of them much good. "Where's this supposed to happen?"

"You know where the stream grows close to the road? That sharp bumbling corner, the blind one right before the road widens?"

He'd made it a point to know the roads in Mr. Roberts' region and ways to get around the countryside that avoided them. "Aye. You keep this quite, James, you hear me? If I hear a whisper of this I'll know it's from your lips." He didn't have to try to make himself sound threatening to make the stable hand swallow hard and nod.

"Aye, sir. Won't whisper a word!"

He glanced up to the cloud heavy night sky and shook his head before hauling himself into the saddle and forcing tired man and beast back down the road.

It was a careful balance between rushing in the dark and arriving too late and Daniel pushed as hard as he could. He knew he was going to be out numbered and most likely out armed as well so he pulled up a good half mile from the bend in the road James had mentioned and hitched the reins around a tree branch. Just to be careful, he wrapped them loosely. If the worst happened and he didn't come back for the animal, it would be able to pull free and find a warm stable again.

The trees gave good cover and he moved carefully, slowly, between them. Creeping foot by foot long the high edge of the embankment the road cut into. It wasn't necessary, he heard the whispering of the pair on his side of the road a hundred feet back. He shook his head in the darkness and moved slowly, stalking the voices in the slick green woods.

Closer now and he was able to make out the shadowy forms of two men crouched down within a few feet of each other. That posed a problem, should be at least one, most likely two more on the far side of the road and too much noise would draw them over. He knelt down near a tree and waited, thinking, feeling the press of time upon him. Teagan was riding toward them, at the very moment he was getting closer, and there wasn't time to just sit and wait for the proper moment to act but neither could he rush in foolishly.

Daniel backed off a dozen or more paces and looked around in the dark. He found a broken branch, as thick around as his wrist and almost too long but it was better than nothing. Carefully,

so slowly it made him ache to count off the seconds he was wasting, he eased back closer to the pair. Any sound he might have made was covered by their own whispering as they discussed a woman Daniel didn't know.

He stood a moment, back to a tree and steadied his breathing, calmed his nerves. When he moved it was without hesitation, there was no room for doubt or fear. Daniel charged out from behind the tree, suddenly appearing in the darkness, not concerned now with the sound of his approach. The two men startled, one dropped the end of a rope to reach for a pistol and Daniel swung.

The branch arched upwards and caught the second man as he was turning. It cracked hard against the side of the man's head, the impact vibrated up Daniel's arm and the man dropped. Unconscious or stunned, it didn't matter, it dropped the odds into his favor. He swung the branch around again and the second man pulled the trigger on the pistol.

Nothing happened and Daniel would have snorted in disgust. The man had let the charge get wet in the drizzling damp, there wasn't anything that could make wet powder fire. It was careless and sloppy and it cost the man his life. Daniel fell on the man with his blade drawn and silenced his startled cries as quickly as he could.

"What's going on over there?" A voice called from the far side of the road and Daniel glanced up from where he was finishing the second man off to see a pair of forms moving on the other side.

Before he stepped out, he cut the rope looped around the tree trunk that they'd meant to raise and trip Teagan's horse. Now, with one side unanchored, there was no threat of that happening but the low throbbing of a fast approaching horse urged him to move faster. He stepped from the covering of brush at the side of the road and let his arm fling out.

The small blade from his boot flew true and the form standing on the other side of the road gave a startled, pain filled sound as he doubled over. The pair cursed and the one uninjured helped his wounded friend to the road's embankment. The friend left laying there was moaning now in shock and pain and he pulled the blade from his guts and cried louder as the blood flowed freely.

"Bastard!" The last one snarled and charged across the road toward Daniel. He was holding a rifle but had been smart enough to either not prime it in the damp or clever enough to know it wouldn't fire.

Daniel didn't wait for the man to meet him, he charged forward as well. When the last ambusher swung the stock of his rifle over in a fast arc, he ducked inside it and tossed his arm up. The blow was stunning, the heavy wood crashed down on his upper arm and nearly staggered him off his footing in the damp hard packed road. It didn't break his arm, but it was going to leave an impressive bruise for days to come.

Before the rifle could be pulled back, Daniel wrapped his aching left arm around it's length and pulled. The man held on and Daniel swung out and punched the man, hard, in the face. It staggered him just barely enough to let the rifle slip from his fingers. Daniel tossed it as far away as he could, his blood pounding in his ears as the man swung at him, a fist with his left hand, a knife with his right. A knife fight didn't worry Daniel, he'd either win and live or lose and die and he skidded back a few steps to try to sum up his opponent.

Blades flashed and were avoided. The man at least knew what he was doing and Daniel moved carefully, darting away from another slash but his boots slipped and the blade cut in across his side. Not deep, not worrisome, just messy and painful. He pushed it aside and caught the man's wrist, they struggled for grip and purchase in the dark, damp night. The blood was roaring now in his ears, making it difficult to think over the racket.

When he remembered it wasn't the sound of his own blood he was hearing, not fully, but also of

hoof beats as Teagan raced down on them. He would come around the blind corner into the wider section on the other side and never see them before they were trampled. How good of a rider was Teagan? Could he pull the horse up in time to stop? Would he ever react fast enough? It seemed absurd to be fairly sure he'd survive the fight to die under the hooves of the man he'd been trying to spare.

Then there was no time left to worry or fear. Teagan's horse barreled around the corner. Daniel thought he might be able to use that heartbeat of surprise in his opponent to pull the man down and over to the side of the road, out of the way of the oncoming horse. He managed to wrestle the man down but he was too stubborn to be moved far. The horse whinnied unhappily and reared and Daniel glanced up to see sharp hooves dancing what seemed like over his head.

They crashed down a hands width from his body and the horse reared and danced and bucked some more. Teagan made shushing soothing sounds and pulled hard to get the horse to back up and into a tight, controlled circle. It took a moment but he got the animal under control and held his seat but when he did he squinted into the darkness of the road trying to make out what was rolling about before him.

He saw the flash of the blades as the two men struggled. To the side he saw the limp form of another man. It startled him, made him uncertain what to do. His instinct was to help but which man to help? Teagan glanced down to the pair straining to kill each other and saw a face he knew. He backed the horse up and began to rise from the saddle to hop down and run over to help.

"Ride!" Daniel groaned out. "Ride you fool!"

Teagan frowned. It didn't look like Daniel was winning and he couldn't tell who's man it was on the side of the road. It made him ill to leave a friend behind, to simply ride away without offering help.

"RIDE!"

The horse danced in a tight circle. It wasn't a happy choice but Teagan dug his heels into the beast's sides and it leapt forwards, safely around the fighting pair, to dart like lightening down the road. The dispatches were more important, the hand off had to be made, the cause was greater than any single person. He didn't like it but he believed it and he made haste to the drop point, but his thoughts stayed behind, worried over a man he barely knew.

It was dawn before Daniel staggered back into town. He didn't have the heart to ask his exhausted horse to carry him, even at a slow walk, back to the town. The poor thing had taken the brunt of hauling the bodies down to the deeper part of the stream for Daniel to lash together and sink with rocks. He'd have to go back tomorrow and fish them out and bury them properly but he just couldn't manage it tonight.

Not that getting wet and freezing cold mattered any, before an hour had passed the drizzle had turned into a hard rain and he'd been soaked through long before he'd gotten the bodies to the stream. Exhausted, half frozen, and wounded, he'd walked back to the town leading his equally worn out horse to the promise of someplace warm to sleep.

James was huddled outside the stable, wrapped in his coat and he sprang to his feet when he spotted Daniel shuffling along. Horse and rider were weary and wet and the rain hadn't fully stopped the blood from staining Daniel's clothes. Most of it was his own, the small gashes and the one longer cut on his side, had continued to bleed sluggishly long after stream and rain had washed the blood of the dead from him.

"Danny!" James took the reins from numb fingers. "Was getting worried about you."



"Teagan..." He swallowed and remembered his place. "Mr. Walsh?"  
"Safe and sound and tucked up in a room here for the night."

He nodded and let James lead him and the horse into the stables. He pulled a hand away from the cut on his side and the fresh blood that glossed his fingers. "Need to stitch this."

"Aye, get you out of the wind first."

It was too much to protest over and he gave in to James' gentle nudging. He let himself be pressed to sit on a bench inside the stable and let the boy that worked with James take his horse away to be tended. It didn't take long for James to come back with needle and thread, whiskey and some bandages but Daniel was too tired to protest letting someone else tend the wound. He gritted his teeth and downed a few swallows of the liquor and tried not to feel the needle pulling the gash back together.

A hand shook him awake and he startled and nearly fell from the bench. It was only James and he stopped drawing the blade from his hip, letting it drop back into its sheath.

"Jesus!" James cursed, eyes wide. "Easy now, it's just me. You drifted off, can't sleep here, come on now."

It wasn't a room at the tavern that he was nudged and prodded toward but a clean stall right there in the barn. The hay was sweet smelling and the blankets he pulled over him were warm. Daniel drifted back to sleep almost before James could get the stall door shut behind him as he left and in that moment, the most comfortable bed couldn't compare to what he was laying on.

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Chapter Four

Teagan was still yawning when he staggered down to the main room of the tavern. It was mid morning, about when he always woke up if a little sooner and he was still exhausted. He always slept better in his own bed and now that he wasn't so tired, he wanted to eat something and just go home.

The main room wasn't empty but it wasn't packed either which suited him. He picked a spot near the windows, in the sunshine. It was pleasant and warm and it let him keep his eyes out for Daniel. He couldn't simply ask, he wasn't supposed to have done what he'd done the night before and it was all better not spoken of.

He smiled and nodded at the tavern owner when he dropped a bowl of cooked oats off at the table but movement caught his eye near the door. Daniel was yawning too as he stumbled into the tavern and moved to a spot in the back, hidden almost in the corner. "Excuse me?" Teagan

asked carefully of the owner, a man he'd known his whole life but still felt formal around.

"What can I do for you Master Teagan?"

And that was why. The town still treated him like he was a boy. He forced himself not to frown and pointed with his chin. "Mr. O'Raian? What time did he get in last night?"

The owner snorted. "He didn't, staggered in about dawn looking like a drowned rat."

It was a risk but Teagan pushed forward. "Would you mind asking him to please join me?"

The owner paused, surprised because Teagan normally kept to himself so much, but he nodded and grinned anyway. "Right away."

It left Teagan sitting alone by the window, too nervous to really eat and feeling a touch foolish. Movement near by and a soft foot fall made him glance from the window and up. Daniel stood there, a stain of what looked like blood peeking out from under the coat he wore. He hadn't shaved in days and his hair was shaggy and uncombed but seeing the man alive and whole made Teagan feel a hundred times lighter.

"Mr. Walsh?"

"Please," He motioned to a chair.

Daniel glanced to his normal corner and back down to the handsome, worried eyes. He knew he should refuse, knew he'd never be comfortable so exposed in a public place. It wasn't safe sitting so close to the window with no solid wall at his back, he should refuse just on those grounds let alone for how improper it was for him to join his employer. He simply didn't want to, he was tired and hurting and it just felt better to know Teagan was safe. With a frown he pulled the chair as close to a solid wall as he could manage and sat uneasily down.

"I'm pleased to see you've returned... safely." Teagan spoke carefully but Daniel was as stoic and unreadable as always.

"It was a risky thing, coming to town like that." He heard himself scolding.

That sparked a touch of stubborn anger in Teagan. "I'm not a child nor am I dead yet." He hissed back softly, careful his voice didn't carry. "I'm a good rider, better than most in this county."

The vehemence surprised Daniel and he nodded. "You're right, not my place to say."

They ate their simple breakfast in silence from then on and Teagan wasn't sure if he should be angry or not. He felt a little badly for how he'd snapped at the man that had obviously saved his life but it galled him to admit he might have needed saving. It left him torn between remorse and guilt for being peevisish and still being angry at being thought to fragile or weak to help out. Daniel's blank expression gave him nothing to go on, nudged him toward neither emotion and he left it at silence.

Outside he wasn't surprised to find both their horses waiting but he was surprised by the surge of happiness he felt at seeing the seed potatoes tied behind Daniel's saddle. The man's few days away had stretched further and it wasn't just his eagerness to get the spring chores done that had Teagan on edge. He had found he'd actually missed the silent man's presence. If only a little bit.

No words were said but it seemed a given conclusion that they'd ride down the road together. Teagan thought, at least, as far as the small side road that branched off and lead into the forest and the cottage he knew Daniel had taken over. Neither men nor horses felt up to more than a casually slow walk but it was soothing to cover the distance with someone instead of alone.

"Thank you." Teagan finally said when they were down the road and hadn't seen anyone for a span of time. "For last night. I'm not naïve, I know there's risk but no one's ever tried to waylay a courier before. The times and routes aren't so predictable as they might seem." He sighed and glanced up to the clear sky. The rains had left the day clean and bright. "I'm not entirely sure what it is you do for my uncle and his friends. I'm not blind, I can see you're more than a woodsman. I know it was a risk for you to come out last night, I just, well, wanted you to know I'm not ignorant of the chance you were taking and wanted to say thank you."

Silence met him and it felt deeper than Daniel's normal silence. Teagan glanced over and smiled gently. Daniel's arms were slack in front of him, his hands resting lightly on the saddle and the reins held loosely. His head lolled a little, hanging in gentle relaxation as he lightly slept. The horse below him followed Teagan's more than any direction from it's rider and when they reached the small side path that lead to the woodsman's cottage, Teagan rode them past it.

Daniel jerked awake but he was far from alert when the horse below him stopped moving. He glanced around but it took a long second to sink in that he wasn't where he should be. "What?"

"It's okay. Come on down from there and we'll get you some real sleep." Teagan prompted as he would when of his sleepy cousins and just like a small child, Daniel obeyed the order with little protest.

Once off the horse, Teagan had to help balance the heavier man as he staggered around like someone drunk or dead on their feet. It took a little guidance but he got Daniel inside and then eventually into the his father's bedroom. Most of the personal touches of his father were long since removed but it was still odd to think of someone else sleeping on his father's bed. Daniel stumbled and almost fell on the soft surface, the sunbeam from the window a warm covering over him.

Teagan moved quickly to pull off the other man's boots, not surprised to find another knife tucked into one of them and he got the long legs up onto the bed. "There now, you sleep." He didn't think it mattered what he said, Daniel was back asleep before he could drape a blanket over him.

He woke from drifting in his father's chair to the sounds of footsteps in the house. He hadn't meant to fall asleep but once the horses had been tended and water put on to heat for washing up in, he'd been tired and sat down to rest. He'd just fallen asleep from there, as he did so many afternoons, in the warmth of a sunbeam, and woken up to hearing Daniel step into the parlor.

The man looked as bleary eyed as Teagan felt and he hadn't pulled his boots back on. There was something ruffled and vulnerable about him, some hard distance that he normally wore that was lacking in those moments right after waking.

"Sleep well?"

Daniel nodded. "Sorry."

"For what? Being human?" He grinned and pushed himself from the chair. "I've water heated if you'd like to wash up?" He didn't wait for an answer, the steady way Daniel watched everything made him edgy. Not worried or fearful but like his stomach was flipping over in unknown nerves. It made him want to keep busy and he went to the kitchen to pull the warmed water out to fill the basin.

"I'll get that." Daniel offered, lifting the heavy pot with ease.

Teagan nodded and stood, feeling awkward and uncertain. "I'll just, just go get toweling and such out for you." It felt so strange not being alone in the house but as he bustled about getting out

cloth and soap and his own razor, he found it wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

In fact, while Daniel was washing up, Teagan found himself almost humming as he sorted out the seeds he didn't know on sight. He pictured the garden in his mind, come that summer, with the plants green and the vegetables ripening. It had always been one of his favorite things to do, tending the house garden. Something not even his uncle could scold him over as he weeded and pruned.

"Mr. Walsh?" The deep voice of his guest rumbled from behind him. Teagan had been so lost in thought about the garden that he hadn't heard the boots steps. "I'm sorry to ask, but do you have a needle and thread?"

Teagan turned and the question made no logical sense. His brain had shut down, that was it. Daniel stood in his kitchen door way, bare from the waist up. Shirt, waistcoat and coat hung from one hand and the other lifted away to show the red stain of blood on recent bandages. His mind had to process that yes, Daniel's shoulders really were that strong and yes his arms too before it was willing to register the sight of blood and the meaning of the question he'd been asked.

"Good God, man, sit down."

Daniel shrugged. "Just tore a stitch." He must have popped it on the ride from town because the edges of the bloodstain on the bandage were dried and the center was still tacky to the touch.

"Sit!" Teagan moved about and gathered his mending basket. Which was absurd, really, but he'd had to learn to cook and mend after his sister had gone on help the cause of freedom in the new world and left them behind.

When he was done gathering things up, Teagan was faced a half dressed man that he was trying not to blush over. "Okay, can you get the old bandage off for me?"

"It's okay, I can do it." Daniel was more worried about the pale, agitated man passing out at the sight of blood than the torn stitch.

"Nonsense." He waved the idea off and fell into the preparations. The needle and the thread he made damp with a little bit of whiskey and water and the dipped the wash rag into the hot water and twisted the extra out. "It may not seem it but I have done this before."

He with held his judgment and watched for signs the pale man was going to faint when the last of the cloth came away from the wound. It really wasn't that bad, over all, but on a bad spot that was likely to pull open unless carefully closed. Slender hands batted his away and he glanced over to see Teagan kneeling, lip caught in an pout between his lips as he concentrated.

That was a sight he didn't need to see. The handsome man on his knees, cool, slender fingers touching the edges of the gash gently, was plenty to put improper thoughts into his mind. Those deep green eyes took in the wound and the blood and didn't glance away or grow faint but it was those lips, teasing, lips that Daniel had to glance away from. He knew he'd been growing fascinated by the other man's mouth for some time. The soft lips that moved so easily, so expressively, gave away every thought and emotion behind those impassive, hidden dark eyes. He'd grown to like watching the other man talk, the quirk and glide of those taunting lips as words formed and fell so easily for him. They'd even invaded his thoughts, his dreams, the movement of those lips and the sound of Teagan's voice and worse the feel of those expressive lips on his skin.

None of which were helpful thoughts with Teagan on his knees, his arm occasionally bumping into Daniel's leg. He had to shut his eyes and promise himself he'd take a couple of days off, ride into Dublin and not come back until he could behave better. It wasn't enough and he was actually grateful when the sharp sting of the diluted whiskey burned in the wound and the needle made a sharp counter point.

"I figured out most of the seeds." Teagan said softly as he tied off the second stitch. "But the one there, next to you, what is that?"

Daniel opened his eyes but avoided glancing down. "Those are mine."

Teagan shrugged. "Fine by me but what are they?"

"Flower seeds."

"Huh, what kind?"

Daniel sighed and figured it couldn't do any harm to tell the other man. "Black Eyed Susans."

"Hmmm don't think I have any of those. An old rose bush or two, nothing I've put in. Father used to say the flowers around the house here were from my mother but I never knew her and neither of us were much worried with flowers. Why Black Eyed Susans?" It seemed so odd to think of the stoic, serious man planting flowers for himself of all things. "Your sweetheart like them?"

The idea startled him and he almost laughed, it came out as a choked snorted sound. "No. They just....remind me of better days."

"There, all done." Teagan sat back on his heels a little and admired his work.

He looked down but not at the other man and was surprised by the tight, neat, skillful line of stitches. "Huh, not bad."

"Don't poke at it and don't sound so shocked. We used to have a cow or two, a couple of pigs, even a few goats once and while." He pressed the folded cloth over the wound and held it in place while he unrolled the length of bandage. "Whenever they'd get cut up, Papa got all queasy at stitching the wound shut. Been doing this since I was just little, so, don't worry, it's okay."

Slender, cool fingers ghosted across his skin as the bandages carefully wrapped around his stomach, across his back, over his side. Every brushing touch set Daniel's skin to shivering and he picked a spot on the wall and refused to look anywhere but there. Around the cloth wove and finally was tied in place but Teagan's hands didn't retreat. They picked at the wrapping, soothing it out, removing creases, being fussier than they had to be and driving Daniel mad with how close they came to touching his skin but staying so safely on the cloth.

Until the fingers touched his skin, sliding off the fabric to the swath of skin above it. The soft fingertips were cool like winter's ice on his skin that felt so flushed and hot. When he didn't slap them away they drifted a little higher, gliding that shy touch up to the bottom curve of his ribs and around the curve to tease a little at the sides of his chest. He struggled to not glance down, frightened he'd see desire there, frightened he wouldn't. He tried to keep still, keep from moaning, keep from giving any sign that the touch was more than what it had to be, a simple check for health or injury.

The chill touch danced over a sensitive spot on his side and Daniel gasped a little and pulled away. A shiver darted along his nerves, up his spine and down to settle in his belly curled up tight, fiery embers waiting for a slight reason to burst into flames. Only, the teasing touch stopped and the cool fingers darted away.

"I'm sorry!" Teagan forced out, face flushing red in embarrassment. "It's just... I didn't mean... I..." He tried to think of a convincing lie to cover what he'd been lulled into. Daniel had sat so still, so steady and the afternoon had felt so surreal and almost dream like, there hadn't seemed to be any harm in touching, just a little. When Daniel had started it had snapped him back to reality and he had no lie to cover that he'd been practically molesting the other man. As soon as

he'd known what he was doing he snatched his hands away.

They didn't get far, even as he stammered out his apologies, a hand caught one of his wrists. The rough, strong fingers curled around his arm like vice, holding firmly but not tightly and still leaving little room to escape. He glanced up to the unreadable, emotionless face and stumbled into brown hazel eyes that churned with emotions he couldn't place or name. They made him blush harder and he dropped his eyes.

"I'm sorry, I'd no right." Before he could mutter out anything more, a hand slid across his neck and gliding across pulled back hair to settled on the back of his head. The fingers were strong and gentle and they lifted slightly forcing Teagan to glance up. All worry of having embarrassed himself faded in the face of the intensity in Daniel's eyes. There was a tiny line creased between his brows and while his lips were parted they looked tight, strained and needy.

The hand on the back of his head lifted and Teagan rose with it. He had lifted himself up to standing on his knees and Daniel had leaned down but it still didn't sink in what was about to happen until they were so close that Teagan could feel the stronger man's breath whispering across his own lips. It made his heart pound and his head feel light and he trembled, wanting to rush forward and cling to the strong shoulders, to melt into Daniel's embrace.

He didn't do either, caught in desire and uncertainty, lost in disbelief, he trembled as he knelt, waiting, needing. The teasing space between their lips vanished and even though Teagan had known the kiss was so close it still startled him. Fire poured into his body, thick and sweet like sun warmed honey and Teagan's lips parted, hungry for more. The hand resting on the back of his head clenched tighter in his hair, not painfully but possessively and Teagan clung to that arm with his own free hand. He shut his eyes, frightened that this was just another mocking dream and if he risked opening them he'd find himself still napping in his father's chair.

The hand on his wrist tightened, the hand holding his head tensed and both pulled him closer. Tormentingly close to just tumbling against the broad chest, falling onto the taller man's lap. His body shivered as his mouth was claimed, consumed, teased. He couldn't breath and it wasn't the kiss, the kiss was life and passion and perfection but his need for more made him feel like all the air in the world had vanished.

Teagan felt himself moaning before he really heard the sounds. He struggled a little in the firm grip, desperate to keep his mouth where it was. His lips trembled and burned from the teasing nips delivered to them. He parted his mouth wider, inviting, desperate to draw the other man further in. He wanted to pull the taller man down, wanted to pull his body firmly over his own. He wanted to feel the weight and heat pinning him to the floor, the tease of a leg between his own. He wanted and didn't have the experience or words to know just what he wanted but his skin burned and his body trembled.

Lips slid away from his own and Teagan hung there, his legs felt too weak to support him even with how he was balanced on his knees. He was certain if Daniel let go of him, removed the hand from his wrist and head, he'd crumble like a broken puppet onto the floor. He didn't want to open his eyes, didn't want to know if it was all a dream but when the hand on his neck started to retreat he had to look.

It was better than a dream. Daniel still looked tense, worried, needy, but his lips were parted and flushed from the passion of their kiss. He was breathing as hard as Teagan was and his eyes, the eyes that always showed his emotions, were glazed in lust and hunger. They studied Teagan's face in quick movements and he drew in a sharp breath.

The hand on his neck disappeared. The one holding his wrist snapped open and Daniel shot to his feet with quick, shaky movements. "I'm sorry."

He didn't look sorry. From where Teagan knelt he had a pretty good vision of how unsorry Daniel

was. It looked more like the man was as aroused, as wanting of more, as Teagan was. He tried to think of a way to say that they shouldn't be sorry but his skills at rational thought had surrendered. Even as Daniel hurried around him, gathering up his seeds and clothing as he went, Teagan still couldn't get his voice to speak.

By the time he had caught his breath and figured out how to move and think again it was too late. Even as he scrambled to his feet, trying to adjust the tightness in his pants as he hurried, he knew Daniel would slip away. He rushed outside, feeling clumsy, and caught sight of Daniel hurrying to saddle his horse, shirt pulled on but loose and untucked.

"Daniel! Wait!" He called but the stoic man never even glanced over. If anything, calling to him made his movements grow more rapid. "Please! Wait!" Teagan hurried so much he stumbled over his own feet and felt foolish as his steps stuttered and he wavered with his balance. Even if everything had been functioning right and he'd sprinted across the yard to the barn he still would have been too late. As soon as the saddle was secured, Daniel was on the horse's back and riding away as if the devil himself was chasing him.

"Damn it." Teagan sighed and frowned.

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Chapter Five

Daniel didn't arrive the next morning and Teagan was awake early to watch for him. The day passed slowly and yet too quickly and at every sound he was rushing to see if the silent man had finally arrived. As the day grew late he was forced to admit that Daniel wasn't coming, knowledge that felt cruel given that tomorrow was Sunday and he'd have to wait until Monday to hope the man arrived again.

Or he could get up early and ride into town and join his uncle and aunt and their children and household for church and hope Daniel was there as well. He avoided going to services, it wasn't so much that he didn't believe as that he never felt comfortable attending regularly. It offered no solace to him and felt like a lost morning of a life that he was aware was going to be too short. He figured God would understand if he only went occasionally and he hoped that God would understand going to worship just to have the chance to run into a man that had kissed him.

So it was that he was awake early, tended the animals and washed up before he normally would have been awake. He dressed in his best clothes and gathered up his mother's bible to take with him into town. Ate a hasty breakfast and started the ride into town, hoping to be early enough to steal a word with Daniel before services started.

Daniel wasn't to be found around the cozy Anglican church but his uncle was. He spotted the older man talking to a small group of his friends while their wives and daughters chatted a few

paces away, Lizzie standing with a baby on her hip and looking very pretty. Unfortunately, his uncle spotted him as well and before he could even get off his horse the elder man was hurrying over to him.

“Well, now, there’s my little adventurer.”

Teagan hid his frown and tied the horse to the post. He knew he’d be scolded once word reached got out of what he’d done. “Morning, Uncle Robin. You look well today.”

“Don’t morning me! It’s a good thing you came to services today and spared me the ride out to your place. We must talk!”

“Is there time before church?” He knew there was, he’d been planning on using it to speak to Daniel. Now he was hoping to stall the lecture from his uncle and maybe finding something in the sermon to use to his advantage, like a lecture on temperance and control.

“We’ve time, what I have to say won’t take long. Come, walk with me lad.”

Which was never a good thing but Teagan nodded and didn’t let himself sigh and moved to follow his uncle away from the gathering people. They stayed in the line of sight of everyone else which was sparked some hope because if his uncle planned to yell at him he’d moved them away from prying eyes.

Instead of tearing into him, his uncle slowed his steps and sighed. “I know things aren’t easy for you, lad.”

“Uncle?”

“I know you would care to do more than just write my articles. I know you want to be more... hands on.” He glanced to the ghost pale face of the young man and saw his sister there. “But hear me lad, when I tell you this and know I speak true, there is tremendous risk, danger in what we do. Even just writing articles encouraging...diverse thinking could land you in a world of trouble. You are taking risks for the cause, lad, you’ve nothing you need to prove. Not to me, not to anyone.”

It wasn’t the lecture he’d been braced for. “I wasn’t trying to prove anything.” Which he wondered about even as he spoke. “It was just that there was no one else on such short notice. I may not be strong but I’m light and a good horse can almost fly with me on it’s back.” They’d only come to him because no one else could be reached.

Robin patted the other man’s arm. “It’s alright lad, I understand. We’re all made to do different tasks. No one thinks less of you for fighting with words, not fists.”

“Uncle...”

He held up a hand to still the protest. “Do you’ve any idea how close you came to being killed? If Daniel had been a few hours later arriving home he wouldn’t have been on hand to do what he did. They would have murdered you lad.”

He wasn’t going to pretend that he’d even remotely be able to fight off one man, let alone several. “I know that, Uncle, I knew the risks.”

“Then it’s time you start acting like you know the risks! Your health is fragile, riding under a dark moon for miles in the damp? That alone without the thugs could have been your death.”

“I’m not so ill, Uncle, I promise, if I’d been feeling poorly I wouldn’t have gone.” Truth was, he had been bone weary exhausted most of the next day.



"Promise me you won't do something so stupid again, least of all while I'm unawares."

"Uncle..."

"Promise me!" He barked and his eyes narrowed.

That was the tone and look that meant there was no room for debate. Teagan sighed. "I promise, if I replace the rider again you'll know of it before hand."

Robin narrowed his eyes further, sensing the loopholes Teagan had put into the promise. "You should have been a lawyer lad."

"Perhaps in another life, Uncle." He smiled thinly and tried to veil the harsh reality.

"Anyway, be grateful that Danny is a smart one. His quick thinking saved your skin!"

And that was his opening. "About him, Uncle, I have a right to know what kind of man is on my property." Technically, it was really his Uncle's property but they pretended otherwise.

"He's a useful man to the cause, that's all you need to know. He stays out here where it's quieter until he's needed in the city. He's no danger to you, don't you fret, he has his honor, his own brand of it anyway."

"I should thank him, will he be attending services?"

That made Robin snort. "For a smart boy you pay no mind to anyone do you? He's catholic, he'll be over at mass at the old chapel."

Which meant he'd come to services for nothing more than a lecture on morality. "Oh." He tried to hide his disappointment as his uncle started talking about the responsibility he had to tend to his health and take care of himself. A lecture Teagan could recite word for word, with wool blocking his ears and his eyes shut. He tuned it out and let himself be lead back to the church and Sunday services.

By the end of the service he was ready for a nap, partly from boredom and partly from having been a nervous wreck the day before and not really sleeping much. He barely spoke to the neighbors that approached him, mostly the elderly ladies or the older wives. The ones that would tend the dying and weren't bothered by the fact that he was a walking reminder of their own mortality. The men tended to avoid him, and he had never pushed the issue. His mind wasn't on them today, his eyes always scanning across the town trying to spot one man that never seemed to appear.

Then, as if thinking about the other man had made it happen, Daniel appeared. Dressed in a better suit of clothes than Teagan had seen him wearing but far from finery, battered old hat pushed back on his head, he walked into the open of the town. His horse trailed behind him, the reins loose in his hand and beside him walked the town's priest, Father Augustine. They seemed to be in discussion, which meant that the priest was speaking and Daniel seemed to be nodding gently in reply and saying little.

Teagan hurried to extract himself from his current conversation without being overly rude. When he had slipped from the conversation he moved toward where the other man was walking with direct, obvious intentions. He didn't make it there, Daniel quickly spotted him, his eyes went wide slightly. Before Teagan could go another dozen paces Daniel slipped a rosary into his waistcoat pocket, nodded to the priest and hopped onto the horses back. He was riding out of town before Teagan was even close enough to hail him.

He sighed. "This is getting old."

A knock came on Daniel's door, which wasn't common but not abnormal. Someone had to bring him word when he was needed after all but it was never a social call. It made him frown and he put down the rifle he'd been cleaning, he wasn't up to another job. He still felt bruised, cut up and sore and he knew it was all a cover. It had little to do with being hurt, his head was all spun about and it wasn't a good idea to work with that frame of mind. His survival depended on being as direct, as clear headed, as possible.

He pulled the door open, braced to tell who ever it was there to go away and steadied in case it was something simple like about his woodsman work and not something more. What stood on the top of the three simple steps that led to his simple door wasn't something he was ready for. It left him standing there, struck dumb and silent.

"You're avoiding me." Teagan declared when the door opened but they both stood staring at each other.

Daniel swallowed the lump that had blocked his throat and told his mind to forget the fact that the pale man had tasted like honey. "No sir, I'll be by to work tomorrow."

"I'm not talking about work." He sighed and folded his arms across his chest. "We need to talk, may I come in?"

He thought about the small two room shack, the clutter in the front room, the simple blanket that draped across the doorway to where his bed was. He thought about Teagan alone with him in the dimly lit space, so close, so privately closed off from the outside world and he almost slammed the door in the other man's face. He would have if he'd been sure there was even a small chance that Teagan would give up and go home.

Instead of being invited in, Daniel pulled the door open further and slipped outside, quickly shutting the door behind him. It forced Teagan to step back, down the narrow rough hewn steps to the walkway in front of it. Daniel hovered a moment on the top step, hand on the door, before he glanced down and stepped down to the path as well. It put them closer to eye level but the silent man didn't glance up.

"The less said the better. I'm sorry, it won't happen again."

"I didn't come here looking for an apology for something you shouldn't be sorry for." He tried to glance and see Daniel's eyes, those eyes that gave away more than his face ever did, but they were lowered. "Everyone thinks just because I'm ill that I'm some simpleton or a child or some sheltered, naïve fool. I'm not you know!"

Daniel shook his head and wished he'd slammed the door. "I don't think that."

"You're acting like you do. You won't even look at me, let alone talk to me!" That didn't earn him even a glance up. "Fine, then tell me what you think, hmmm? If you don't think I'm some sickly child, tell me?"

"I think you're my employers beloved nephew and that I like my job." He snapped out and pushed past the slender man to move away toward the trees and the cool shade there. Trying, mostly, to put distance between them more than to escape the late afternoon sunlight.

Teagan let the other man walk away, only to follow behind him. They didn't stop until they'd reached the side yard and the fenced in corral that held Daniel's horse and the small shelter used to stall the animal and give it shelter. Daniel fussed until his arms were resting on the fence but his eyes were watching the horse across from them.

"My uncle told you to try to befriend me, didn't he?" He asked carefully. Hazel eyes flicked over to him and back to the horse which was as much of a confirmation as he'd likely get. "Is that why you kissed me? Out of some sense of duty?"

Hazel eyes, now dark and with a glint of danger turned and boldly locked onto Teagan's. "I'm not a whore."

That hit a nerve he hadn't intended but it did confirm that Daniel wasn't as stone like as he tried to seem. Teagan softened his expression and shook his head. "I never meant to imply such, I'm sorry. I just wished to know if you were earnest in your actions, or regretful, or anything..."

He turned back to watching the horse, a far safer place for his eyes to rest than the handsome, pale face. "Have you ever even kissed a woman before?"

The question surprised him and he blinked a little, startled. "Was I that bad at it?"

A small, tiny, quirk of a smile touched Daniel's lips but he kept the smirk at bay. "It wasn't a complaint." Far from it, memories of that kiss had woken him from his sleep every night since. Anytime his hands were idle his thoughts wandered to it's memory and even standing with several feet between them he wanted to grab Teagan, pin him to the fence and kiss him again.

Teagan snorted and glanced out to where the horse was grazing on thick spring grass. "For your information," he started with a high tone. "I have kissed women before, I'm not so innocent as people assume I am. I've even kissed men before." Well, a man, two counting Daniel but that still allowed, technically, a plural use of the word.

The tiny quirk on Daniel's mouth grew and threatened to become a real smile.

"Don't smirk at me." He raised an eyebrow and tried to hide the tingle of excitement even that small thawing of the other man's face caused. Inside Teagan's mind, he pictured himself pouncing on the stronger man, the feel of their bodies gliding against each other, tumbling into the soft green grass. It made his breath feel short and his head feel light. It chased his teasing aside. "You've kissed men before."

It wasn't a question but it made Daniel glance down while he tried to think of how to answer. In the end, the only answer was the simple truth. "Aye."

"So why run away? Is it so wrong?" He knew what the papers, and the law, had to say about it but he also knew he wasn't the only man alive to prefer kissing men to kissing women.

Daniel propped his elbows on the fence and dropped his head so he could rub at the tension in the back of his neck. "Your uncle wouldn't want me seducing you."

"Seducing me?" Teagan laughed and shook his head. "I'm not one easily convinced to do a thing I don't wish to. Do you think it's wrong, for two men to kiss so?"

"Isn't my place to think like that, to worry over the way things are?"

"Then why run from me? I'm not a child or an innocent, or... or blind to what I desire."

He dared to look over to the open honest face and the bright eyes that seemed so hollow inside and told himself to behave. "I need this work. If your uncle knew, even what little there is to know..." he shook his head and glanced away. "I wouldn't be as lucky as Captain Jones."

That was a thought that Teagan hadn't considered, ever. His wealth, his uncle's rank, would shelter him some but while he wasn't really aware of what men did together, he knew it was illegal. It was why he'd kept silent about his desires, telling no one, hinting to not a soul, always

feeling different. It was only that one encounter, behind a tavern in Dublin, less than a quarter of an hour with a man he didn't know, that showed him full on what he wanted. From that night on, Teagan had worked very hard to bury his own more physical desires and wants, to play the part of the invalid and let people assume his lack of interest in women was from illness not inclination.

Until Daniel had walked in, with his stubborn clutch on his thoughts and emotions and strong shoulders, he'd been doing just fine. One sight of him working, of the controlled strength in his body, had been enough. One scent of him on the spring air, male, rich, powerful, had broken down Teagan's resolve. While he hadn't been happy his physical body had wanted something it couldn't have, it had been a private longing. Until Daniel had kissed him, from that instant everything Teagan had spent years pretending he didn't feel unraveled. He'd be damned before he backed down without a fight.

"It would never come to that." He spoke with resolve. "Nothing could make me speak of that kiss, or another." He slid a hand onto one of Daniel's tense shoulders.

The touch made him jump, actually physically jump in startled reaction, and he pulled away. That extra distance was all he had to stop him from grabbing the slender man and pulling him close. It was a thin defense and one he didn't feel up to maintaining if he was being touched.

The wide, worried, hazel eyes didn't seem angry or even upset, just sad, lonely, needy like before and still so stubborn. Teagan dropped his hand. "I'm sorry."

"No, I am." Daniel shook his head. "I can be your friend, Mr. Walsh, if you'd like that, but not more, never more."

Something felt tight and sharp and bitter inside his chest, a feeling Teagan had long since gotten used to since his father's death, only this time the loneliness was more brittle. There was no forcing the issue, no demanding more, without being a cad and Teagan didn't want what wasn't to be offered willingly. Pity was the worst of all human emotions, second only to disinterest, and he'd have none of either.

"Well." He nodded and stepped back. "I could use a friend far more than a servant to offer a hand around the house. The offer will be gladly accepted." Teagan forced himself to draw a breath and stand a little straighter. "Thank you for risking your own safety to protect mine the other night. I've really taken up far too much of your time already. Until tomorrow then?" He nodded again in a small bow and moved to hurry away.

He spared one glance behind him as he pulled himself up into his horse's saddle and saw Daniel standing within his line of sight. The man's shoulders were knotted up and tense. His brow was furrowed with unhappiness and the teasing, warm quirked smile was gone, faded into a frown. He looked like he wanted to say something, to perhaps call Teagan back but before words could be formed Teagan took his turn riding away.

(Cookies and kudos to anyone who knows who Capt. Jones was! Post on the msg board!)

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## Visions & Shadows

### Chapter Six

By the time Teagan convinced himself that it was worth getting up the next morning, it was closer to noon than morning. He'd spent a long, bitter, restless night where not even his books had been proper company and the subtle turn of a poem's phrasing had been lost on him. Eventually he'd given up and gone to bed but sleep hadn't arrived for him, not until after he'd curled up, arms wrapped tightly around his own chest, and wept.

He hadn't cried since the first night his father had passed. The house had quickly filled up with family and neighbors all convinced that he wasn't capable of sitting with the dead, all certain he was as fragile as he appeared. It had grown too much and he'd let them shoo him to bed, something he couldn't debate since it had been days since he'd slept anywhere but in a chair by his father's side. Instead of sleeping, he'd curled up and sobbed into his pillow.

Then, like now, the tears had carried him into sleep and like that morning so long ago, he awoke but didn't wish to rise. This time, there was no Lizzie to sit on the edge of the bed and entice him to come eat and no reason to feel as poorly as he did. It seemed foolish, and it was only that thought that dragged him up to start his day. He dressed and did his household chores without thinking, ate something light but the face that greeted him when he went to shave was frightfully pale and his eyes were still red.

Part of him hoped to find the silent man working as he had been before and part of him prayed he wouldn't have to face him. It wasn't quite relief that filled him at seeing Daniel's horse turned out in the small pasture with his own but it was simple pride that had him refusing to be embarrassed or ashamed after what had passed between them. He moved to tend the chickens and the other small morning chores still left to him but had to pause, struck still and dumb by the sight that awaited him.

Daniel had made good on his threat to prepare the fields. Already that morning he'd walked them, pulling surface rocks up and onto the back of the wagon's bed. It was backbreaking work and a job Teagan normally helped with but Daniel had simply stripped off his jacket and waistcoat, rolled up his sleeves, and gotten it done. The wagon was loaded down, a pile of stones to the side of the barn showed it wasn't the first load and the fields were nearly cleared.

He moved to fill a tin cup with cool, fresh water and carried it across the untilled field to where Daniel strained, putting his strength and weight on an iron pry bar, to dislodge one particularly large rock. Seeing the man work like that shouldn't have been so potent but Teagan knew it would slip into his thoughts later, when he was alone. The rock finally lifted free and Daniel slipped his hands under it, groaning a little as he hefted it up and with a stumbling step, tossed the rock onto the wagon.

Beads of sweat trickled in small lines down Daniel's face and he stopped to lean against the wagon, winded, and wipe it away with a cloth he pulled from a pocket. "Morning."

"Morning." He answered reflexively but he was caught in the warmth in those hazel eyes. The hard, physical work had softened the tension Daniel normally carried, softened the tense lines of his face and made him look vastly younger. It was the warmth of those eyes that settled so easily on Teagan and made him look away before he could blush. "Brought you some water."

Daniel nodded and took the cup offered him. "Thanks." The water was cool and sweet and it felt good. He downed half of it in quick swallows before forcing himself to slow down to prevent getting sick. The rest of the cup he sipped at, taking it in with slower swallows and he studied the

other man over it. Teagan looked even paler than normal and his eyes were bloodshot. Either he'd had a rough night or he'd been drinking, somehow he found it difficult to picture the upstanding man getting drunk.

"Will you have time to till today?"

"Yes, sir." Teagan just looked so sad, it made Daniel want to wrap his arms around the older man, pull him close, stroke his hair. He wanted to whisper that there was nothing to be sad over, wanted to be the cause of that mercurial smile's return but he'd worked too hard, gone too far, to risk losing it all over weakness. "Pick out the stones it kicks up tomorrow, be ready to start planting then."

Teagan nodded and stripped off his coat and began working on the long line of buttons on his waistcoat.

Daniel raised an eyebrow and knew he should object but watching those long, pale fingers slipping buttons free melted his resolve.

"You've cleared most of it, I can help finish." He shrugged out of his waistcoat and tossed both over onto the edge of the wagon before he started to roll up his sleeves.

He had to glance down into the mostly empty cup of water to hide his amusement and the less than proper thoughts that were lurking in his mind. "You should wear gloves."

"I have worked a day or two in my life." He moved away from the wagon and down the line, crouching down to pull up any rock bigger than his hand.

It made for an interesting sight. The pale man moved with graceful steps across the uneven ground, pulling stubbornly at well-planted rocks, only to throw them forcefully onto the pile gathering in the wagon. His dark hair was neatly tied back but Daniel couldn't help but think about how it would look tussled, loose about his face. They were distracting thoughts he didn't need when there was so much work to finish.

"Damn it!" Teagan cursed and pulled his hand back. The rock he'd been pulling on had slipped and its rough edges dragged along his, admittedly, too soft hands and scrapped his palm. He brushed the dirt off and frowned at the light welling of blood.

Daniel finished the water and placed the cup on the wagon before moving to where Teagan was crouched and kneeling down. He reached to take up the obviously injured hand but Teagan pulled it from his grip.

"I'm fine! It's just a scrape." He was more angry at himself than anything.

Stubbornly, Daniel caught the wrist and this time was allowed to pull the hand out into the sunlight for inspection. It really was just a scrape but he brushed lightly at it anyway before pulling his battered old pair of gloves loose from where they were folded over his belt. Before Teagan could protest, he'd pulled the first one on over the slender fingers and offered its partner for the other hand.

Teagan frowned as the worn leather covered his hand. The palm and fingers thicker than his own left him feeling like he was wearing hand me downs. "I'm not helpless." He felt eyes on him, bright, watchful and intent, and he glanced up to meet Daniel's gaze.

"I don't think you are, but no point in hurting yourself to make a point." As he let go of the now gloved hand, his thumb stroked the back of the elegant knuckles. "No shame in it." He stood up and left the choice to wear or not wear the gloves up to Teagan. There were rocks to clear and plenty of work to do. If he was really lucky, the work would be hard enough that he'd sleep

without disturbance.

Teagan not only wore the gloves, he found strips of fabric and tied them tighter to his wrist to keep them more securely in place. Together they cleared the remaining surface stones from the field and Daniel got the wagon guided back to near the barn. Side by side, they unloaded the stones one by one, pitching them onto the growing pile that Daniel planned to turn into a fence wall sooner or later.

When the last stones were pitched and kicked free of the wagon bed, Daniel was ready for a break but Teagan looked almost faint. He'd lost what little color he had, was breathing too hard past parted lips that were distinctly blue tinged. He sat down right in the wagon bed and leaned against the side while he struggled to catch his breath.

It was frightening to see but Teagan didn't appear to be in any distress. He figured if the man really was about to drop over dead he'd be a little more worried about it than he was acting. Instead of fussing, he simply took the tin cup and filled it again with cool water. When he returned, the other man's breathing had leveled out a bit but he still looked too pale and too blue.

Daniel sat on the gate of wagon and nudged Teagan's nearest boot to get his attention. When those dark green eyes glanced up he offered the water and held the cup out while Teagan pulled gloves from his hands and took the cup with trembling fingers.

"Thank you."

He waited while Teagan sipped at the water and caught his breath. "What's wrong with you?"

"Well, that was blunt."

"I'm sorry."

"No." Teagan smiled and held the cup with both hands. "It's nice, most people are afraid to ask. They tell me my blood is too thin and my heart too weak. It really isn't so bad." His smile faltered a little. "Just makes me tired a lot of the time."

There really wasn't anything Daniel found to say to that. He didn't want to offer sympathy when it couldn't make anything better. "Nothing left for you to help with today."

"Lunch, I'll make us lunch." He sat forward and pushed some of the dizziness aside.

"I'm fine."

"But I'm hungry." It was late but he really wasn't hungry. He figured Daniel had to be starving, the man had been working since early morning.

To mock his denial, Daniel's stomach growled loudly at the thought of food. It broke a real smile across his face and he folded his hands over his stomach. "Guess a break wouldn't hurt any. Let me get the horses out of the harness."

The smile broke any thought of feeling dizzy from exhaustion and replaced it with feeling dizzy from lust. It transformed the steady, solid face into one of laughter and pleasure. It made Teagan feel like that smile was his and his alone. He nodded and quickly escaped before he could say or do anything stupid.

The smile faded quickly as Teagan hurried off, the man had looked close to fainting but still rushed away. It made Daniel frown a little and curse his own stupidity. Yes, he was attracted to the slender, pale man, he'd be a liar to say otherwise but he didn't need to go and kiss him. Teagan would have remained happily clueless and the tension between them would have

remained hidden, buried. It would have made it easier for him too, to pretend that he felt no scalding attraction if it had remained unspoken. With a long sigh and a soft groan he pushed himself up and off the wagon to get the horses tended.

Teagan glanced outside to where a now washed up and cleaner Daniel stood on his porch. "Be ready in a moment." He called through the open door but the other man didn't come inside. "You're welcome."

But inside was the memory of that moment and shelter from random prying eyes. Inside was temptation and that was something Daniel didn't need. It wasn't right and it sure as hell wasn't safe. He shook his head and took his place sitting on the edge of the porch.

"You're, perhaps, the most stubborn man I've ever met." Teagan scolded as he put a plate of cold lunch and a mug of cider beside the silent man.

He'd been accused of worse. "Fine one to talk."

Teagan dropped himself down onto the porch a proper distance away and picked at his own lunch. "At least I talk! You say what? Twenty words in the course of a day?"

Just to be annoying, Daniel simply shrugged and kept his mouth shut.

It made Teagan grin, knowing that the move was done in teasing jest. "I heard you were in the army, is it there where you learned to fight like that?"

"Partly."

"When I was a small child, I wanted to join the military. My father had a friend that was a retired navy man, he used to tell us all these stories. I wanted nothing more than to sail off on the high seas and see the world. Or at least the continent." He smiled in amusement at his foolish child self. "I wasn't old enough to really know how ill I was but I'd tell everyone I was going to be a military man when I grew up."

Daniel made it a rule to never speak of that time, ever, to anyone, not even to other veterans but there was something wistful to Teagan's words. "You didn't miss much. I was happy to live to get out."

"What was the war like?" He knew he was prying but he wanted to get the silent man to talk, he wanted to hear his voice even if it said nothing.

That was a question he normally avoided at all costs but he sipped the cider and was surprised to hear himself answering. "Too long, too bloody."

"And America? Is it as savage as they say?"

He smiled a tiny smile and shook his head. "No, it's wild, untamed, dangerous but trees... forests that go on forever and rocks that poke up like the earth's bones past the soil. That soil..." he shook his head. "It's thick and black, it'll grow anything. Plenty of land, space, a man can breath there."

The words were filled with longing and far more artful than he'd expect. "Sounds like you wish to return."

Daniel finished his cider and set the mug down. "I'm here now." He stood up. "Thank you for lunch, sir." Without another word he moved to get the horses harnessed up and to start the plowing.



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Chapter Seven

By late afternoon Daniel's back hurt, his arms, his legs and he was more than happy to have the small field plowed. Every foot, every inch had to be wrestled and forced from the plow, even the land that had been turned in recent years was a fight. That was fine by him, it made him feel good to be tired and look over so much accomplished. It was a hard life but one he could be happy in, the simple turning of seasons that ruled a farmer.

He stopped to wipe a trickle of sweat away and promised himself plenty of cool water as soon as he finished. A few hours ago he'd felt Teagan's eyes on him and spotted the pale man sitting with his back propped on the side of the barn. He'd been holding a book but Daniel knew where his eyes really were. Now, when he squinted, he could see the man's eyes were closed. The book hung in limp hands and Teagan's head rested heavily on the wall behind him. Lulled by the afternoon sunlight and exhausted from his morning's labor, the other man had fallen asleep sitting up. It made Daniel smile softly and he clucked at the horses, flicking the reins to get them moving again. Sooner finished, sooner done and sooner he could wake the slumbering man.

A hand shook his shoulder and Teagan started awake. "Hmm?" He blinked in sleepy half awareness. "What? Daniel?" A book slipped in his grip and he snatched at it before it could fall but there was no doubt, the steady face was across from him. One hand raised up to wipe his face and mouth, trying to be casual but checking to make sure he hadn't drooled in his sleep.

"Shouldn't sleep out here, it's getting late."

Teagan rubbed his eyes but the field stayed plowed and the sun was growing low in the sky. He'd meant to read a little out in the sunshine, feeling odd with Daniel working so hard while he sat inside, but his body had conspired against him. The warmth of the sun had felt nice and he'd ended up watching Daniel work instead of reading. It had been pleasant and he'd lulled into restful sleep, sitting up. Which turned out to be a bad idea for avoiding cricks in the neck.

"I fell asleep."

Daniel nodded and offered a hand to help Teagan up.

He yawned and took the offer, and the strength in the rough hand easily lifted him. He stumbled a little as he gained his footing and baring but those strong hands didn't let him stagger let alone fall. "Thank you."

Daniel nodded. "Welcome." He moved to get the plow and horses back into the barn for the night, leaving Teagan bleary eyed to find his own way inside.

Daniel arrived the next morning as he always did, a few hours after dawn, only when he moved to tend the horses he found them already cared for. The wagon was missing and so were the draft horses, both easily found out in the field. Teagan again had the too large gloves tied in place and he was hauling a light load of stones from the field with the wheelbarrow. It didn't seem to be the first load either. Without a word, Daniel moved up and helped Teagan unload the wheelbarrow onto the closer wagon.

They worked side by side for the rest of the morning, barely speaking a word between them. As noon grew closer, Teagan's failing strength became more obvious, even with Daniel doing most of the heaviest of the work. Daniel was inclined to keep working until the field was cleared, stopping later in the afternoon and just going home from there but it was pretty clear that Teagan was making a point and he wanted to give the other man a means of stopping.

The last rock from the current wagonload dropped with a crack onto the pile by the barn and Daniel stood up, stretching out his spine. "The offer for lunch still stand?"

Teagan smiled a little and caught his breath. "Of course, just give me a moment to get it together." He didn't even have to look to feel Daniel's silent nod or to wait to know the man would tend the horses while they broke to eat.

Today, Teagan was too tired to try to draw the other man out into a conversation. It was enough, more than enough to sit quietly together and eat the simple lunch. That was pleasant enough on its own, comfortable. It made his solitary dinners, eaten with not even a book for company, feel empty now.

Daniel carefully placed his plate on the porch beside him. "Hardest part is cleared, I can manage the rest." It was the truth, the two of them had gotten the majority of the freshly tilled field cleared and the remaining section wouldn't take him that long. Once that was done, the smaller part closer to the house that Teagan had been maintaining as a small vegetable garden had been cleared more recently and would turn up less stones.

"It'll be faster with two sets of hands." He was tired but unwilling to give in. "Don't worry." He said the frown that felt more potent than his uncle's most vibrant arguments. "I won't do more than I'm able." His grin had a bitter feel. "I well know my limits."

He shrugged and figured it wasn't his place to treat the other man like an infant. If he said he was able to do more, it wouldn't be Daniel to contradict him. With a shrug he held back any protests and returned to the waiting work. It would be a race now to finish clearing the field before the sun started to go down and it was one Daniel planned on winning.

The next morning, Daniel arrived with a happy, content feeling in his stomach. He hadn't really planted anything in years, not since he was a boy and it made his heart feel good to do it now. It was a balm to some bruised hurt feeling he'd been carrying and it just felt so much better to be growing something, to literally be putting down roots. It was worth all the work to reach the planting.

Some of the contentment disappeared when Teagan stepped out onto the porch. The man looked like he hadn't slept, or maybe, not soundly. He was frightfully pale and looked almost ghost like. Even how he moved seemed disconnected and too thin and Daniel had seen enough wounded and dying men to feel a spark of fear in his stomach. It wasn't until Teagan smiled warmly and waved for Daniel to come to the porch that the fear faded.

"I made some biscuits and there's plenty of honey. Thought you might like some." He'd deliberately left the plate on the table but when Daniel stopped on the porch and refused to come close, hat in his hands, Teagan sighed. "Really, just come inside. I think we're both mature enough to be trusted indoors at the same time." The words were caustic but he was mocking

himself because he wanted to slam the door shut behind the other man and molest him.

It was a bad idea but Daniel took a few shuffling steps inside. The smell of hot biscuits a siren song and he carefully took one from the plate, keeping his back to the wall and his eye on the open door. "Mmm, thank you. I can't cook."

"My uncle's first wife? She tired to teach my sister how to cook but, well, ended up teaching me. I don't know much but I get by." He swallowed and glanced away. "I could... I could teach you some? Simple things, nothing difficult..."

Daniel shrugged and swiped another biscuit. "Maybe."

Teagan didn't know if that was a polite way of accepting or refusing and figured it was better not to push the issue too much now. "Well, I'm going to go start cutting up the seed potatoes." That was a task in and of itself, cutting each of the small potatoes down into smaller parts. Each section with an eye would sprout it's own plant, one potato could produce three or more plants. Daniel followed on his heels, another biscuit in his hand.

The day was long and tiring. Each cut potato got carefully planted by Teagan and Daniel moved behind him to place a small pitchfork full of spent hay and horse dung. When they had the potatoes in, Daniel hitched up the horses and worked to plow them in, faster than doing it by hand but just as exhausting. Instead of resting, Teagan started on the seeds and the small seedlings he'd already sprouted. He knelt on a piece of burlap and worked bending over the rows, moving with skilled and able hands.

By the time Daniel had the larger field finished, the wheat and potatoes planted, Teagan had made good progress on the smaller section. He got the plow back in the barn and the horses away and tended, pausing only to get a drink before moving to kneel beside Teagan and help him get the rest of the seeds in. It would be hand tools from here on out but he left Teagan do the actual planting and Daniel took on the more physical task of finishing.

They worked with single minded effort, pushing past lunch and Daniel barely noticed as the afternoon started to slip away. Slowly, the rows were finished and he was pushing the last stakes into the looser dirt to mark where one vegetable had been planted and another type started. He glanced over to see Teagan slowly pushing himself to his feet but had to look down again to put the last stake in place.

When he finished, movement caught his eye and he glanced over in time to see Teagan stagger a step backwards. One of his hands reached out, as if seeking something solid to grasp hold of and steady himself with and found nothing there but air. Before it really sunk in to Daniel, Teagan collapsed like a puppet with broken strings. He crumbled down into an untidy heap in the dirt and made no effort to brace his fall.

Daniel felt his heart stop. "Teagan!" He called out and dropped the hoe and hand tools he'd been planning to carry into the barn. "Teagan!" The uneven ground pulled at his balance as he hurried across it to get where the other man had fallen. He fell to the ground as he reached the other man's side and rolled him into his arms.

Some of the instant fear dissolved when he saw the other man was breathing and more, as Daniel brushed stray dirt from the side of the pale face his eyes fluttered into semi-consciousness. "Teagan, come on, say something..." He brushed at the strands of hair that had fallen free and tried not to worry about how clammy his skin felt. Gently, he slapped lightly at the chilled face and the eyes rolled a little more down, grew a little more aware. "Say something!"

Teagan moaned. "Something." He forced the word out. He knew he should try to get up, try to shake it off but it felt better to lay there, limp and sheltered, in those strong arms. So he gave in and just stayed as he was, exhausted, light headed, and focused on trying to get even breaths

into his body.

The muttered word made Daniel smile in relief and he shook his head at the sarcasm. "Let's get you inside." He'd chew himself out for letting the man overwork once he was certain he really was okay. The body in his arms was still limp and trembling so getting Teagan to walk was out of the question. That suited Daniel just fine, he felt better scooping up the more slender form and holding him close.

Teagan was both surprisingly light to carry and heavy at the same time. The last person Daniel had hauled about wasn't breathing and was quite a bit heavier than Teagan. However, given just how slender Teagan looked, there was surprising weight to him. It didn't matter, Daniel pulled the limp form close and moved with steady, sure steps to the house.

Once inside, he had no idea where Teagan's bedroom was, but he did know where the bedroom he'd woken up at was located. So he took him there, figuring any bed would do and was pleased to find the bed covered in a plain sheet to keep it clean and fresh. The sheet would keep the dirt and mud that was on both of them from ruining the finely made quilt that Daniel knew covered the bed.

"There now." Daniel settled the other man on the surface and brushed a hand across his face again. His skin no longer felt so clammy and his breathing seemed easier but his eyes stayed shut. "Stay here, I'll go fetch your uncle." He turned to leave but a hand caught his wrist and stopped him.

"No." Teagan forced out and opened his eyes. "No, I'm okay." He drew a slow breath and tried to get his head to stop spinning. "Just stood up too fast, too tired."

Daniel wasn't sure he believed what he was being told and he glanced to the door.

"I'm fine, it happens....water?"

Daniel rested a hand on the narrow shoulder, frowning now that he was caught between doing what he thought was right and getting Teagan's uncle and doing what Teagan obviously wanted. "Stay still."

Teagan nodded and didn't know where Daniel was going, for some water or to fetch his uncle. He hoped it wasn't his uncle, he didn't need to be scolded or lectured and he didn't need the older man hovering around more. Or worse, becoming convinced that it wasn't safe for Teagan to live alone and demanding that he move into the main house. The idea of losing his home, his quiet solitude and privacy terrified Teagan.

It wasn't a long wait before the steady footsteps returned and Teagan felt some of his fear and tension fade. His head wasn't feeling as light now, the spell was passing but he was left feeling exhausted, drained and empty. Daniel sat on the edge of the bed and he opened his eyes to the sight. It made him smile a little and wondered if it was wrong all the dirty little thoughts seeing Daniel sitting over him on a bed inspired.

"Can you sit up?" He asked, brow furrowed in worry.

"If I go slowly." It was something he'd learned as a child. After fainting it was always better to go slowly and be sure he was okay instead of bounding up and blacking out again and being fussed at twice as much. He rolled onto his side and with a little help from Daniel swung his legs off the side of the bed. From there, with steadying hands that he was trying really hard not to focus on, he carefully sat up. Even then, he still grew light headed and unbalanced.

"Easy." Daniel soothed and helped steady the pale man as he bent over his knees for a moment, swaying a little until he'd steadied and sat up.

"Thank you." Teagan spoke softly and accepted the cup of water, sipping at it carefully and waiting for his head to stop spinning. "Well, that hasn't happened for a while." He tried to sound light and teasing but it came out weak.

"What can I do?"

He shook his head and wished he hadn't. "I'm fine, just need to rest. Did too much the last couple of days." His weakness disgusted him. "I'll be fine with a little rest."

Daniel took the cup back and nodded. "Alright, then let's get you some rest."

The gentle yet stubborn hand on his shoulder left no room to debate lying back down and Teagan resisted just enough to really feel the strength in that hand. It made him glad he was too exhausted to think about such things because otherwise he'd have embarrassed himself more than just by fainting. As it was, the private whispered thoughts made him blush a little and he hoped that whatever flush actually touched his face just made him look healthy and not naughty.

It wasn't wrong to exploit his own weakness, not really, he hoped. No one ever touched him, not really, and certainly no one like Daniel that he ached to be touched by. It felt good to let the other man lay him down, his strength and warmth a physical pleasure along Teagan's tired aching body and he didn't mind the thought of what it would be like to have more of the lean strength pressed into him. It felt good to have the silent man pull his boots from his feet and Teagan let himself imagine what it would be like to be stripped further by those sure hands. I just felt good to be fussed at by someone who wasn't fussing.

He sighed as a blanket he kept folded on a chair near by unfolded and settled over him. "Thanks." Teagan managed to mutter as sleep clawed him down into blackness.

"Rest." But it didn't seem that the slender man would have any trouble obeying the suggestion, as Daniel watched he dropped into a sound sleep. He lingered for long moments, watching Teagan's face grow slack and still, watched as the color slowly returned to the pale skin and slightly blue lips. Only when he was certain the other man was resting soundly and that it was restorative rest, did he turn and leave the bedroom.

The house was dark when Teagan woke up. His body felt thin, tired but functional and that was an improvement. It would take a couple of days, maybe a little longer to recover to a point where he didn't feel weak but he was used to that. Now, as he yawned and stretched and woke up, he was just hungry and wanted to find a quick meal and maybe go back to bed.

When he stumbled into the kitchen a small fire was burning in the place and a lamp was burning low, more than that, the door was open and light seeped in from the porch as well. Teagan yawned again and stepped to the door. Daniel sat on the porch, lamp burning beside him, putting careful neat stitches into some of the old damaged leather harnesses that Teagan hadn't gotten around to repairing.

"Daniel?" He whispered, worried that this was some crazed dream and that the man wasn't really sitting on his porch, still working.

The man glanced up and the line of concentration that had crinkled up his brow melted away. "You're awake."

Teagan nodded. "What're you doing here?"

"Wanted to wait to make sure you were okay."

"Oh." He watched as Daniel's steady hands began to tuck the work away, sliding the thick needle

securely into the project to wait to be finished. "Thank you. You should..." he waved to the house trying to figure out how to ask the man to come inside and off his porch. "I'll make dinner."

Daniel gathered the last of the work up and shook his head as he stood. "I should go." But he didn't turn to leave and stood, staring at the porch. "I'm sorry."

"For?"

"I shouldn't have let this happen."

That made Teagan laugh. "It's not your fault I'm broken."

Daniel glanced up and saw the bitter resolve in the deep green eyes. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Thank you, but there isn't anything anyone can do." He tried to look content but knew after fainting he always looked three quarters a corpse and worried people. "I'm supposed to rest, not exhaust myself. Which, I don't like doing so often push too far. I'm supposed to eat fresh meat and liver to keep my blood healthy but I hate liver and well, I grow weary of chicken. Neither will do any real long term good, they'll just keep me from getting sick more often than I do."

Daniel nodded. "If you're okay..."

"I'm fine."

"I'll go then." He nodded and took up the barn lantern to get on his way home.

"Daniel?" Teagan called out to the form retreating as a pool of light in the night darkness. When the light stopped moving but didn't return he went on. "Thank you, for waiting to see I was okay."

No words drifted back to him but the light bobbed a little before continuing on to the barn.

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Chapter Eight

Teagan slept late the next day, even for him, and it was noon before he was ready to face the day with any semblance of humanity. On his porch, hanging from a nail, were a pair of freshly snared and killed rabbits. The sight was so unusual that he stood for a moment and just stared at them before it sunk in that Daniel had brought and quietly left them for him. Then he smiled and rather than move to help the other man with what ever work he'd set himself, he carried the rabbits in and set about making a real, solid lunch.

With rabbit stew happily simmering and the biscuits that Daniel had seemed to enjoy so much finished and set to cool, Teagan moved to find the silent man. He didn't have to look far but he had to hike up into the far side of the large pasture to reach him. Daniel was moving along the fence, section by section, tearing down or out any damaged wood in preparations for rebuilding and repair.

"Hello." He said to keep from drooling or gaping like a fool. Daniel, shirt loose, straining with a stubborn bit of wood, trying to wedge the iron pry bar in tighter, was enough of a sight to embarrass himself over.

Daniel glanced up and half smiled. "Hello."

"Thank you, for the rabbits."

He shrugged and pulled the bar from the section he was trying to work free. "Welcome."

"I've made lunch."

"Yes, sir."

Teagan didn't wait, he knew by now that Daniel would finish up and come in at his own pace. If he'd known that instead of working to finish the task at hand, Daniel stood and watched him walk back to the house, Teagan might not have moved so freely. If he'd turned, he would have seen the softer, almost smile on Daniel's face, but he didn't.

Which was a good thing, really, because when Daniel showed up on the porch, washed up and with his sleeves rolled back down, Teagan placed lunch on the table. "We're going to eat like civilized people for a change." He muttered loud enough to carry. If he'd seen how Daniel had watched him, he wouldn't have been able to make the request without blushing.

There was a pause in the doorway, a shuffling of booted feet in scuffling uncertainty, before Daniel crossed over and came inside. "You cooked the rabbits?"

"Just part of one, into a stew."

"I didn't intend..."

"Food is better when shared. Don't you get sick of eating alone?"

Daniel opened his mouth to answer but it felt too personal, too close to let them out. He did get tired of eating alone, of being alone but he'd found a sense of safety in his solitude. He glanced up instead and found deep green eyes watching him and a look of understanding to all that he didn't speak.

Maybe it was just how guarded Daniel was with everything he thought or felt, to the point that Teagan was often unsure the other man even thought or felt, that made it seem so much deeper when something slipped up to be seen. Words weren't needed, he knew loneliness when he saw it and it struck a chord in his own heart.

"I..." He spoke softly when Daniel glanced up and caught him staring but at the single word those hazel eyes dropped back down. "I made more of those biscuits." He pulled them back to safer ground and moved to bring the mention treat to the table.

Gratitude washed over Daniel. "It all smells good." Which wasn't a lie or a safe escape from more personal conversation. The tidy kitchen smelled wonderfully and oddly made him think of his home and before his father had died. The smell of meat was rare but it always marked a festive event, a time when the whole family laughed.

They ate in comfortable silence for the most part and when Teagan had finished his smaller portion he unfolded the newest newspaper and without asking if it was proper, began to read some of the more interesting stories aloud. It was common in taverns and such, those that could read were pressed into service to read from the paper to those that couldn't. Teagan didn't know if Daniel could read or not but the other man made no effort to stop him and as lunch was finished he was smiling and nodding to the different stories.

The next few weeks passed with comfortable ease. Slowly the fence was brought back into repair with Daniel planning to fully replace some sections. Every few days, Teagan woke to find a pheasant or rabbit, occasionally a well-wrapped section of venison, waiting for him. The variety was welcome and he always made sure to include Daniel in its bounty.

Even after being in the kitchen so much more often, Daniel still had to be enticed in and he always sat lightly, ready to bolt. They'd eat in the comfortable silence and Teagan often would read from the paper when there was fresh news. As the days slipped by, they fell into a pattern that seemed to work for both men, so much so that Sundays felt empty and alone without Daniel arriving to fill the day.

When Teagan arrived home from his visit to see Lizzie, a requirement every couple of weeks, he was surprised but happy to find Daniel was still at his place in spite of the late hour. Even on a busy day, Daniel was leaving before lunch or shortly after they'd eaten so to find him still on hand into the afternoon was a pleasant surprise.

"You're still here." Teagan said and knew he was grinning like a fool.

Daniel had been using the excuse of chopping firewood to linger and wait. It was an odd, silent, worry that had gnawed at him and made him uneasy until he knew Teagan had arrived home safely. He told himself it was because they were friends but the smile that lit up Teagan's face was brighter than mere friendship.

"Leaving soon."

Teagan walked over, reins loose in his hand and letting the horse follow behind him. "Well, it's a good thing you're still here. Lizzie, my aunt, her cousin Maureen is visiting and my uncle is away tonight and tomorrow. He suggested that she invite the both of us up to the house for dinner and cards to keep the ladies occupied while he's away but Lizzie felt you'd be reluctant to agree. Instead, they're both coming here to cook a proper dinner and if you run off and leave me alone with the pair of them for hours I will never forgive you."

"I don't think..."

"It's just dinner and cards, they're properly chaperoned, my uncle made sure it was clear it was at his request. Besides, it's not fun playing cards with three people, you really need at least four. You know how to play, don't you?"

Daniel felt himself nodding.

"So, it's settled. I told them it had to be nothing fancy, that we'd both be working all day and they'd have to take us as we were. We're agreed, come by tomorrow afternoon and stay for dinner. It'll be good to have some real cooking for a change." He grinned wider but saw the reluctance in the hazel eyes. "It'll be fun."

That made Daniel snort a little bit, he couldn't imagine being in a room with two wealthy women he had nothing in common with and didn't know how to speak to as fun.

"I promise, you won't have to stay too long. If it gets tiresome I'll plead exhaustion and shoo



them home.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

They were working on the last section of fencing when the women arrived. It was on the far side of the gentle, long sloping hill and it wasn't until the women appeared at the top and began their way down that they even knew the company had arrived. Daniel spotted them first, even while on his knees prying out the last rocks from the current posthole he'd dug.

“Here huh?” Teagan glanced up and wasn't surprised that the women were dressed more for prettiness than for cooking. Maureen looked especially nice, a plain woman she had an honest face and warm eyes. “I've a dreadful feeling that Lizzie is planning my wedding before I've even met this spinster cousin.” He lifted the fencepost and eased it into the dug hole, Daniel guiding it and steadying it before standing to shovel and pack dirt back around it.

“I'm told married life isn't horrible.”

“I don't see you rushing off to wed.” He snapped back a little too quickly. “I've heard the women in town sighing over you.”

He emptied the shovel full of dirt into the hole and glanced up and met dark green eyes. “It's not them I want sighing over me.”

The honest intensity in Daniel's eyes stopped Teagan's teasing. The fence post he was holding felt numb in his hands and he wondered if the words were meant as they'd sounded. Daniel's eyes, those hazel eyes that hid nothing, certainly seemed to mean them as they'd sounded.

The women were nearly within earshot when Teagan was pretty sure he hadn't swallowed his own tongue and hadn't misheard. “Why, Daniel, you flirt.” He forced out, grinning at the other man's teasing and at his own shocking reaction.

Daniel just glanced up where he was scraping the last of the dirt pile around the post, packing it solidly in place, and smiled. It was quick and hidden from the approaching women but it was bright and real and warm and it made Teagan blush.

“I thought you promised your uncle not to do this kind of work.” Lizzie was scolding as they grew closer, skirts swishing over the growing grass.

Teagan glanced over, Daniel getting the rocks around the base of the post to act as additional support and anchor. “I'm behaving. Daniel is almost a better watch dog over my health than you.”

“You're not letting him work too hard, are you, Mr. O'Raian?”

Daniel glanced up but quickly looked back down. “No, ma'am.”

“Well, we brought you both some water. Thought you'd like a drink before we head in and start on dinner.” The cups they'd carried were handed out and Lizzie grinned. “Oh, how rude of me! This is my cousin Maureen Doyle, Maureen dear, my nephew Teagan Walsh and our woodsman Daniel O'Raian.”

Maureen smiled prettily. “It's my pleasure to meet you, Mr. Walsh. Lizzie speaks so highly of you. Mr. O'Raian.” Her eyes barely flicked to Daniel before settling back with a shy smile on Teagan.

It set a spark of jealous dislike into Daniel's stomach. One he had no right having but that still

made him a touch ill feeling. He kept his eyes lowered and focused on his water while Teagan lightly chatted with the two women. Teagan should be married, it wasn't right that he lived alone. Ill or not, he should have a wife, his money and position in the county almost demanded it. That didn't mean Daniel had to like that reality.

Dinner arrived sooner than Daniel would have liked. He was happy out in the field, alone with his work and Teagan. When Maureen appeared on the hilltop to call them in to wash up and eat, Daniel found some comfort in the strained, harsh sigh Teagan puffed out at the sight of the woman. It kept him quietly silent when she reached them and Teagan dropped into bustling, light conversation with her because he'd seen the irritation on the expressive face.

They washed up in heated water the women had waiting but still looked like they'd been working on the fence line and digging postholes most of the day. Daniel didn't mind, he knew his place and didn't fuss much at appearances but it had to be shocking for a man of Teagan's place. It made him smile a little to see Teagan looking as work scuffed as he was.

"Thank you for the wash water." Teagan acknowledged to Maureen who waited on the porch for them.

She smoothed a hand over her carefully controlled hair and smiled shyly. "You're welcome. Though I must admit to being surprised that you'd do such work yourself."

The polite smile dropped from Teagan's face. "I'm not so ill."

The woman's plain face took on a horrified expression and she shook her head. "I didn't mean it as such! Just, there aren't too many gentleman farmers left in these parts any more."

Daniel had to cough to cover the snickered laughter that bubbled up. He had to give the woman credit, she was able to back peddle any mistake into a flirtation.

"Well, I enjoy the labor." Teagan finally muttered a little and let them be guided into his own kitchen as if he were the guest.

As Teagan wavered between the compliment and his own bristled pride, Daniel revised his earlier worry. The night might prove to be very amusing, and really, a good meal forgave almost anything.

Dinner was as good as Daniel could have hoped for and better than anything he'd had in quite awhile. There was even bread, baked fresh that morning and brought down with the women from the main house. There was no fine china, just Teagan's day to day dinner plates and mugs, which kept him feeling like a total uncultured brute and made the entire dinner feel more relaxed. Neither of the women expected him to talk or take a large part in the conversation, something that eased Daniel's mind considerably. Instead, Maureen sat almost as silent as he was and it was Teagan and Lizzie that chatted happily with few comments from the other woman and even less from Daniel.

Evening chores were finished after dinner and chairs taken out onto the porch but it was Lizzie that sighed. "Oh, look at that sunset starting. Teagan, walk us around the farm?"

"Of course."

But when Lizzie said walk us around the farm she meant, walk Maureen around. It must have been planned because Lizzie looped an arm around one of Daniel's and held him back, leaving Teagan to walk ahead, guiding Maureen around across the fields. They were well within line of sight and so still very proper but it gave them the time alone Lizzie had been planning for some time.

It made Daniel frown a little to watch how attentive and careful Teagan was to the other woman. It didn't matter that he knew Teagan was a gentleman and would be so careful with any woman, it still bothered him to see. More, it left him alone with his employer's young, pretty wife and he had no idea what to say to her. The words that seemed to come so easily for Teagan didn't for him and less so around a woman.

Lizzie patted Daniel's arm companionably. "It's good of you to do this, Mr. O'Raian, you haven't looked too horribly tortured by indulging us."

"Ma'am?" He glanced over to Lizzie's soft smile.

"I know what you do, really do, for my husband, Mr. O'Raian and it isn't shooing off poachers or fixing Teagan's fences." She paused to see if he's say anything and was pleased when he stayed silent. "It's tickled me to see what good friends you and Teagan have become. He speaks of little else but you when he visits, you and the work and changes being done here. Thank you."

"It's been my pleasure, ma'am."

"I didn't think he'd live out the year after his father passed. Those two were so close, dear friends really not father and son. Once Teagan's sister ran off, well, they just grew closer and when he passed..." She shook her head. "I know Maureen isn't the world's greatest beauty but she's a good choice for him. She's solid and steady and loves books almost as much as Teagan does. She'd be a good wife to him, even if there is no sparks between them, a marriage is built on more than just passion."

"If you say so, ma'am."

She laughed softly. "True, you are a bachelor. No girl in the town has caught your eye yet?"

"No, ma'am."

"You should hear them talk about you. The girls haven't twittered this much over one young man in a long time. You'd almost be able to have your pick. I know you've no family, Mr. O'Raian..." she paused a little when she felt the arm under her hand tense at the words. "If you do find yourself in a courting way, I'd be more than happy to help you. I enjoy the rule of matchmaker and I'd be delighted to be your honorary aunt."

Daniel was surprised by the offer and oddly touched. "That's kind of you, ma'am."

"Not at all! Teagan is dear to me, my husband is quite fond of him and no one has been able to get through to him since his father passed away. God rest his soul. No one until you, he's healthier looking than he's been in years and certainly happier and I'd be blind not to see a good bit of that is your doing." She patted the arm again. "That makes you almost family in my thinking, even if I didn't think so highly of you already. So please, tell your aunty which girl has caught your eye?"

Daniel glanced up to where Teagan had paused to point out a hawk soaring along the tree line before roosting for the night. "Honestly, there isn't anyone, ma'am, but if one happens to, I'll be sure to let you know."

Lizzie had little doubt what the quiet man said was true, his words rung with sincerity and none of the gossip had him even looking twice at any of the town's girls. It wasn't her denial that gave her pause but what he didn't say in words. Romance and flirtation, matters of the heart, were one of her favorite diversions and she knew when a look said more than any words could. Since there was little room to believe that the stoic Daniel O'Raian had become enamored with her plain, steady cousin. That left only Teagan for those expressive hazel eyes to rest on and that was an entirely new thought.

Her eyes narrowed a little and she glanced over to see if maybe she'd misread the look that had crossed the man's eyes and face but he'd already glanced down, his expression empty and unreadable. She considered herself a progressive woman, educated, aware of the greater world around her, unable to be shocked by anything so common as human interactions. The idea she was entertaining about where the silent, deadly, woodsman's preferences may have been hidden didn't upset her. What caught her off guard and made her go silent in thought was the idea that maybe Teagan wasn't avoiding marriage and romance because of his healthy but because of what was being offered to him.

She patted Daniel's arm again and smiled softer. "You're a good man, Mr. O'Raian, I feel quite secure with you. Now, tell me how we're going to team up and fleece those two at cards."

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Chapter Nine

Cards proved a favorable time, even if they were being gentlemanly and playing for pebbles of various sizes instead of money. Lizzie had been clever and brought with her several bottles of a nice claret wine that worked nicely to smooth some of the nervous edge off of all of them. By the time the first bottle was emptied, they were all relaxed and far more comfortable and Daniel allowed himself to drink just enough to feel relaxed without approaching drunk.

They played and gossip was shared easily. The wine was slowly consumed and even Maureen who seemed reserved drank and ended up losing badly at cards but laughing as freely as Lizzie. It gave them a glimpse of how the two women must have been as girls playing together. That would have been fine if, as she relaxed, she hadn't grown more bold with her flirting. It made Daniel laugh less but Teagan, half drunk himself, only laughed and lightly flirted back. It was difficult for Daniel to be angry because he wasn't sure the slender man was taking any of the flirting seriously.

"Oh..." Teagan laughed to a halt from an almost bawdy joke Lizzie had told. They'd all laughed, even Daniel had silently chuckled, eyes kept low to the table to hide his amusement. The sight made Teagan's breath grow short from something other than amusement. "I'm afraid my game is suffering, the claret is too good to avoid becoming unseemingly drunk on."

"Shut up and have some more." Lizzie teased and poured the bottle to refill all their glasses. "It's your turn to deal, Maureen dear."

"I'm having a delightful evening." She said, boldly looking right at Teagan.

He might stare. "So am I." And he meant it but not how she assumed. Under the table, happily drunk and not caring about warnings of being only friends, Teagan found Daniel's knee.

Fingers tickled the side of Daniel's knee and trailed up his thigh. It made him gasp a little and he quickly laid down his new cards to try to reach under the table and catch the wandering hand.

"Cards that bad, Daniel?" Lizzie teased but suspected the truth behind the reaction. Daniel had shown no response to any of his cards, good or bad, the entire game and Teagan had a smirk plastered on his half drunk face that looked decidedly wicked.

"Perhaps." Daniel's deeper voice rumbled out. Under the table, the hand he'd caught, Teagan's hand, twined around his own. Slender, graceful fingers stroked across the sensitive skin of Daniel's wrist and sent shivers across his body. He wasn't drunk enough to surrender and give in but he was too drunk to protest the touch.

Teagan grinned wider and tried not to laugh when his hand was dropped into his lap, safely away from Daniel's legs and skin. "Maybe your wicked luck is changing, hmm? Maybe us lowly plebs will have a chance to win a few hands? You and Lizzie are cleaning up tonight."

"Maybe." Daniel agreed and made his bet. With his hands freed up and the turn passed to the women, he slipped a hand under the table. Two could play Teagan's game and he hid his grin. His hand didn't settle on a knee, instead he found the sensitive upper, inner thigh on the slender man. He wanted to touch that skin, tease higher, torment them both with the physical tease but he wasn't drunk enough. Instead, with no warning, he gave the sensitive flesh a small pinch.

Teagan leapt to his feet, eyes wide and startled and Daniel about choked to death holding in laughter. "What the..?" But at seeing the amused smile hiding on Daniel's face he knew the source of the sharp sudden pinch.

"Teagan? What is it?" Lizzie asked startled.

Teagan blinked not sure how to respond.

"Mouse." Daniel nodded to the corner. "Went that way, ran over our feet. Scared of a mouse, Teagan?" Daniel asked smoothly around a sip of the claret.

He was grateful for the excuse but not pleased to be made such a fool of. "It was a mouse? Felt larger, more like a rat." Lizzie and Maureen laughed and it was at his expense but he settled back in to play the hand and this time he kept his wandering fingers on the table surface, even if Daniel's teasing hidden grin made him want to seek revenge.

"Oh, it's late, we should be getting home and let you two get some sleep." Lizzie finally announced when interest in the cards had waned, Maureen seemed flirted out and the bottles were emptied.

Daniel stood up. "I'll ride with you back to the house, see you home safe."

"No need, the wagon is easy to drive and the roads are clear and safe. It's even a full moon and it's such a short way. We'll be fine." Lizzie smiled warmly and waved the offer off.

"Ma'am..." Daniel protested.

"I insist. You were kind enough to indulge our silliness all night, we don't need the escort home on top of it."

Daniel looked to Teagan's subtle nod before he agreed. "I'll hitch up the wagon for you."

"You're such a dear." She smiled happily but was watching the way Teagan's eyes followed Daniel to the door. Now, she had to find a way to let Maureen down gently because no matter

how much Teagan had flirted with the other woman, his eyes only flirted with Daniel.

It didn't take long for Daniel, with several lanterns burning in the barn, to get the ladies' wagon hitched and ready to go. Just to be safe, he saddled up his own horse while good byes were said and Teagan handed the women, now wrapped up in cloaks and gloves, up into the wagon.

"It was kind of you to indulge us, Daniel, thank you so much, we had a lovely time." Lizzie smiled.

"I'd feel better if you'd let me escort you home."

"Pish. We're fine. Don't be a stranger, Teagan, come around more, we miss you at the house."

"I'll be by, I promise."

"Better! Night gentleman." She smiled and expertly got the horses moving and the wagon rolling at a sedate pace back toward the main house.

Teagan stood in the barn's light and watched the wagon roll away into the moonlight. "You pinched me!" He finally protested and turned to see the evil, wicked grin teasing Daniel's mouth.

"You were doing worse."

"Well, I'm half drunk and you..." He sighed and wondered if he could explain what seeing Daniel laughing did to him. "Why don't you want me?"

"You are drunk." He shook his head.

"Not too drunk to know what I'm saying."

"She'd make a good wife." He kicked at a stone with the toe of his boot.

"I don't want a wife. I've never known anyone like you." Teagan moved closer to where Daniel stood, made bold by the claret, the acute awareness of his loneliness brought on by flirting and the memory of Daniel's laughter.

Daniel stepped back, moving a little deeper into the barn and away from Teagan. "I need this job, Teagan. I've nothing but this, no family, no home, nothing but the work. I can't loose it."

"You won't." Which was only partially true, he couldn't even imagine how his uncle would react if he ever found out. He moved closer, stalking slowly toward Daniel, moving two steps nearer for every one Daniel retreated. "Don't you get lonely too? I know how I am, I know I'm nothing worth looking at but I'm willing and lonely too."

It was the claret, he was going to blame the shiver that raced across his body and settled to tickle in the pit of his stomach fully on the claret. "Don't say that, you're very handsome."

Teagan stalked closer still, nearly close enough to feel the heat from Daniel's body in the lightly chilled night air. "Then, why don't you want me?"

"I can't."

"No one would ever know, just us." He moved closer, close enough to feel the claret tinged breath in small puffs from Daniel's too rapid breath. "Just us." He whispered again.

Daniel had stopped retreating. He stood tense and torn between what he wanted and what he knew was his place. It was too much, the slender, elegant man throwing himself at him. He was just a touch too drunk to cling to his reserve when Teagan was standing so close by, bathed in

the golden light from the barn lanterns. He was so close, almost touching him but not, teasing with the promise of contact that Daniel wasn't sure he could survive.

"Neither of us should want alone." Teagan whispered and watched the fluttering of the thick eyelashes that hid Daniel's eyes, the only part of him that ever betrayed what he was really thinking. "We can blame it on the claret."

That was true, they could blame it on the claret but it was how close Teagan stood, how still he waited, that broke the last bounds of Daniel's control. Teagan was so close that his hands were on the other man before he was even fully aware that he'd made the choice to move. Roughly, he gripped the back of the dark head with one hand and grabbed an arm with the other. Before he could think about what he was doing, he pulled Teagan those last teasing inches closer.

Teagan stumbled roughly forward as he was tugged closer. His chest hit into Daniel's, his legs tangled around the stronger pair. The feel of hips rubbing tightly into hips, half aroused lengths teasing into each other, would have stopped his thoughts cold if he hadn't been over whelmed by the feel of harsh, hungry, demanding lips on his own mouth. Teagan closed his eyes, opened his lips and moaned. Trapped in the strong arms, mouth being savaged with lust and need, he allowed himself to be kissed deeply. It made him shiver and grow light headed. It made him feel alive and he hung in that startled moment of passion.

He thought he might be growing faint as he dug his fingers into Daniel's hair, knocking the other man's hat off. His head felt dizzy, he felt like he was spinning and he struggled with the need to devour Daniel's mouth while warning that he was feeling dizzy. Only, it wasn't that he was about to faint, he was actually moving. He cracked his eyes open a little to see that Daniel was guiding them around and back. It was the feel of the barn wall pressed to his back that told him it was real and solid.

That felt nice, the solid feel of the wall, when everything felt liquid and weak. He stayed there, propped between the wood and the steel strength of Daniel's chest. When the lips strayed a little from his mouth he moaned in a clingy, pouting way since he found no words would form in protest. He moaned again when Daniel's mouth stayed close to his skin, nipping and teasing his chin and jaw line, only this time the moan was surprisingly desperate, begging for more. It made him arch his back, pressing his body tighter to Daniel's and tilt his head away to give the other man better access to his neck.

There was no way it could feel better than what Teagan was already feeling, he knew it couldn't. Until Daniel's hands slid across his body and drew out more hungry moans from his throat. Across his shoulders they went, over his neck, back into his hair where they struggled to free the length from the tie. Their failure made Daniel groan and he gave up, his hands retreating to wander and map out more of Teagan's body.

The desperate need to touch him made Teagan painfully hard, achingly aroused and he wanted more. Having Daniel teasing his neck felt delicious but he wanted something deeper and he didn't really know what that was. He pulled at the hair his hands were buried in, tugging Daniel away from where he was licking and nipping the sensitive flesh of his neck.

Slightly confused hazel eyes met desperate dark green and Teagan surged forward to claim a kiss every bit as devouring and passionate as Daniel's had been. It drew out a dark whimper from Daniel, a sound Teagan hadn't imagined the man was capable of making until that moment. He took the man's mouth and encouraged him to capture his own in return but still he wanted something deeper.

Teagan sighed and pulled his mouth away, shivering as Daniel suckled on his lower lip in an effort to keep him from retreating. "More." Teagan whispered. "Please, please, more." He heard himself moaning in a begging voice and felt his hips thrusting forward to rub blindly into Daniel's. Only, while the hips he rubbed against had a delightfully hard hidden treasure as well and he felt

the way the contact made Daniel shiver, the man did nothing in further in response.

"Please, more!" He begged again and slipped forward to try to duplicate the same teasing licks, kisses and nips that Daniel had just covered his own neck with. It had made his skin feel burning with fevered need and he wanted that same need to consume Daniel past the point where he had to beg to go further. "More..." He whispered again, right against a hidden ear.

The words made Daniel shiver and gasp in desperate shuddering breaths and Teagan rejoiced in that but the hands exploring his body had stilled. Truth was, Teagan only had a very basic idea of what men could do together and no practical experience with even that small knowledge. His singular encounter had been quick and he'd been passive, lost in passion and feelings he hadn't know he'd even possessed. He needed Daniel to show him, guide him and he was trembling with the desire to seek that something deeper he couldn't find on his own.

"Please... Daniel... please..." Teagan whispered and slid his hands across the tense, strong body. The breath gliding across his skin now felt shorter but had a harsh, rougher edge that didn't feel like passion. It felt like Daniel was struggling with his control again, struggling with his desires again and Teagan didn't want the other man thinking about their social positions and obligations.

All Teagan knew was touch and he had no experience touching another man before. The stranger he'd stumbled against a wall with had kissed him, whispered lusty words into his ear, opened both their pants and while Teagan clung to him like the virgin he was, gasping, the man had touched him, pleased him. From whispered bawdy jokes and stories Teagan knew there was more men could do together but touch was all he knew. Desperate now, shivering in need and frightened that Daniel again would become spooked and stop, Teagan placed a hand on Daniel's chest and slid it lower.

Down, down the hand went until Teagan found a hardness under the palm of his hand. It felt surprisingly like his own and yet deliciously different. He pressed his hand to it's hidden form, awed by the feeling of lust and power and need touching Daniel burned into him. Daniel's hips jerked forward, trying to press tighter to the light contact.

"Holy mother!" Daniel cursed in a shuddering breath that turned into a moan. His arms wrapped around Teagan and pulled them close together into a tight hug.

An embrace so tight that Teagan found no room between their bodies to stroke the cloth covered manhood he'd found. He was held so close he couldn't move and Daniel buried his face in the side of his neck and held on. His breath came in shuddering, half sobbing gasps, his hands splayed out in grasping reaching gestures across Teagan's back and together they clung.

"I can't." Daniel sobbed and the arms around Teagan tightened further, became almost crushing. "I can't, this isn't right."

There was such broken, hungry pain in the words that Teagan stood in those bruising arms and found nothing to say in reply.

"I'm sorry." Daniel's words were a torment, harsh and broken. "I'm sorry." His arms twitched, as if fighting the order to let go and release Teagan, before they actually sprang open and space formed between the two men.

Teagan looked up, caught in lust and need and the sudden horrible emptiness of standing alone and saw Daniel stumble backwards a few steps. The look on the normally unexpressive face was one of torment and confusion and Daniel struggled to form words that refused to cooperate. Finally, he gave up, shook his head and stumbled back further before turning and hurrying to his horse.



“Daniel...” Teagan called out, skin still tingling with the touch it craved to have over all his body. “Please!” He begged but the word was drowned out in the sound of hoof beats as Daniel dug his heels into his horse’s side and rode away as if the Devil himself was chasing him. Teagan wanted to curse or cry or laugh at the irony of how so much of their time as spent wasted with Daniel hurrying away. Instead, he stood silent and still in the center of his barn, alone and aching hard. When the sound of hoof beats disappeared into the night, he made his mind up and moved to saddle his own horse. Daniel wasn’t running away this time.

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Chapter Ten

The small cottage set away from the road inside the sheltering trees had never looked more inviting as Daniel rode up on it. The cool night air had settled his nerves and cleared his head. By the time he reached his home he wasn’t so stricken but he pulled saddle and bridle off of his horse and turned it into the pasture without brushing the animal down. He may have settled some but he wasn’t settled and he hurried on quick strides into his cottage.

Inside there were things to be done, the fire had to be stoked and the embers tickled into life, wood needed to be brought in and lanterns on the wall lit. He moved about his chores without thought until he finally sat down heavily and considered the jug of whiskey tucked away on a shelf in the other room. As he sat at his table, most of it covered in various bits of rifles and other equipment he’d taken apart, he struggled with the desire to get drunk. Not just a little drunk like he was but really, truly, drunk. Drunk enough to forget and drunk enough to wash away his thoughts and memories and he sat at his table, head in hands and tried to come up with reasons not to open that bottle.

A sound, like a boot step on the short wood steps outside his door, scuffed across his senses and Daniel came instantly alert. He was halfway to his feet when his door slammed open and he had his knife halfway drawn before he saw who it was that had barged in. It wasn’t a face he expected to find, it wasn’t one he was ready to face.

“Teagan.” He whispered out and moved to leave the knife where it was. “What’re you doing?”

Teagan took his hat off and stripped off his outer coat, he dropped both by the door making it very clear he didn’t intend to leave easily. “What did you think you were doing?”

“What?” Daniel frowned, grateful the table was between them.

“Running away again!”

"We've had this conversation. Let me get my horse saddled back up and I'll see you home safe."

"No!" Teagan snapped. "I'm not a child or a woman to be escorted around and I sure as hell didn't ride three miles in the condition I was in to be shooed away like a school boy."

"That wasn't what I meant."

Teagan waved it off. His conviction and lust had driven him into the night but it was his anger and frustration that made him bold. "You desire me."

The words made Daniel glance down, hiding his eyes.

"I know I've little experience, I must seem a fool so tell me truthfully and I'll stop. Tell me it's just the touch you respond to and not me, tell me you don't want me and I'll stop." He struggled to keep his breathing steady and not to get lost in emotion. "But if you can't, then, please, no more, I can't take any more."

Daniel's hands balled up into fists. "This isn't a game." He forced out into the small space.

"What?"

"To me, this isn't a game or a dalliance or a way to pass the time. I won't be a toy for a lonely rich boy to amuse himself with."

"Is that what you think this means to me?"

Daniel shook his head and glanced up but saw no deceit in the expressive face. That only made things worse, light amusement to while away long hours was far safer than anything with meaning.

"I'm not a fool, Daniel. I sought out the places where men meet to encounter other men and I could have returned at any time. I haven't because what happens between two people should hold some meaning. I've chosen to be alone instead of cheapening what could be shared. What I want to share with you if you'll have me, let me, show me." He pleaded. "Tell me to go and I will and never pursue you again but please, if you'd have it otherwise, take me."

The words made Daniel shiver. "You can't know what you're asking. You've no experience, no idea what it is men do together."

"Neither did you the first time you were with a man."

"That's different."

"How?" He tossed his hands out in exasperation. "How is it different? Because we were born to two different families? Because I'm ill? I'm a man, same as you, and I'm no coward. I think about you and my blood burns, I'm not afraid." He watched how Daniel stood with his shoulders hunched up and his hands clenched so tightly and the truth slowly sunk in. "I may not be afraid but you are."

"Please..." Daniel whispered, keeping his eyes down.

"There's nothing to be afraid of." The words made Daniel flinch a little. "You do desire me."

"Yes."

The soft confession made Teagan shiver in delight. "Why do you just stand there?" Daniel still hadn't moved, his eyes still stayed lowered and suddenly Teagan felt foolish. He'd done everything but strip naked and still been refused, there was only so much his pride would allow. He shook his head and pushed down the feelings of lonely desperation and frustrated want. "I'm sorry." Teagan sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I'll go, I can be stubborn, too much so. Stubborn and single minded and I push too hard, I'm sorry for putting you in such an uncomfortable situation. Please forgive me, I... my only excuse is that when you're told you can't so often, you tend not to take no lightly."

He couldn't stay there and see Daniel standing, not looking up, almost begging him to go away so he turned to leave, only he paused with his hand on the door and his heart feeling bruised. "Please, tomorrow, there's no need to come by. I think I'd like to be alone."

There was no sound to give Teagan warning before strong calloused hands slid about his waist and he was pushed roughly forward against the door. He shivered, startled and oddly aroused by the rough treatment and the feel of the heat rolling from the body behind his own. There was no fear, he knew Daniel would never hurt him and he moaned as lips fell to the back of his neck.

"Tha...that's nice...." He moaned out, his legs kicked a little apart and the feel of Daniel's desire pressed firmly to the roundness of his ass, lips teasing the unexpected erotic spots on the back of his neck. Teeth nipped the skin and Teagan bucked, rubbing his ass into Daniel on instinct.

It must have been something good to do because Daniel choked on a groan and the hands at Teagan's waist wandered up. Demanding hands pulled roughly over waistcoat and traced the contours of Teagan's chest. Up the hands traveled until work roughened skin scratched against the front of Teagan's face and he lifted his chin. Hands capable of choking his life away with little effort stroked the slender length of his neck with passionate gentleness.

"Is this what you wanted?" Daniel moaned just barely above a whisper into Teagan's ear. His hips ground forward, rubbing himself into the untouched body that he knew he could never really have, not on any level that meant anything. He wanted too desperately to care about consequences.

Teagan shuddered and felt limp in the strong grip. "Yes..." he moaned in reply and felt his legs sliding wider apart. "More... oh... please..."

Daniel's hands traced upward, gliding over Teagan's face, mapping out his features. The touch was desperate and held a fluttery need that spoke of the fear of never being able to touch Teagan's skin with bare hands again. He leaned into the wandering caress. Fingers slid across his mouth and Teagan parted his lips and sucked in two of the digits. He just wanted to kiss Daniel, to press his hands and mouth to the other's flesh, to taste and feel as much of him as he could.

The rough fingers tasted mildly of leather and Teagan swirled his tongue around the sensitive tips. Daniel shuddered, his breath a raspy gasp in Teagan's ear as he forgot to touch or kiss the slighter man that had so surprisingly turned the tables on him. The stronger man's reaction surprised Teagan but it made him happy and he sucked hard on the captured fingers and let Daniel plunge them all the way into his mouth.

Daniel's fingers slipped away and Teagan sucked hard on them, trying to keep them in his mouth and it earned him another shuddering sigh. The damp fingers left wet trails across his skin and it was a shocking counter point, Teagan hadn't been aware how fevered his body was feeling.

"Tell me to stop." Daniel pleaded, his voice a begging moan to continue. "Please, stop me." His hands traced down Teagan's arms.

"Never..." Teagan sighed, as aroused by the passion in the other man's voice as much as his touch. "I'll never want you to stop."

Those were not words that helped Daniel control himself or to do what he felt was right. He grasped the slender wrists, shocked again by the delicacy of the man's bones. Teagan offered no resistance when he lifted the man's arms up over his head and the submission made Daniel shiver, the level of trust was stunning. He gathered both wrists into one of his hands and held them, pinned there, trapped.

Teagan pulled a little, struggled a little to get his hands lowered, but it was only a tiny effort. It was just enough so he could feel the strength in the hand holding him, just enough to know he was being held and it sent a delicious sense of delight down his spine. Daniel's other hand glided across his arms, down to tease at the opening of his shirt, slipping inside where the fabric had pulled loose.

Rough hands found and traced a collarbone, a place no one had ever touched on him before, and Teagan gasped and arched backwards. His head lolled against Daniel's shoulder and he found if he turned his face inward he could press soft kisses to the other man's neck. The contact caused the hand to dart from inside his shirt and the other to tighten on his wrists.

There was no pause, no warning, no slow lowering touch. Teagan's moaning and writhing were enough to drive him to distraction alone but added in with the soft kisses being placed on every inch of skin Teagan could reach and Daniel thought he might go mad. Instead, his free hand dropped, ghosting a light touch of trailing fingertips across a hip and roughly pressed into the other man's groin. He wasn't surprised to find a length and hardness to equal his own but he was surprised at how violently Teagan reacted.

Teagan found himself caught in that touch. It was such a simple touch, just a palm pressed into his manhood, nothing more, but it set off cascades of tingling pleasure across his body. He didn't know what he wanted, to press forward and rub himself and the deep, trembling ache of his desire, into that teasing hand or back into the stunning feel of how aroused Daniel was at touching him. He pulled on the hand holding him in place in earnest now, struggling to get his hands free to hold Daniel's hand tighter to his desire or to reach around and torment Daniel equally, but he was well and thoroughly captured. It left him to dangle there, pinned between Daniel and the door, without any idea of what to do, trembling and moaning for more.

"Please..." Teagan gasped as the hand below his waist stroked the length of his need with soft, teasing touches. "Please....more..."

The begging voice was too much and Daniel knew what he wanted. He'd had too many dreams of Teagan to have little doubts about his desires and he knew he could take the words literally. He knew he could strip the man bare, or merely lower his pants. He knew Teagan wouldn't stop him and he could take the slender man to his bed or take him right there against the door. Daniel shivered and his hips rubbed harder into that untouched ass. He knew what it would feel like, to take the other man, the virgin tightness, the shocking, breath stealing pleasure as his cock would be the first to penetrate the other's body. He knew he could make it good for Teagan even during a rougher joining and from how responsive the man had been to simple touch and kisses, seeing him moan and trembled while being taken would be a rare, exquisite pleasure.

Only, Daniel remembered his first time. The shock of the cool night air on his lust fevered skin as his pants were lowered. The hands, gentle and encouraging, touching him, guiding him. Mostly, the restraint his lover had shown, how patiently they'd waited for him for days, weeks, until he'd beg them during their times together for more, beg to be taken. Even that

hadn't been enough, it was only when they'd felt he was ready did they go that final step. Because of their care his first joining with a man had brought with it only blinding pleasure, stunning delight.

He'd been luckier than so many of the other young men, those others who had fallen into less careful or concerned hands. He remembered seeing them with little doubt when they'd been taken. Their eyes distant, skittish, jumpy young men that soon grew cold and distant.

He didn't want that for Teagan no matter how deeply he lusted for the other man, no matter how much he ached to rip the clothing from his body and have him. He wanted Teagan to know where their contact was headed, he wanted the other man comfortable and safe. If they became lovers, Daniel wanted to wait until Teagan was begging to be taken with full knowledge what he was asking for. If they became lovers, he wanted Teagan only to feel the breathtaking, blinding pleasure of a union and no violence or pain.

Which meant stripping him bare and taking him was out of the question. Teagan was no back alley contact or brothel worker he could do as he pleased with. Neither could he refuse him any longer, they'd danced around friendship and flirtation and desire for too many days, weeks, and it had left them both too tightly wound to escape without some release.

He made up his mind. He had Teagan pinned in place, hands safely secured; there was nothing Teagan could do to push their contact further than Daniel intended. He would open the man's pants, slide that hidden length into his hand and stroke it until Teagan crumbled into release. Then he would send the other man home and they'd discuss all the implications of going further under the bright, glaring light of the day instead of the private, inviting glow of nighttime lamps. He had a plan, a course of action, and that laid out a safe path, Daniel was not going to be swayed from it.

"Oh... please..." Teagan moaned. "Please, Daniel, please let me kiss you..." He panted out, needing to be freed, to turn to claim the mouth teasing him.

With that breathless request, Daniel felt his plans shatter.

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Chapter Eleven

With that breathless request, Daniel felt his plans shatter. The words made him moan and shiver. He knew he should refuse, there was something about the feel, the taste, of the other man that drove him crazy. He knew kissing Teagan, allowing the other man to turn and face him, would be a very bad idea. All of his control and logic screamed at him to refuse the request. It would be easy to distract the other man and so much safer.

Instead he dropped the wrists he'd been holding safely away and roughly caught the slender shoulders. He turned Teagan before it even sunk in to the other man that his hands were free. Roughly he spun him around, pressing his back to the door now and his body tight to the writhing, demanding one he'd captured. Teagan's mouth was open before Daniel's lips even reached them and the moan that filled the small room was from two throats.

Hands fell onto Daniel's body, slithered across his shoulders and down to the small of his back before tracing back up again and digging into his back. Hips ground into his own, teasing with the promise of more contact. It became frightfully clear what a quick study Teagan was when he bucked a little and pulled his mouth away only to return to torment Daniel's neck with nips, kisses and suckling licks. Worse, the dark haired man seemed to all ready have a map of the spots likely to gain the best reactions.

"This is..." Teagan moaned as he traced the curve of Daniel's jaw line with the tip of his tongue. "This is so nice....oh...God, I want to touch you."

The hands on Daniel's back twitched with the words and any hope of a plan disappeared. "You are touching me..." He half teased back, sliding a thigh between Teagan's legs. It made him shiver how easily, how readily, Teagan was to have his legs parted. There was no pause for shame or uncertainty and the man's abandon made him feel on fire. As soon as his thigh was nestled between Teagan's, the slender man moaned again and began to slowly rub himself along Daniel's leg. "Oh....Teagan...that's...oh." Daniel moaned and that only encouraged the teasing rubs and the last fragments of Daniel's mind shut down.

So he wasn't thinking, wasn't anticipating anything, when the hands that had released their grip on his back reappeared. They tickled a little over the small of his back, mapping the feel of his waist, teasing a little inward to the flat of his stomach and then back and down. He may as well have been naked, the cloth did nothing to blunt or dull the feel of those uncertain, hungry hands as they traced the curve of his ass. He didn't know if Teagan explored from the desire to simply touch or if he had any idea how the touch would feel and it didn't matter.

Event he light touch made him shudder and gasp. "Teagan!" It earned him a dark, amused chuckle almost against his ear that made him shiver with all the hidden desires in the sound.

"You like that?" Teagan whispered and grew more bold, drunk on the sounds and reactions he was provoking from a man he knew to be conservative with even a smile.

"Oh...yes..." Daniel moaned in reply and nuzzled against the side of Teagan's face. "Oh! Oh...saints have mercy..." The hands so gently tracing the curve of his back and bottom, the tops of his thighs, grew demanding. The touch grew stronger, deeper, pulling on his flesh in hungry grasps. It made Daniel start to think the plan should be for Teagan to take him, now, with no further delay. He whimpered at the very idea and wondered what had gotten into him. It had been a long time since he'd wanted another man to take him.

Plans shattered when a hand, soft and yielding, slipped forward and molded to his hardness. The touch had more of a feel of exploration than blind, wild desire and Teagan touched him like a man starved from the need of touch. It exploded all thoughts, all reason, all sense of right and wrong. Nothing mattered in Daniel's world outside of the slender body he was holding and the hand carefully learning the feel of his hidden desire.

Daniel's arms tightened around him so suddenly and all the whispered words and quiet moans stopped when Teagan pushed farther and touched Daniel as Daniel had touched him. The stronger man froze so suddenly, so totally that Teagan grew a touch fearful. Maybe he'd crossed some unspoken line, broken some unknown rule? The man he'd encountered before hadn't wanted to be touched in return, maybe that was the way things were done and his innocence had offended.

When Daniel didn't stop him, he pressed more boldly into the other's flesh. It felt good and odd to feel a length so similar yet so different from his own. It made him feel alive and powerful to make Daniel whimper in needy demand. The sudden silence worried him and he paused his touch just long enough to ask. "Is this okay?"

It was the hint of insecurity, the careful tone of uncertainty that broke into Daniel's fog of desire. He shivered and pulled away a little to claim another deep, wanting kiss. It would have been better to simply tell Teagan it was okay, to reassure him with words but Daniel had never been much of a man for using words when actions were available to him. He covered the tentative hand with his own and pressed it tighter, more fully to his arousal.

It was the tone to the question that sunk in. There was no way Teagan could take him, the man was completely unprepared for that experience. More so, Daniel still struggled with the sudden and surprising need to be taken again and wanted time to resolve the desire. It made more sense to think that it was just how long he'd been lusting silently for the slender, sharp tongued man and that once some of the pent up need had been burned off the desire to bottom would fade with it.

But that touch, stroking him boldly now over the cloth of his pants, drove him to insanity. Daniel blindly tried to unbutton Teagan's waistcoat, to undress the man a little bit to ease the aching need to touch his bared skin a little, but the buttons were stubborn and his fingers clumsy. With a whimpered moan he gave up and roughly pulled the well made shirt up from its tidy tuck in the man's pants. It bunched up enough with the waistcoat over it that he could have full access to the slender lower back, the sharp ribs, the smooth stomach and he didn't wait for permission before plunging his hands under the fabric and exploring skin.

Teagan was a man comfortable with his own mortality. He'd lived with the reality of his condition since he was a child and he'd never once flinched or shied away from the knowledge that he wouldn't live to be an old man, live to raise a family or see grandchildren playing. He'd often felt bitter about his limitation but never over his eventual fate, after all, everyone was going to die, he just knew his time was sooner than later.

It wasn't until work roughened, strong hands nearly tore the fabric of his shirt in their desperation to pull it upward and not until those same hands stole inside to rest bare against his skin that Teagan knew he'd been missing something vitally important. He learned more in that burning, trembling moment than he had in years. Suddenly he knew, the curve of his navel was an erotic place full of tingling nerves, that his breath would catch and shudder as fingertips glided over his ribs and that everything in life was pale and pointless outside of the vibrancy of this man, this moment and this touch.

He shuddered and arched backwards, caught unawares by the intensity of what he'd once viewed as merely a simple touch. Teagan's head cracked into the wood door, thumping lightly but he didn't feel it, his vision was already marked with stars from the hands on his waist, the fingers teasing the flesh under the waistband of his pants. He was breathless, lightheaded and for once welcomed every feeling of faint abandon.

Until the hands slipped away, pulling out from under the fabric of his shirt, leaving only the ghost of their touch behind. Teagan whimpered in protest and even the return of that touch to his chest, outside the fabric, didn't stall his whine for more. A hand trailed up to cradle the back of his head, padding it from the harsh unyielding wood and the other caught the fabric of his pants and pulled him away, into the room and from where he was propped, trapped.

He fell into Daniel's arms, limp, weak, blindly desperate. The hand on his pants dropped lower, boldly down with no fear or pause to cup the roundness of his ass. It was a place no one had ever touched on him as an adult and Teagan jerked a little in startled surprise. The hand wasn't simply exploring, hungry for touch and surprised at the reactions it earned as his had been, this hand knew what it was doing and it cupped him and kneaded him skillfully. It set off shock waves

of surprising pleasure and like the curve of his belly button left him consumed by the physical delights being touched gave him.

“Oh!” He arched backwards again, trying to both keep his hips pressed into Daniel’s leg and force his ass tighter into that skillful hand. The hand on his head cradled him gently, supported and held him and the mouth he’d been kissing lowered to nip his chin and tease the front of his exposed neck. “Oh...no wonder you like that! Oh God! More... please....Daniel... don’t stop....”

Something sharp and hard hit the back of Teagan’s legs and he reached down reflexively. His hand rested on the edge of Daniel’s table and he glanced backward a little, the rough made surface was littered with bits of equipment and what looked like a disassembled rifle. Daniel kept advancing and he found himself half sitting on the table’s surface, slowly being bowed backwards over it. He would have worried about being lain down on so many sharp and uneven objects but his knees were slid apart and he suddenly found Daniel standing between them. That felt right, amazingly, perfectly right and he found himself grasping the strong hips in front of him and pulling them tight to his own body.

Daniel growled when Teagan yanked him closer, his cock still unhappily trapped inside its fabric prison, rubbed happily into the bottom side of Teagan’s own desire. Just a little more tilt to those slender hips and Daniel would be rubbing lower, back close to that untouched entrance that he ached, burned to breach. Desperate, he leaned forward, and reached behind the other man. With a wide swipe of his arm he cleared the table, bits of work, hours of careful lying out and planning, scattered in chiming noise to the floor to bounce away and be lost.

Daniel didn’t care. Nothing mattered any longer but Teagan’s arms tossed so freely about his neck, struggling to pull him closer still. The man may not have known what he was doing, what he wanted, but the desperate need to make them closer drove him and Daniel shivered as he lowered Teagan down, kissing him all the way. His hips were pressed into Teagan’s lower now, teasingly lower and the man arched down like some beautifully falling leaf on a soft breeze, graceful and bowed.

Dark, deep green eyes opened and locked onto him and Daniel forgot to breath. He’d had a hundred dirty thoughts of what Teagan would look like below him and none of them, not one, matched the beauty of the reality. He had to pause, lost in those eyes and he knew that this was the final moment to stop and run. The awareness that one more touch, one more kiss, would sweep away whatever last stronghold of protections he had around his heart was bitter and bright. If he let himself fall into those teasing, cynical, dark green eyes, he knew he’d never come back out.

A question flickered across Teagan’s face at the pause and it was chased by quickly hidden fear of rejection. Daniel saw it and knew he was already drowned in those eyes, that he was already lost. A small smile tugged at his lips, a tiny grin but a real, happy one. He saw the moment the smallest of smiles was noticed by Teagan, felt the other’s held breath rush out in relief and was warmed by the wide, unhidden smile that was returned. Legs wrapped around Daniel’s own, a hand lifted to caress the side of his face and both pulled him downward to claim another kiss and press his body to the slender man below him.

Urgent hands pushed the fabric of Teagan’s shirt upwards again, baring his stomach to the night air this time. He arched his back to allow the fabric to glide up as high as it could and considered undressing. Which would have been a great idea had he been able to remember how to work buttons, all knowledge and thought disappeared when Daniel pressed a kiss to his naked skin.

If being touched had felt good, this felt a hundred times better. Hot breath puffed in little clouds across his skin. Soft lips contrasted with calloused hands and found spots that tickled in an erotic not a giggly way and Teagan gasped. His entire body writhed, his feet scrambled for purchase along the table and found now and he lost himself. He wanted to strip naked but didn’t know how, he wanted that teasing, tender mouth to cover every inch of his skin, he wanted more and didn’t



know what to ask for.

Hands that hadn't once been shy or uncertain, fumbled lightly with the front of Teagan's pants. It took a moment for Daniel's actions to sink in but when Teagan understood the man was trying to open his pants he arched from the table's surface again. "Oh...God... yes....please....Daniel....please....don't stop!"

Fabric parted and hot flesh tumbled free out into the cooler air and clear light of the room. Teagan was laid down, exposed and naked to the eyes of another man for the first time and it made it difficult to breathe. He knew he was blushing and the urge to cover himself struck him. Only a hand caught his wrist and prevented him from hiding his arousal from view. Teagan glanced down to where Daniel's eyes were shifting over his body, across the splayed length of his legs, up to the exposed tops of his thighs, lingering on the swollen begging length and up higher to the paler skin of his stomach to settle on his face. Daniel looked stricken, awed. He looked like a man that had seen something breath taking and it confused Teagan.

"You're so perfect." Daniel finally gasped around panted breaths. "The things I want to do..." And the words and thought made his voice tremble.

For the first time Teagan felt confused and lost and uneasy. Daniel looked at him with the knowledge he didn't have and it made him feel like some well made pie at a Sunday Social that was about to be devoured. For the first time it sunk in how little he knew and how much of a disappointment his lack of skills could be to someone like Daniel who knew what to expect.

"I...Daniel..." His words were cut off by fingers being pressed to his lips and a quick shake to Daniel's head. A rakish grin broke Daniel's hungry look and it made Teagan shiver in lust and it made him feel secure and safe again.

Hazel eyes never wavered, never glanced away and a touch not his own found his length. It made him writhe and call out wordlessly. His hips snapped up into that tormenting hand and no matter how much he tried he couldn't keep his eyes open. All that was left for him was to lay there, on Daniel's table, lightheaded, breathless, moaning and beg with his body for release.

Until the hand stopped and the sudden cold emptiness shocked his eyes open. "Please!" Teagan begged. "Oh...God....please...please...I need to...please Daniel!"

The moaned pleas made Daniel shiver and moan as well but he shook his head and caught one ankle. Carefully he placed the booted foot on the table's edge. When he reached for the other leg, Teagan had the foot already halfway in place. The new position made him feel more vulnerable, more open and for a second he wanted to snap his knees shut but Daniel was stroking the inside of his thighs and it made his legs feel languid. Inch by inch they fell apart until his knees were almost on the table his legs were opened so wide.

When he opened his eyes, gasping for breath, stunned and hungry, he caught Daniel watching him again. Teagan really looked at the display he made and doubted that whores were so blatant and immodest. His legs were pried apart, his pants barely open but his cock jutted out like a proud flagpole. It was reddened, swollen and pulsed slightly with the rapid beat of his heart. The tip glistened dew from his desire and knowing Daniel was watching him, laid out like that, made his manhood tremble and another bead well up to the tip.

"Daniel..." He whispered and moved to touch himself. The idea of stroking himself to release while Daniel watched him made him shiver with desire.

A hand caught his again and he whined at being denied. Daniel just shook his head. He reached behind him and caught the back of one of the room's simple chairs and pulled it over to sit on. It lowered him down and placed his head below Teagan's knees. While he watched, Daniel lifted one of Teagan's legs up a little, supporting all of its weight. He nuzzled at the inside of his knee

and that set off new shivers of delight. Before he could wonder what was going on, Daniel nuzzled higher and the feel of kisses being pressed to his still clothed thigh made Teagan's breath hiccup and his body ache.

Higher still Daniel went with his teasing touches and Teagan's body was floating in such a haze that it wasn't until lips touched the bare skin next to his arousal that it sunk in how high Daniel had explored. His eyes popped open and he sat up onto his elbows. "What're you...oh...oh God...oh!" He fell back down onto the table when a hot, wet tongue lapped at the head of his cock. Drawn by the need to see the source of a pleasure unlike anything he'd even dreamed of, he rolled his head and opened his eyes and glanced down just in time to see the tip of his length disappear into Daniel's mouth. "OH God...you...you can't...you...I...OH Daniel....please!"

It trapped him between wanting to thrust upward and bury all of his length in that hot, velvet wet mouth and the shock of something he'd never even knew was possible and the nagging sense that it wasn't right or fair or proper. Now wasn't the time for him to debate morality with himself or face his own sexual taboos, not when every bob of Daniel's head drew in another fraction of an inch and doubled, tripled the pleasure he was lost in. All he could think about, the only concern other than his fear of coming too soon and ending the best experience of his life, was that there was no pleasure in this for Daniel.

A fear that Daniel's whimpering moans soon proved false. The feel of the desperate, hungry sound trembled along his flesh and nerves and Teagan had to grip the table to keep still. When he glanced down again, shuddering at seeing most of his length disappearing into Daniel's mouth, he was shocked at the look of pleasure in the other's eyes. Seeing that Daniel was enjoying himself mixed gave him no room left to hide in.

"Daniel...I can't... if you...oh have mercy...if you don't stop....I can't hold....oh...." He couldn't come like this, not while Daniel had him inside his mouth. He couldn't, it wouldn't be right. Only what warning he tried to offer went unheeded, more so, Daniel swallowed more of him and Teagan felt the hypersensitive tip of his length being caressed by the back of the stronger man's throat. He whined and shivered and Daniel only sucked on him harder.

Until he reached a threshold when slipping into release or not was beyond his control and no warning could be issued. Teagan tossed his head to the side and found himself biting on his own knuckles to hold in the screams of pleasure he wanted to give voice to. He was shuddering, shivering, his body trembled and his hips arched and still Daniel devoured him. His release coiled in his belly, made his legs tremble in the moments before. It crunched up tightly and exploded inside of him. Once he fell over that edge, he fell hard.

Knuckles in his mouth or not, he screamed, loudly groaning a wordless moan that begged for more and begged for it to end. His heart shuddered too fast in his chest, painfully so and his lungs couldn't pull in enough air. He crested on a wave of pleasure better than anything he'd ever felt, not by himself, not with the whore his father sent him to, not even that quick stroking in an alley with some nameless man, nothing compared or even hinted to what he was feeling. His vision grew spotty and darkened but he clung to awareness to feel every sensation, to allow his ears to catch everyone of Daniel's moans, to feel his release being swallowed by the hungry mouth that still consumed him.

When it finally began to fade and Teagan knew he wasn't going to faint or even die, he lay on the table like some obscene meal, limp, spent, and breathless. Daniel continued to lick and suckle him until his release had faded and only then did the man free the softening length from his mouth but he didn't retreat. Instead, he rested his head where Teagan's leg joined his hip, his breath puffing softly on his wet and flaccid sex and moaned.

He felt it then, the motion that he'd been expecting, the touch of a man upon himself. Teagan knew the rocking strokes too well, it was his only comfort normally and he struggled to find his voice and protest. He wanted Daniel to wait until he'd caught his breath and he wanted to try his

turn at what had just been done to him. It excited him to even think about, and he tried to picture Daniel writhing and moaning in the pleasure he'd just felt. For as odd and wrong as Daniel kissing him in such an intimate place had seemed, he now shivered to consider returning such a kiss.

Only, before he could find the breath to speak, Daniel's eyes squinted shut tighter and he gasped. His body arched and trembled and the hidden thrusts of his release rocked the table with their shuddering need.

"Oh...oh my....oh..." Daniel sighed in shuddering breaths and trembled where he was pillowed against Teagan's body.

Teagan's feet slid from the edge of the table and his legs enfolded Daniel. His head dropped back down to the wood surface and he lay there, panting and exhausted and wondered what the hell to do next.

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Chapter Twelve

"I'm sorry." Daniel muttered against the hip he was resting on. He meant it, really, he did but he also didn't.

The words seemed so absurd to Teagan that he started to chuckle. It was low and deep in his stomach but quickly bubbled up into real laughter. The laughing amusement was seriously threatening to become hysterics and he folded his hands over his stomach and tried to swallow the giggles but it just felt too good to laugh.

"Teagan?" Daniel sat up and wondered if the other man had lost his mind.

"Oh!" Teagan tried to explain but the serious worried look on Daniel's face just made him laugh harder. "Oh your face! You... you... look like...like... you think...I'm... ma...mad!"

He was pretty sure he wasn't being laughed at but it was starting to feel like maybe the joke was him. "What's so funny?"

"You!" Teagan chuckled out and tossed an arm over his eyes, struggling to breath and calm down.

That made Daniel frown and he roughly cleaned up with his handkerchief and got his clothing pulled mostly back into place. Teagan didn't seem in any rush to close his pants, which just made his spate of laughter seem all the more odd. "I don't like being laughed at."

The utter lack of amusement made Teagan's laughter break into unexpected snorts and he clapped a hand over his mouth and felt tears welling into his eyes. Suddenly the laughter felt brittle and he knew he was teetering on the knife's edge of weeping. He forced himself to sit up, on Daniel's table and that idea made him twist off into new-amused chuckles even as he struggled not to. Tears slipped from his eyes, burning hotly in twin streaks down his face but he was too busy reaching for Daniel to wipe them away.

He had to pull Daniel closer and when he did the lips he found were tense and unyielding. Teagan wanted a kiss, a real kiss, and he fisted his hand into the loose tumbles of hair and nibbled on the unhappy lips. He felt Daniel struggling to stay angry but hands slid around his waist and pulled him closer to the edge of the table. Teagan could be single minded and stubborn until he got what he wanted and he didn't stop until Daniel parted his lips and really kissed him.

The kiss had an odd taste, slightly salty, slightly bitter but it wasn't unpleasant. When it sunk into his mind that he was tasting his own release lingering in Daniel's mouth his entire body shivered. He drove the kiss deeper and it earned him another of those odd, dark whimpers Daniel made softly. The hands on his waist tightened, pulled, and finally lifted him. They guided him off the table to sit across Daniel's lap, a place that felt surprisingly perfect to Teagan.

When he broke the kiss he buried his face tight into Daniel's neck and tried to squash the manic emotions twisting through him. He tightened his arms around those comfortably strong shoulders and pulled the still, uncertain man into as tight of a hug as he could manage. There was a pause, a lingering moment of uncertainty, before Daniel's arms slid around his back and pulled him equally close.

When the laughter seemed truly gone and the tears no longer threatened, Teagan sighed. "Only you would apologize for giving me the best experience of my life." He whispered. "Don't be sorry, please, never, ever be sorry." The hands on his back rose up to cradle the back of his head but seemed unwilling to release him.

"You weren't laughing at me." Daniel confirmed in more of a statement than a question.

Teagan shook his head. "No, just your silliness. And, well, this is the best I've ever felt. Ever. I..." he struggled after words and emotions he wasn't sure he should give voice to. "Thank you."

The simple words dripped with hidden unspoken fears, isolation now breached, loneliness now eased, and it made Daniel's chest feel tight. He had expected questions, ramblings maybe, about how good what they'd done had felt. He hadn't expected the odd spate of emotions or the trembling need to hold him closer. He'd half expected Teagan to hurry home in embarrassed shock but from how tight the slender arms were around him, it didn't seem like the man wanted to go anywhere anytime soon. As he struggled to understand what the simple thank you really meant, Teagan sighed and dropped his head down to rest on one of his shoulders.

It didn't matter if he understood, he didn't have to understand the layers of meaning Teagan seemed to put into every word he uttered to understand the other man's actions. Daniel closed his eyes and drank in the feeling of holding such a man in his arms. He let his hands pet across the tangled and still tied back hair, across the tense back that trembled slightly at the simple touch. Like some high strung, proud, spirited horse, one expensive and rare but too wild to be tamed to a saddle, Teagan was wound too tightly, was proud and strong and beautiful and he'd enfolded himself into the circle of his arms. He didn't necessarily have to understand, he just had to hold on.

Teagan had to be the one to clear his throat and pull away. As with everything, Daniel seemed to have endless patience and he was pretty certain he could have sat there all night and the younger man wouldn't have moved. He petted the unruly hair back and for once, Daniel didn't try

to hide his eyes from him. Which was nice and in them Teagan saw worry and nervousness but also pleasant contentment. It made him smile softly.

“So, you’re the man with the experience, what do we do now?” Teagan whispered and it sounded sultry, sexy and he really, honestly hadn’t meant it in a sexual way. Not that he regretted the innuendo because he liked the way Daniel’s eyes widened a little at the idea. “I don’t mean it like that.” He grinned. “Well, a little, but not primarily.”

Under the laughter and grins Daniel saw real worry. He set his mouth into a stubborn line. “Now, you go home.” That made Teagan pout a little, not a frown but a real pout and it softened some of Daniel’s resolve. “I didn’t intend this...I...” He had to glance away from those too clever eyes. “Go home, sleep, think about...well...”

“How good it felt to feel you over me?” Teagan heard himself whisper and the hands on his back clenched tighter as Daniel’s breath caught in his throat. “I already know what I think.”

“Then go so I can think!” Daniel snapped. “A man can’t tell if it’s light or dark with you in his lap!”

For all the harshness in the tone, the words made Teagan smile brighter. “I think that’s the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.” His smile grew wider when Daniel scowled. “If I go, will you get some stupid idea about never repeating what just happened? Or that I can’t try the same to you? Or anything else equally moronic?”

“Ah...” He blinked, startled, convinced he hadn’t heard properly. “You want to try... ah...”

He kept his mouth shut for a change and just nodded. The shocked and slightly lusty look that crossed Daniel’s face made him grin again but it was quickly split by a wide yawn. “Oh, tired, you wore me out. I’ll go but you had better not get any foolish ideas until tomorrow.”

“Make sure you remember your hat and coat this time.” Daniel recovered.

Teagan had the decency to at least blush. “I wouldn’t know what you mean.”

But Daniel felt a smile tug at his lips, he had noticed that for all of Teagan’s threats to leave before things got a touch out of hand, he hadn’t moved once to pick up his coat and hat. He quirked an eyebrow and decided not to mention it again. “I should see you home safe.”

“No, I’m okay.” He yawned again and leaned in to press another quick kiss to Daniel’s mouth. It felt good to be able to do that. “I’m a good rider.” For some reason saying that made Daniel’s face flush a little but rather than ask, Teagan stood up and tried to straighten his clothing.

Before he could reach the door, arms slid around his waist and Daniel tucked his face along the tangled half tussled mess of his hair. It was a surprisingly gentle move, unexpected but welcome. It made him feel warm and said more than Daniel’s words could. So much that it startled Teagan who had assumed that their encounters would be passionate but not emotional beyond the working friendship they currently shared.

When the arms loosened, Teagan turned, caught the sides of Daniel’s face between his hands and stole one last kiss. The moan Daniel let slip free almost made him steal a second and a third and maybe suggest that he didn’t really have to ride all the long, lonely way back to his own house tonight. Almost as if Daniel had sensed the thought, he pulled away, face empty but eyes brimming with emotion.

“You should go.”

Teagan nodded and stepped back. He gathered up his hat and plopped it down in his head without concern for how tangled his hair had become and shrugged into his coat. Looking at

Daniel made him feel a little flushed, a little proud, a little lusty and he knew if he didn't go he wouldn't. "Alright then."

The cooler night air felt good against his skin but the ride home felt too long and empty. He tried not to think too much about what had just happened but when his thoughts started to stumble over it he found himself grinning like a fool. In his mind he worked out counters to every argument he thought Daniel might come up with for not repeating what they'd done. He wanted to be armed and ready to hold the advancements they'd already achieved firmly in place before Daniel could try to talk them out of it tomorrow.

He was so wrapped up in his thoughts and the easy ride home that he turned into the lane that lead back to his house without ever noticing that Daniel had followed him home. The silent man had stayed a safe distance back but hadn't been able to rest until he knew that Teagan had made it home safely. It was only when the turn onto the lane had been made that Daniel reined his horse in and rode silently back to his own cottage.

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Chapter Thirteen

The morning came both too soon and not soon enough. Teagan had slept soundly and well, exhausted from the day's works and the nights pleasures, but he woke at a ridiculously early hour. He rose, washed up and shaved. It surprised him how healthy he looked, how rested and he found himself whistling softly as he moved about his morning chores. They were finished far too soon and he found himself fussing over breakfast. He wanted to make something Daniel would eat as well, something tasty but that wouldn't seem like he was trying to hard.

The truth was, he wanted to keep busy. When he stopped moving his thoughts wandered to the night before and he saw again the teasing flirtation and the wonderful results of his stubbornness. That would make him grin and the tingles of arousal would tease his skin. He refused to meet Daniel with a hard on, he simply wasn't going to act like some desperate fool. If he was going to manage that, he'd have to keep from thinking about just how good it had been.

Luckily, there was no change in Daniel's routine and he was neither early nor late arriving. Teagan however, had been standing, watching out the kitchen window, like some mindless fool. His nerves made him suddenly uncertain and awkward. It didn't matter how good it had felt, the reality that Daniel had taken his manhood into his mouth and pleased him seemed dirty in the light of day. Nothing in his background had taught Teagan what to say to someone after such an encounter.

"Good morning, I made sweet rolls, with honey, and by the way, it was wonderful that you pleased me last night." He mocked himself under his breath, trying out the bald truth and

finding it scandalous and sexy to say. "I'm an idiot."

All thoughts of scolding himself disappeared when Daniel rode into view. The man sat the horse easily, his hat providing slight shade from the morning sun. His nose was still sunburned, he held the reins loosely and his eyes never stopped moving, as alert as ever. Nothing outward had changed but the sight of him did more than steal Teagan's breath, it made his knees feel a little weak and his cock a little hard. He knew now what those hands felt like on his body. He knew just how strong those shoulders were and his body wanted more.

Daniel was still Daniel. He rode toward the barn and easily slid from the saddle. He spared only one look to where Teagan stood on the porch, his eyes squinted shut a little by the sun, and gave a small nod. There were morning chores to be done and he wouldn't come to the porch until he knew everything had been tended and properly finished. It was a single-minded trait that, at the moment with his nerves so tightly strung, made Teagan want to scream.

Eventually, Daniel turned his steps toward the house. Teagan had made tea and wondered if they were better off drinking something stronger. He fussed at getting the sweet rolls out onto the plate and the honey drizzled across the top to keep from standing and watching Daniel wash up and approach the porch.

"I guess you won't come inside." He tossed out when the boot steps stopped on the porch. When he glanced over to the door he caught Daniel watching him before the hazel eyes darted away. "Here."

Daniel took the mug of cooling tea that was thrust at him and quickly moved from the door way. He found what he had started to consider to be his spot on the porch and sat down. It left his feet dangle over the edge to kick at the dirt and grass below. The lawn would need to be cut soon, either grazed by the horses or he'd have to take the scythe to it before it grew to much higher. He balanced the logistics of both choices to keep his thoughts in line until the small clink of a plate being placed beside him and Teagan lowering himself down to sit close by shattered them.

Hazel eyes glanced from the plate up to meet his eyes. "Sweet rolls...with honey..." Teagan explained, feeling awkward again.

"Thanks." Daniel nodded but he didn't touch the rolls.

"Did you...did you get a chance to think?"

"Not enough, I fell asleep."

That made Teagan nervously laugh a little. "I was pretty tired too."

"Mr. Walsh..."

"You called me Teagan last night."

"That was last night, it wouldn't be right."

"Hang what's right!" Teagan snapped and heard the sharp edge to his voice. He took a slow breath and tried again. "I like how you say my name."

"If anyone heard, they'd wonder."

He nodded in agreement. "Yes, they would but about not for long. They'd see a sick man that has little in the way of friends and his man that he's indulged with informalities, not...well...not..."

"The truth?" Daniel raised his eyebrows and risked a glance over. Teagan had put his back to one of the support posts and sat with one leg off the porch and one knee bent, foot on the porch. It gave him a casually arrogant look and one that made Daniel itch to mess up.

"They'd never see the truth." He agreed but without the slight mocking tone Daniel had used. "No one ever will."

"Someone always does."

"No one will think a thing of it. In fact, my uncle will most likely praise you for getting me to stop being such a stubborn fool. Besides, there's just us here, please, just call me Teagan."

Daniel kicked at the grass below his feet. "Fine."

That was a small victory and it settled his nerves a little bit. If Daniel was going to be stubborn and try to run away again, he wouldn't have been so willing to give in on the name. "Good, now have a sweet roll."

With a sigh he gave in and lifted one of the breakfast breads from the plate, the honey thick on his fingers. It gave him something to fuss with instead of sitting there trying to pretend interest in his tea or the grass. He tried again. "Teagan..."

The sound of his name made him grin. "Yes?"

"We shouldn't have done what we did."

That wasn't unexpected. "You said you wouldn't try to convince me that it was wrong or say we couldn't continue."

"I..." Daniel pulled a section of the roll off and popped it into his mouth. He chewed slowly to buy himself some time. When he swallowed the bite, nothing had changed and honesty still felt like the right answer. "I don't think I can deny you."

The words, spoken so softly, made Teagan sit up a little straighter. A breath he hadn't known he was holding eased out in a shaky sigh. "Good." He declared and took up his own sweet roll now that he was certain the conversation wasn't going to go too badly.

"No, not good." Daniel shook his head. "Not good at all."

"Seems good to me, last night was....amazing."

He couldn't deny that but this went deeper than pleasure. "There's too much between us."

"Daniel?"

"It's too risky. It's never easy for men like us, under the best of situations but you...you're..." He shook his head. "It's too risky."

Teagan sniffed a little in stubborn pride. "I'm what? Too sick? Too weak? Too ill to risk a physical relationship with? I know I'm not well but I'm not on my death bed quite yet." But he thought about how his heart had fluttered and his lungs strained while lost in such delights and knew that Daniel was right, there was risk involved. "And if there is risk involved, it's my choice to take it or not!"

Teagan's illness had been the most distant thing from his mind so it took a moment of confused uncertainty for the other man's words to really make sense. When they did, Daniel shook his head. "That wasn't how I meant it."



“Oh.” All of his bristled pride dropped away.

“You’re a man of wealth and landed and importance and I’m, well, I’m not.” Daniel wasn’t quite up to saying what he was or wasn’t.

“And what’s that have to do with anything that may or may not occur between us in private?”

“There are other men, with our tastes, of your social place, men better suited to you.”

Teagan shook his head. “My social place? The men of my social place are boring, spoiled, useless fools. I’ve no patience for them in society and I’d have less for them if they were in my bed. I care not at all for land or money or social rank, I know what kind of man I want.” The words pattered out like fast falling raindrops, chasing each other to the dusty earth below but he couldn’t stop them.

Daniel placed the half of the sweet roll he hadn’t picked apart down and quickly sucked the sticky honey residue from his fingers. He needed time to think, time to figure out what to say and if he should say it. Teagan was so much more volatile and unpredictable in person that he never really felt fully prepared to discuss anything with him.

“You can say what you will about the two of us being from different backgrounds but it matters not at all to me.” Teagan added, his voice softer.

“I was young, still a boy...” It wasn’t a time he spoke of but he needed to if he was going to make Teagan understand. “Tall for my age, the county levy had to be filled for the army, we owed rent, taxes, I was sent to fill it so my mother and sisters wouldn’t be tossed off our land.”

“Daniel...” But he stopped whatever he was going to say when Daniel held up a hand and asked for silence.

“It was months at sea. I’d never been from home before. A lot of the men, so long from women, turned to each other for comfort. New recruits to the regiment were introduced to the things men did together sooner or later. Some veterans were more forceful, unkind.”

“Oh, Daniel...”

He shook his head when Teagan gained the wrong meaning behind his words. “No, I... I made friends. Older men that were kind, they were good men, good soldiers. There were five in their group, friends at arms. They didn’t have to take me under their care but they did. I wouldn’t have survived the war if they hadn’t taught me so much.” He rubbed at the back of his neck and couldn’t look at Teagan. “They were good men. They found my...inclinations for enjoying the company of men amusing. They used to tease about how they’d ruin me for a woman but I don’t think it works like that. I think I was just born this way, just like they were born to be more fond of women when they could spend time with them.

“I was lucky. They were good to me. I always knew what was happening. I never was afraid or worried. I was lucky, it was always good, they were like my family. Everyone should have something like that, I...I take this seriously...I don’t know...” He sighed and glanced over to see Teagan sitting, looking thoughtful and handsome and for once silent. “I desire you, a great deal, but...”

“No, no buts...” Teagan shook his head. “What can you say to change my mind or what I desire?”

“I...I’m not just your uncle’s woodsman.”

That made Teagan grin. “I had figured that out.”

"I've killed people, hurt them. I'm good at it."

"Did you honestly think I wouldn't ask my uncle after you? Or that any of this is new to me?" The grin softened. "It doesn't matter to me."

"I'm not..." Daniel shook his head and tore off another bite from his abandoned sweet roll to buy himself some time. When he'd managed to finish as slowly as he could he tried again. "I can't do things halfway."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not clever. I'm not good with words. I'm not smart."

Teagan snorted a little at that, Daniel had proven himself all of those things just in different ways.

"I can't do things by halves. I see them out, all or nothing, holding nothing back." It was why he was such a good worker and so good in a fight. "It's not in me to be otherwise."

"Okay."

"I want you."

"I want you too, I don't know why this has to be such a fuss. We both desire the other, why can't we just let it be. I just don't..." the words stopped when Daniel again raised a hand asking for silence.

"There's more to this than just physical pleasure, more than desire. I'm not a man to change desires, to change loyalties, easily. If we do this, I can't keep anything back. I... I can't...and you're so..."

It all sunk in and snapped into place. All the stammered words of being from different worlds and finding someone better, all the forcefully confessed words of other men in his past that dripped with devotion even now, all the uncertainty and fear. It all made sense. "You're warning me that you're afraid you'll be hurt by this." Daniel didn't answer but when he glanced up the emotions in his eyes screamed for him. "I won't ever hurt you if I can prevent it but I don't know what I'm doing here. I've never, I haven't even done more than flirt in passing with a woman. I can't promise I won't do something stupid or moronic or hurtful from sheer ignorance but I can promise I will never intentionally hurt you. You're my friend," he shrugged a little, trying not to let the words be too bitter. "The only friend I really have."

It was a foolish point to worry over anyway. Before he'd allowed anything as intense as last night to occur, Daniel had been haunted by thoughts and dreams of the other man. Now that he'd seen how responsive he was, how hungry Teagan seemed for more, there was no way he'd have enough willpower to refuse. So if he wanted to spare his heart, because he knew himself well enough to know that he was tumbling headlong into caring too much for the proud man, he'd have to put real, physical distance between them. That would mean giving up the quiet, contented life he'd found here, out in the countryside, alone in his woods and he'd just started to really feel like this place was home to him. There was no way he could leave, which meant there was no way he could refuse Teagan, which meant that his silent pleas to be handled gently were foolish.

"I just..." he paused and swallowed his uncertainty and placed himself into Teagan's hands. "I just don't do things halfway."

"I understand." He sat, silent and waiting while finishing his sweet roll. Daniel seemed content to stare off at the grass below his feet and the silence grated on Teagan's nerves. "So, what now?"

Because, I'd really like to kiss you."

That snapped Daniel's head up and he looked to see if he was being teased. He wasn't sure if he was more or less pleased to not be able to tell. "You can't joke like that. If anyone even suspects..."

"Who said I was joking?" He smiled wider. "And there's no one to see."

"There could be."

Teagan sighed. "I know, I'm just, it was just nice." Really nice to be touched and held and he wanted more.

Daniel nodded slowly and kicked at the grass below his feet. "There's more to what men can do but you may find it disagreeable."

"Do you find it disagreeable?"

That drew a small smile to Daniel's lips. "No."

"Then I doubt I will either. About last night, what you did, is that okay to do to you?" Teagan had to glance away from how acutely uncomfortable Daniel looked. "Because, well, I want you to feel that good too. And... well... I want to try. You seemed to find it enjoyable?" He tried to sound logical but he felt his face blushing slightly at remembering being splayed out on Daniel's table, exposed and pleased.

"I did...I do... I..." He felt strangled by his own shyness. "This was easier inside my head." He muttered and kicked a rock from where it was nestled in the grass.

"So you'll let me try?" Which both excited him and made him nervous.

The idea made Daniel want to moan and drag Teagan into the house away from prying eyes. "Yes." He whispered. "If you'd like, you can try anything."

"I can touch you, and kiss you?"

Daniel wasn't sure now if he was going to get aroused or die of embarrassment. "Yes." He wiped his oddly sweaty palms along the tops of his thighs.

Teagan sighed and felt warm and good. His eyes lowered half way to mere slits as he thought about the next time he could be alone with Daniel. "I want to feel your skin on mine, is it okay to get further undressed next time or isn't that right to do?"

"Teagan..." He had to glance over to check and see if he was being teased or not. Teagan sat looking rather cat like with contented lusty eyes and the sincerity of his words burrowed under Daniel's skin and tickled his desire. "It isn't right or not, with men, it's just safe or hurtful. If you'd like it and it's safe, I'd like it too."

The idea made Teagan happy and he closed his eyes to think about it. "All I know is kiss and touch, is there more?"

Daniel swallowed a moan, embarrassed and turned on and caught between both. "Yes." He whispered.

"Hmmm, do I have to wait to find out? Or will you tell me?" Without thinking about it, he sucked the lingering sticky feel of honey from his fingers.

Daniel watched transfixed, wondering if he should leave or crawl under a rock because it was too early to think what he was thinking. "Ah, you know how it is with women? Your...um....goes into her....ahh...." He watched the lazy way Teagan sat, how his fingers slid into his mouth in an unconscious tease and it grew difficult to think. "Men can...men can...do....something similar..." The fingers swirled around the parted lips as his stammered words slowly sunk in.

When understanding dawned Teagan was too startled by the idea to imagine it was real. "You don't mean...but doesn't that hurt?"

"You won't ever have to...I don't expect it..." Daniel didn't see revulsion in the dark green eyes just curiosity.

"Does it feel good?"

It was asked with such innocent need to know but Daniel still blushed red and glanced away. "If done right, for both, yes but..." he stuttered off.

"And you'd want to put yourself in me?" The words sounded odd but they fit with all the half heard bawdy jokes and mocking innuendo he'd ever overheard about two men together.

"Oh bloody hell..." He was hard now at the thought alone and Teagan's simple asking.

"That's a yes?" Teagan narrowed his eyes and was amused to see that even the idea alone was enough to arouse Daniel.

"Yes but it's okay not to or... or...you could be in me." He heard himself whispering. "I'd like that...and... it would..."he swallowed hard and tried to keep thinking. "It would let you see..." That was it. He was going to have to excuse himself and crawl away to some dark corner somewhere for some alone time.

"Daniel..."

Teagan's voice speaking his name was a dark touch and it made him shiver. "Yes?"

"Come inside the house with me, please."

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Chapter Fourteen

"Teagan..." He heard himself whisper and didn't know what he was going to say next. Going inside was a horrible idea, there was no way he'd be able to keep any control behind closed doors. At the same time, it seemed the best suggestion he'd ever heard and he nearly jumped to

his feet and dragged the other man inside with him.

"You look like someone's cracked you over the back of the head with a board." Most of the embarrassed color had drained away from Daniel's face and now he just looked stunned and hungry. "Come inside with me."

"We shouldn't."

Teagan shrugged a shoulder. "Why shouldn't we?"

"The fence..." Daniel glanced over his shoulder almost as if he needed to see the half repaired fence to make sure it was real and waiting to be worked on.

"Isn't going anywhere. Come inside with me."

"I..."

"I want to kiss you, I'm going to kiss you. It can be out here on the porch where anyone might happen to see or inside behind a closed door." Just to test things, Teagan dragged a finger into the slick honey left on the plate. It pooled up under his fingertip and dripped from his skin. Slowly, he raised the finger up and popped it suggestively into his mouth. It made Daniel's breath freeze and Teagan felt like a cat that had cornered a mouse. The honey thoroughly sucked off his digit, he removed it slowly and grinned evilly at Daniel. "Come inside with me."

Teagan didn't wait for an answer. As Daniel struggled to remember how to think, the lean man stood with graceful ease and walked into the kitchen. It was a chance to escape, Daniel could be half way home or out working the fence before Teagan really knew he wasn't going to be followed. The trouble was, he wanted to follow. He doubted when he'd been asked by the esteemed Robin Roberts to give Teagan a hand that it had been meant in such a way.

He was on his feet before he could think too long about what he was supposed to be doing, and not doing. He was at the door before he could remember his place and position and how bad it was to mix work and pleasure. For a man that was ill and weakened, Teagan was all stubborn will and Daniel felt trapped by it. If Teagan wanted to kiss him, well, he found himself sapped of the strength to refuse.

He'd barely cleared the door when it was slammed shut and his arms were suddenly filled with Teagan. The slender man was writhing and his body pressed violently into Daniel's. He tilted his head and parted his lips and let himself be kissed. He gave in to the rough, desperate demands, shocked again at how quickly Teagan was learning to kiss.

"Natural talent..." He sighed, Teagan's lips teasing his neck, his hands pulling at his clothing.

"Hmm?" Teagan hummed against the shivering flesh.

"Just...oh...you're getting good at this..." He flinched when sharp teeth nipped him.

"Getting good?" Teagan asked in a high manner, trying to sound offended when all he wanted to do was beg to be shown how to return the pleasure he'd felt last night. Or, maybe, beg to have a repeat of that pleasure. "Are you saying I need more practice?"

"Teagan..." He tried to think of the logical reasons why sex was less favorable than getting his work finished and found none. "We can't..."

"Of course we can..." Teagan countered and hands slid around his waist, pulling him closer.

"No...what you want... oh....no time..." It wasn't that he was opposed to a quick tumble, far from

it, but Teagan needed to be introduced to this carefully, slowly. Even if the other man didn't know that he needed to go slowly, it was Daniel's responsibility as the better informed to make sure they did.

"I know." Teagan sighed and pulled back enough to look into the clouded hazel eyes. "Just, I adore touching you." He leaned forward again and nibbled on eager lips. "Kissing you."

"Teagan..."

He grinned wickedly. "I adore how you say my name when you're like this." And to make clear what this was, he pressed his hand firmly into Daniel's groin. It made the stronger man buck forward and shiver. "Open your pants, I want to see you."

"Oh, mercy... only...only if..." he licked his lips and swallowed hard to gain the will to pull Teagan away, stopping the man from interrupting him with teasing kisses. "Only if you set loose your hair."

He remembered how those hands had struggled to free the tie and failed previously. A fact that hadn't really sunk in until later, when Teagan had to comb the knots out and only then did he wish he'd untied it and let Daniel see it unbound. It was such a simple request to gain what he wanted that he pulled the cord from the nape of his neck without pause and shook out the dark length.

Hands instantly came up to the sides of his face and work roughened fingers traced backward into his hair. It wasn't something he ever considered erotic before but something he knew he'd always consider erotic from that moment forward. Every petting stroke of Daniel's hands in his hair was a little more demanding, a little more needy and made him a little bit harder. He started to wonder what it would be like to have it pulled, to have the hands touching him so gently fist roughly in the strands and hold his head still. A small part of his mind that was still able to think made note to ask Daniel, later, if that was normal and if he'd try it.

"Like silk." Daniel whispered, transfixed at the feel of the dark threads that coiled about his fingers and made him feel ensnared. He could have stroked that length for hours and been content if Teagan hadn't narrowed his eyes and stuck his chin out in his stubborn way.

"Your turn."

The dark green eyes looked like they were set for a fight, expecting Daniel to stall or protest and that made him feel wicked. If Teagan expected him to be body shy or embarrassed being naked, he'd be seriously wrong. The request was for him to open his pants and it was understandable. It would be a bold step for Teagan to undress him, when he'd never done such before, but Daniel wanted to do a bit better for his sheltered lover.

He used his hands on Teagan's shoulders to push the man back a few steps, just out of arms reach so he could clearly watch. A confused look crossed Teagan's face and he ignored it, moving instead to pull a boot off. When the second boot tugged free and was dropped by the first some understanding was starting to dawn.

"You don't mean to..." but the words dried up as Daniel boldly met his eyes and began to unbutton his waistcoat. He stumbled backwards and ended up having to sit down in one of his chairs. Daniel was stripping naked in his kitchen and he prayed that if this was some vivid dream he wouldn't wake up until after the good parts.

The waistcoat was pulled from shoulders and dropped next to the boots. Strong hands quickly loosened the collar of his shirt and with quick, confident tugs pulled it free from where it had been tucked in his pants. A few more tugs and he had it up and over his head, leaving him bare from the waist up as Teagan's eyes burned into his skin.

He didn't try to strip off his pants in a sexy manner but the wide green eyes and obvious desire lurking in them made him feel sensual. There was an almost childlike wonder under the very grown up lust that swirled around Teagan's face and it was pretty clear that the other man was hiding nothing. Which was a rare treat given how closed off, snippy and caustic Teagan could be. It just made him feel like being nude, like showing off a little bit and he slipped his pants and under britches down with a teasing display of casualness.

A display quickly ended with the cloth being kicked aside to join the pile of discarded fabric. Daniel stood there, his back nearly against the door, fully nude and watched the flicker of emotions cross Teagan's face. Lust, desire, awe, hunger, wonder, uncertainty, abandon, restraint, need, all warred for dominance and left the man so normally good with words, speechless.

The silence made Daniel smile softly. "You've never seen another man undressed before?" It was a question but he could tell by how the other's eyes were desperately devouring the sight of him what the answer would be.

Teagan managed to shake his head but that didn't make any sense. "No, not... well... not when it was okay to look....I....it is okay right?"

The question deepened Daniel's smile and he nodded. It amused him that something that should have been instantly understood had confused the clever man.

Now that he knew it was okay, really okay, Teagan looked. He felt starved for the sight of Daniel's skin and hadn't understood the pangs of hunger until they'd been satisfied. The skin hidden from the sunlight was paler than the tan on his arms and face but not pale, not anything close to pale and Teagan let his eyes drift over skin. Daniel's shoulders were as strong as he'd known they'd be, the man's arms, shoulders, and chest were pared down to lean strength from a lifetime of hard work. When he moved, Teagan saw muscle gliding under skin and the sight fascinated him. Daniel's stomach was flat and lean and there was only a small spattering of auburn brown chest hair that tapered to a tiny thin line that led lower where his eyes weren't quite bold enough to wander. Peachy nipples were flat coins on the strong chest, hard and tight and Teagan struggled with the desire to touch them, feel the texture of the flesh and across the lean chest.

Once he felt braced and able to stand it, he allowed his eyes to wander lower. Daniel's hips were narrow and lean and made a fine line with this chest and shoulders. It was visually pleasing in balance, like some fine sculpted statue but Teagan admitted that his interest was far more base and primal and not at all artistic. His eyes followed the lean line of hip down and over, transfixed by the proud, hard flesh that stood out in arousal for him. Daniel wasn't massive nor tiny, too thick or thin but a pleasing length and a solid width that made Teagan want to touch him. The swollen flesh looked heavy and hot and he wanted to feel the velvet skin sliding over iron. The tip was dewy with desire, trembling, begging to be touched, obviously held in check by Daniel's will.

It took Teagan a few moments to catch his breath and adjust to the sight he'd only barely dreamed of. Daniel stood bold and unashamed, naked as the day he was born, painfully aroused and just let Teagan stare. It was a sight that filled a thirst in his soul but stole his thoughts and mind away. When he was certain he could stand without falling, he rose to his feet and stalked over to where Daniel stood, waiting to accept whatever was offered.

He was fairly certain now that being as naked as Daniel, skin bared to skin with nothing between them, was going to be one of the best sensations in the world but he learned as he fell into Daniel's arms that the feel of cloth catching between them was pretty high on the list too. It made him feel in control and powerful to tease them both with that small fabric denial, knowing how easy it would be to remove it. His body rubbed lightly along Daniel's, making the other man

moan a little and tremble but still he stood waiting, arms loosely enfolded around Teagan's waist.

Which felt like a challenge to Teagan, unspoken, un-issued but still a challenge. He rubbed harder against the trapped body and claimed a kiss. There was no teasing there, lips parted, and Daniel yielded his mouth to Teagan's torment. Boldly, Teagan reached forward and touched bare skin of his hand to the bare skin of Daniel's manhood. The world disappeared to a narrow focus of that simple feel. So hot, so heavy, so like his own cock when aroused and aching and yet so totally different. He delighted in the touch, in the shuddering gasping breaths it forced from Daniel. Teagan touched the other length as he liked to touch his own, soft and light mixed with hard and rough, teasing in location, speed and pressure, trying to keep nerves overwhelmed and the pleasure strong. Only now, the slick moisture on his hand wasn't from his own desire and the stuttering moans gave warning to another's release.

He was doing this. He was. Suddenly Teagan didn't feel like the sick weakling he knew he was, seeing Daniel with his eyes rolled shut, biting his lip to keep from begging, lost in pleasure he was granting, Teagan felt like a god. He knew he held more than just mere flesh in his hand. He knew that Daniel had stripped himself naked of more than just clothing, exposing history and scars to his eyes, and the sense of delighted, heady, bliss it gave him went beyond words.

Teagan nipped at the bared shoulders, licked across exposed collarbones. He wanted to touch and taste and tease all of that exposed skin. One of his hands slid uncertainly across the bare skin of Daniel's ass, just the lightest of touches but it made the strong body shudder and Daniel's hips snapped forward harder into his stroking touch. It was those unconscious, unhidden, responses that made Teagan know that just touching Daniel, pleasuring him, would be enough to carry him away on his own release. He wanted to see Daniel lost in pleasure he'd caused before he found his own and he kissed back across a shoulder and wondered how much skin he dared kiss. Until a sound caught his ear and he glanced over the shoulder and out a window.

"Shit!"

The hissed curse broke across Daniel's world of pleasure and delight. There was real alarm in Teagan's voice and he went from languid to alert in that single heartbeat. His arms came up and wrapped around Teagan's shoulders in an instant and unconscious effort to shelter the man from the unknown threat. "What?"

Teagan pulled away enough to see the alert protectiveness in the hazel eyes. "Uncle Robin is here."

Daniel's blood turned to ice. "What!" He turned to glance out the window and the direction Teagan was looking in. Sure enough, Robin Roberts, his employer, a man with enough influence and authority to see to it Daniel disappeared with no questions asked, was almost within reach of the barn. He'd be at the house door in a moment and Daniel was standing naked holding his nephew. "Shit!"

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## Chapter Fifteen

Teagan glanced around the room, wide-eyed and unsure but Daniel was already moving to root around his pile of discarded clothing. "You can't stay here."

"I figured that out." Daniel grumbled and finally found his pants.

"Shit, there's no time." Teagan bent down and gathered up Daniel's clothing, boots, pants and all and hurried to the back of the house.

"What are you doing?" With his clothing being stolen, Daniel had no choice but to follow into the front sitting room. By the time he'd caught up Teagan had the latch open on the window and was pushing it open.

"We have to get you out of here!" Teagan tossed the pile of clothing out the window. "He won't knock, he'll just come in."

Daniel wasn't sure if he should curse or laugh at the absurdity of his clothing being tossed out the window. There was a point to be made, if Mr. Roberts came looking for him, he couldn't be lurking in a back room of the house. He shook his head and moved to climb out the window, still bare ass naked and half aroused.

As soon as his body was securely out the window, Daniel paused and pulled Teagan forward for a quick, very quick, kiss. "Do something to hide that." He dropped his eyes to the still noticeable bulge in Teagan's pants.

"Shit!"

That was it, he was going to laugh, instead he dropped himself down the last few feet to the grass below, gathered up his clothing and darted across to take cover behind the chicken house. He wasn't even halfway there before the glass pulled shut and clicked close.

Seeing Daniel gathering up his clothing, chuckling to himself and scurrying across the yard nude almost made Teagan forget the urgency of the situation. He shook his mind away from its lustful thoughts and quickly pulled the window shut. His uncle worried about drafts and the last thing he needed was the man going over to shut the window and seeing a half dressed Daniel outside. He moved quickly and got himself dropped into a chair and a blanket pulled over his hips and legs. As the door opened, he was picking up a book and opening it to a random page, praying he didn't look as startled as he felt.

"Teagan, lad?" Robin called out as he came inside.

"In here, Uncle!"

"Eh? There you are my boy, did you know you've biscuits on the porch?"

He'd forgotten about them, sitting out there. "Yes, I made some and thought Daniel would like to share them. I guess he's finished."

"Drawing ants, I'll bring them in before I go." Robin narrowed his eyes. "Are you feverish lad?"

"What?" He was, he was burning up but not from fever. "No, I feel fine."

"You look flushed." He moved over and pressed the back of his hand to Teagan's forehead.

"I'm fine." He snipped and pulled his head away.

"Well, you don't feel feverish. Hmm maybe the company last night was good for you? You look almost hale and healthy m'boy."

The company had been good for him, but he didn't think his uncle meant it in the same way Teagan did. He closed the book and set it on his lap. "What brings you by today, Uncle?"

"Oh, one of the ladies left a handkerchief here, since I wanted to come by and have a word with Daniel, I told them I'd fetch it."

"Should be around the table, we stayed there. I didn't see anything while tidying up." It didn't surprise him; he'd been willing to walk out without his coat and hat to have an excuse to return to see Daniel. "Want me to look?"

"No, no, stay put, I'll find it." But before his uncle could turn to go hunt the escaped cloth he paused and tilted his head a little to the side. "Maybe you just look like you've more color because your hair is down. Don't think I've ever seen you have it free."

Teagan had completely forgotten that Daniel had demanded it freed and he'd been in too much a panic to tie it back. "Oh." He sat blank eyed for a moment, a lie not readily available and the truth too much to speak. "Well, I couldn't find the tie this morning and was too lazy to hunt up another. Didn't think it would matter any, since I was staying in. I was going to work on those pamphlets about absentee landlords that you wanted."

"Good, good, no one turns a phrase to raise the blood as nicely as you do lad." His uncle nodded but still stood for a moment with an odd, thoughtful look to his eyes before he nodded. "Well, let me get this silly thing and be out of your way."

When his uncle was out of the sitting room, Teagan pulled off the blanket, did a quick check to make sure he'd not embarrass himself with any unexpected protuberance in his pants and followed his uncle back into the kitchen. The heavy set man was on one knee, groaning a little to stretch under the table and fetch the lost cloth.

"Found it?"

"Yes, unless you've developed a more foppish taste in things." With another groan he emerged from the table and fluttered the lace edged cloth in the air. "Eh, well lookie, there's your tie."

Right dead smack in the middle of the kitchen floor and almost impossible to miss was the discarded cord. Teagan hurried over and snatched it up before his uncle could bend and retrieve it.

"Well, I must have been tired this morning to miss that." He teased and grinned. With quick movements he gathered his hair back and wrapped the cord around it to hold it in place. "There, better, do I still look almost hale and healthy?"

Robin snorted a little. "Better than you have of late. See how much easier things are with an extra hand around the place? The rest is doing you good."

"I help out as much as I can."

"Well, it does my old soul good to see you with some company. That girl, Maureen, she seems quite taken with you. Wouldn't do you any harm to have a woman's touch about the place."

"Uncle..."

“And she’s a smart sort of girl too, she knows the situation and still seems quite taken, quite taken indeed.” He was nodding, plotting out the advantages of Teagan wedding. Lizzie had seemed quite set on it before Maureen arrived. Oddly, when he’d asked his wife that morning about how their little set up had gone, she’d seemed cold to the idea of finding Teagan a wife.

“And what? Make a widow of her in a few years? Worse, leave her with a few sickly children to burden her with? I’m happy as a bachelor, Uncle.”

Robin reached over and patted a slender shoulder. “Well, if Lizzie has her way, you’ll be married off.”

“I doubt that’s going to happen.”

“Perhaps not, the two of you are stubborn like mules when you set your minds to something.” He grinned at the idea of his wife and nephew. It had always left him a little curious why the two of them hadn’t wed. He knew Teagan was fond of Lizzie, they’d been friends as children and his wife considered him dear to her heart. It wasn’t something he worried about, the two acted more like siblings than romantic lovers. “If you insist on remaining a bachelor, lad, you should take advantages of being such. Maybe I’ll talk to Daniel about his escorting you into the city more. See to it you’re safely shown around the clubs and theaters and other...diversions.”

His first thought was to refuse as he’d always done. The idea of being dragged from popular restaurant to the theater to a brothel by his uncle held no appeal. Luckily, before he refused out of habit, it sunk in that Daniel was being suggested as his escort. That was entirely a different story and one he suddenly didn’t find as unappealing.

“I have been feeling better, stronger, of late. Maybe a change of scenery would be welcome.”

“Good, lad, good, you think about it. I could rest my mind safely if you’d take Daniel along. Doubt there’s a skull cracking thug around he couldn’t keep you safe from but it’ll have to wait a bit. I need to borrow him for a while.” Robin was nodding and already plotting out which hotel to make reservations in for Teagan. “Good, well, it’s good to see you taking care of yourself, Teagan, right good. Let me find that boy and get out your way.” He moved to the door and paused. “Oh, yes, Lizzie has asked you to come up and see her in a few days, something about some crop of mushrooms they’ve found and dried.”

As always, he found himself promising the visit but he didn’t really hear the words. His thoughts were stuck on the idea that Daniel was going away again, to do whatever it was he did for his uncle and refused to directly talk about. A gnawing worry settled into his stomach that left him feeling sick as he saw his uncle out the door with muttered directions to look for Daniel in the barn or out with the fence he’d been repairing. He was glad to shut the door and find himself alone because he found himself frightened and needed the solitude to get control of himself.

He hovered inside the house and peeked out windows like some sort of reverse thief, spying on where his uncle stood near his horse, talking to Daniel. There was no outward sign that just a short time ago the other man had been stark nude and whimpering under his touch. His clothing was neatly in place and his face as empty and expressionless as always. Teagan watched as Daniel gently stroked the neck of his uncle’s horse, idle and without thought while he listened to whatever was being discussed. He watched as Daniel nodded, eyes serious, in agreement to what he was being told and he knew that Daniel was going away again.

That felt cruelly unfair. There was no real way of knowing how much time he had, how long his life would be, every day was important. He’d just found this pleasure, this thrilling spark of life and the raw delight of feeling, not just another man’s but Daniel’s arms around him. A couple of weeks could be a lifetime. He could fall ill again, be too sick to recover for months or, as the doctors promised would one day happen, not recover at all. Odds were good that he’d be fine but there were no promises and he wanted to be selfish and keep Daniel to himself, if just for a time,

if just to sate some of the lonely hungry a bit.

From his spot, peering out the window, he watched as words were finished, hands shook and his uncle heaved himself back into the saddle. Daniel stood for a moment, alone, watching the older man ride away before he dropped his eyes and his shoulders sagged. In that moment when he thought he was unwatched and alone, Daniel let the weight of his responsibilities settle on him and it made Teagan ache a little to see such a strong man appear so bowed. Daniel didn't stay that way for long, he drew a breath, his shoulders squared and he turned toward the house.

Which made Teagan scramble to get across the room and seated at the table. That seemed silly since Daniel wouldn't just come in like his uncle did. He didn't need to be pretending otherwise, he was nervous and that was okay. Still, knowing that Daniel was coming toward the house, when the knock came on the door Teagan about jumped from his skin. He moved quickly and pulled the door open but Daniel seemed unwilling to come inside.

"He wants you to go away again for a while." Teagan said so the other man didn't have to.

Daniel just stood in the door.

"Do you know how long you'll be away?"

Still, Daniel stood silent, his eyes tormented and wide.

"Would it be terribly selfish of me to say I don't want you to go? That a few weeks seems like forever." That sounded needy and clingy.

Daniel glanced down at the words, his hands that hung loosely at his sides balled up into fists.

"Not that I'd tell you what to do. I'm just a touch spoiled, used to getting my own way but I doubt I can explain to my uncle why I want to keep you close at hand. Not without blushing and stammering like a guilty child anyway. It's just..." He sighed and glanced away, over Daniel's shoulder to the empty yard beyond. "I just...well... I miss you when you're not here." He was starting to sound like a lovesick girl. "Sundays feel like a week, out here all alone and I know that sounds selfish and bad and all but..." Whatever he was going to say was cut off by Daniel surging forward. The words got garbled around the kiss Daniel stole and strong arms forced him back into the kitchen.

A hand tugged at the tie he'd so recently replaced into his hair and another wrapped tightly around his waist, pulling his hips tight into Daniel's body. He was surprised to find the silent man almost as hard as he had been, as if he hadn't almost been caught naked a moment before and been forced to hop out the window, as if they'd never stepped away from each other. He melted into that claiming kiss and the steady hands, he let Daniel push him further into the house and as soon as they'd cleared the door one of Daniel's booted feet kicked back, caught the door with a heel and pushed it shut behind them.

The tie slipped free and Daniel moaned softly around the kiss, black silk fell around their faces tickling and teasing and it let his hand slid up over the back of Teagan's skull. Teagan would have moaned if he wasn't so busy gasping for breath in between demanding kisses, shivering at the way Daniel nipped and teased his lips. It surprised him how a kiss could make his entire body tremble and each one shared, stolen and returned made him hungry for another. The teasing lips slipped to his chin, his neck and Teagan shivered in the strong grip that held him steady.

"Oh, God, Daniel..." He moaned.

The lips didn't stop but the hands slid forward, tugging and pulling at buttons. It took Teagan's mind a second to understand but soon his fingers were helping of their own accord, sliding buttons through holes. When the last one gave way, Daniel's hands slipped up the cotton of his

shirt and stripped the waistcoat from his shoulders. They didn't stop there, as soon as the fabric hit the floor, Daniel was pulling the shirt from its neat tuck in Teagan's waistband.

The hands were forceful, nearly tearing cloth in their rush to bare his skin. It made Teagan shiver and grow even harder. It made him want to struggle just a little to see if Daniel would actually rip the clothing from his chest. He didn't because he was afraid if he protested, Daniel would freeze up and not strip his shirt away. In that moment he needed to be bared to hands and sight, needed to dissolve and stop thinking. If he didn't think about it, maybe, just maybe, Daniel wouldn't ever stop.

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Kiss after kiss claimed his mouth, teasing, demanding, drawing out muffled moans to be consumed like a rare treat. Those hungry, demanding hands pulled harder on fabric and soon stole under the cloth. Calloused and work roughened fingers lightly brushed against the skin of Teagan's waist, across his belly, up to the edges of his ribs and his knees buckled. It was too much, it felt too good, too perfect. He melted into Daniel's steady arms and hung there, limp, weakened, overwhelmed as those gentle hands slipped higher, dragging his shirt up with them.

Without being asked or directed, Teagan slipped his arms free of the fabric of his sleeves. It took only a small bit of twisting and pulling before Daniel had the shirt stripped away from his body as well. It fell, forgotten to the floor around them but the hands and mouth fell still as well.

Teagan opened his eyes, not even sure fully when he'd let them go shut, to see why Daniel had so suddenly stopped. He worried that reason and logic had returned to the stubborn man and he'd made up his mind that what they were doing wasn't proper. There was no way he could stand for them to stop, none, not without some dire consequence occurring and Teagan had no idea what that might be.

Only, when his eyes finally focused, he saw no logic or reason or stubborn refusal in Daniel's face. The stronger man's lips were parted, slightly puffy from so many stolen kisses and the hungry urgency of his need. He was gasping for breath, winded more from a few kisses and teasing touches than working hard to repair field or fence. It was his eyes that Teagan got caught in, those expressive hazel eyes that always betrayed his thoughts. It was when he met Daniel's eyes that he started to blush; embarrassed that anyone would look at him with such raw, open, desperate want.

Those hazel eyes weren't looking at some weakling. They didn't see a man too long ill and walking the razors edge between living and dying. They skimmed over the slightly too slender width to his shoulders, the lack of strength in his arms, the nearly blue tinted paleness from ill health. All those eyes saw was something wanted, desired and appealing. They saw Teagan as

Teagan never saw himself, as something vital and whole, proper and tempting. They looked feral, a touch wild and he shivered knowing that this wasn't in his control, he wasn't being stripped naked by his will, but he was entirely in Daniel's hands.

That moment of examination was Teagan's moment to escape. His own eyes were wide open, he could see the raw desire in Daniel. This was his chance to stop them before they went too far. The only trouble was, he didn't want to stop. He had no real idea where Daniel was taking them but he didn't care either. He knew Daniel wouldn't hurt him, knew it would be okay and above all, Teagan needed whatever contact was offered to the core of his soul. Daniel just stood there, watching, his breath a shallow controlled pant and the more desperate he looked, the more Teagan needed to continue.

When he couldn't stand just being watched, Daniel seemed to be trying to burn the image of him into his memory he stared so intently, Teagan reached forward and began to work the buttons of Daniel's waistcoat free. He was on the second one when Daniel shivered and moaned, his hands moving to help Teagan finish their work. Only as soon as his hands left Teagan's body, all the support he'd been counting on vanished and Teagan sagged.

Daniel grinned and it had a wicked, evil tone to it. He caught Teagan's unsteady body and gently lowered them both down to the smooth wood floor. They made it to their knees before Teagan found his will to steady himself out and his hands again worked on the buttons covering Daniel in fabric. Daniel brushed the hands aside and in quick, rough motions, stripped his waistcoat and shirt away.

"Oh, God, oh holy God." Teagan whispered and lost his balance. He ended up sitting down all the way, hard, with a thump. The sight of Daniel with so much skin exposed shattered his thoughts, broke him down into a shivering creature of want and need. He wanted to touch that skin, trace its contours, learn its feel.

Before he could figure out what to touch first, hands ghosted across his own skin. It never occurred to him until the touch grew more demanding and Teagan felt himself tumbling slowly backwards to lie on the wood floor that Daniel might be as hungry to touch him, for the feel of his skin, as he was to touch Daniel. Hands glided across his shoulders, tracing his collarbones, down over the sides of his ribs. The touch made him gasp and his body arched into the contact, begging for more.

Something hot, wet followed the exploring hands. It took a second for it to sink in that Daniel was kissing his shoulders, a wet tongue followed his collarbones, nibbles and kisses fell onto his ribs. Areas of his body that were nothing, the curve of his shoulder, the round of a rib, the angle of bone under skin, became erotic playgrounds and Teagan struggled to gather enough breath to beg for it to stop for fear he'd climax just from the feel of Daniel's lips on his body.

He'd just managed to gather breath to speak, unsure if he was going to beg for more or to stop, unsure if he even cared anymore about coming like some undersexed, inexperienced boy from such little contact, but a new pleasure stole all his breath. He groaned, and his hands dug into Daniel's hair as a wide, wet tongue lapped at his nipple again.

"OH bloody hell!" Teagan arched under the contact and collapsed down into a shivering gasping puddle when a rough thumb found and rubbed against the ignored nipple. He whimpered and struggled to breathe, prayed without thought or words that he wouldn't faint from the raw pleasure his flesh was being given.

There was a low rumbling sound, like summer thunder off in the distance and it slowly occurred to Teagan that Daniel's moans, so muted and low had turned into a growl of want and need. The sound against his skin made him shiver but when Daniel pulled away, leaving his flesh feeling cold and abandoned, he whimpered in protest and tried to clutch at the retreating body.

"No, don't go..." Teagan whined but Daniel made no move to reach for his cast away clothing.

Instead, the stronger man stumbled like some half blind creature across the kitchen to the shelf where Teagan kept his medical supplies. A strong hand fumbled for the basket, knocking it over in his haste and bandages, needles, thread and canvas bags of dried herbs and medicines fell to scatter about the floor. Daniel hurried after one of the scattered items, a tin of salve and he caught and clutched it into his fist.

Those hazel eyes raked across his body again and Teagan felt himself arching up as if he was meeting an actual touch. He reached out a hand to where Daniel stood, shocked still again by what he saw. "Daniel..." He pleaded, begged with his voice and his body, growing more aroused knowing the sight of him effected the other man so totally.

Another low, whispery growl rumbled in the room and Daniel didn't return. Not right away, instead he pulled at his boots and threw them aside. He ripped so violently at the fabric of his pants he nearly took the buttons off of them in his haste. With rough, urgent hands he stripped himself bare for the second time that morning, only this time he didn't stand meekly by for inspection.

This time he stalked over to where Teagan lay and began to work just as urgently to divest Teagan of his own pants. He had a moment of uncertain embarrassment until Daniel tugged off his boots with the same desperate need he'd removed his own footwear. There was no room in the face of such passion for modesty, Teagan knew that he needed to be as naked, and vulnerably nude, as Daniel had made himself.

As the second boot was pulled off and strong hands slipped socks from his feet, Teagan closed his eyes. It wasn't from shame or a desire to hide, but because with his eyes closed he didn't know where those needy hands would show up next. They surprised him by stealing caresses over his feet, up to his ankles, fingers teasing up the cuffs of his pants to touch his legs and make him shiver. He liked his eyes being shut because it made the feel of Daniel pulling to undo the buttons of his own britches all the more intense and he offered no help with the task. He liked the startling feel of the back of knuckles brushing against his imprisoned arousal unexpectedly. Liked the way the fabric strained under Daniel's need to have him bare, fought with him and how it eventually yielded and parted.

He did help then, lifting his hips as the fabric was pulled from his legs. One leg got caught and Teagan tried to kick it off, nearly smacking a knee into Daniel's face but neither man noticed, slowed or cared. Daniel caught the flailing fabric and pulled it free with a rough yank. He side armed the cloth away, as if he was afraid it would somehow magically reappear back onto Teagan's body if it landed too close by.

It sunk in, all at once, that Teagan was now naked, alone with another man. He hadn't been naked around anyone else in years and never like this, never with a man like this, just the situation alone was the most erotic moment of his life. No amount of thought or fantasy, dream or desire could prepare him for the strength of the reality as Daniel lowered himself down, his own nude body stretched out along Teagan's, his weight held on his arms, and found Teagan's parted and needy lips.

He accepted the kiss with as much need as before, but with less focus. Teagan was moaning, writhing like some cheap whore, all from the feel of so much hot, bare skin pressed to his own exposed body. The slight weight Daniel allowed to rub into Teagan made him feel pinned and so deeply right that he knew there wasn't another place on the planet he'd rather be, another body he'd rather be under. Daniel's length rubbed in slow, teasing thrusts against Teagan's hip, tormenting him with the promise of real contact that was kept, momentarily denied.

But, like before, Daniel seemed as much in need of contact with Teagan as Teagan was of contact with Daniel. Denial was a short lived venture and with a breathy, sighing moan, Daniel moved over. His legs slid between Teagan's and without thought, Teagan parted them wide to

make room. Hips settled into hips, hard manhood found it's partner and both men cried out as the teasing, shallow thrusts glided them together. Teagan tossed his head back, shocked by the suddenly new delight and found his own hips rising to meet Daniel's.

"Perfect..." He heard himself sighing, lightheaded and not caring if he fainted. He traced his hands down Daniel's spine, feeling the way every movement made the strong body shiver and muscles tighten. His hands slipped to the small of Daniel's back and lower, drawing out desperate hungry moans when his hands slipped over the curve to tease the roundness of Daniel's ass with tormenting touch. "Oh, Daniel... oh..."

There was no desperate growl this time, just a starved, dark whimper and Daniel again pulled away. Only this time he didn't retreat across the room but only far enough away to sit, straddling, Teagan's thighs. It caused the crowns of their cocks to bob close together and the sight made Teagan shiver and moan with need, his hips twitched upward and managed to rub himself against Daniel, tip finding and teasing tip in a pin point of contact.

The lid of the tin of salve Daniel had snatched from across the room rolled away like a cartwheel over the floorboards to spin to a stop under the table. Confused, Teagan glanced up, panting for breath, and watched as Daniel swiped out a generous amount of the slick ointment. It was sheer inexperience that had him confused, Daniel had tried to tell him just what it was that men did together and he'd understood intellectually but that was a far cry from the scattered moment he was lost in.

It wasn't until the slick fingers disappeared around behind Daniel's back, not until the stronger man's face twisted a little with a hint of pleasure, torment and an edge of uneasy pain, that it sunk in what Daniel had in mind. Teagan knew he was blushing, knowing that those slick fingers were moving in and out of Daniel's own body. He knew his eyes were wide like the ignorant virgin he was, shocked and so aroused his cock was weeping beads of lust. Daniel whimpered as he forced his body to adapt faster and Teagan shivered in stunned want of the man above him.

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Too soon, or perhaps no soon enough, Daniel moaned and slid forward. Now he straddled Teagan's hips and Teagan could feel the small shivers that shuddered in the strong legs on either side of his body. Part of his mind knew what was going to happen but not one single corner could anticipate it, it was too far beyond anything in the scope of his experience and he wavered between consuming lust and tingling uncertain fear. His eyes felt too wide, his breath came in



long hitching breaths and he watched, caught like a spider in a web, as Daniel settled in.

He wanted those hazel eyes to open and meet his own but Teagan knew that it wouldn't happen. Daniel was shy about making eye contact, knowing his eyes gave away his emotions so clearly, and he was hiding now. The desire was fleeting as a slick hand touched Teagan, barely brushing contact over his aching cock before settling into a solid, steady grip.

Then there came the slightest of contacts, a brushing resistance on the tip of his trembling length and the reality of what was about to happen struck him. Daniel lowered himself just the slightest and the brushing contact grew into a tightness, wet and hot and so full of pleasure that Teagan's entire body arched, his eyes rolled shut and he would he pushed himself forward, deeper into that tight passage had Daniel not been firmly holding his hips down. Which meant he was supposed to stay still, and Teagan did try, honestly, deeply tired to but Daniel rose up a little, panting almost as much as Teagan was, before again lowering himself just a tiny bit. It was barely an inch, hardly anything at all, but Teagan's world had shattered down to that tiny bit of the crown of his length that was slowly spearing into Daniel's body.

This time when Daniel lowered himself back onto Teagan's length, gravity and lust pulled him further. Teagan tumbled into a world of pleasure, his body slick with sweat and shivering as he tried to stay still with the head of his cock swallowed whole by a tight heat he'd never even dreamed of. If this was all there was between what men did, it was so fantastically better than anything Teagan's imagination or own private, solitary explorations had hinted at. He was convinced it couldn't get better, it just wasn't possible and he panted, gasping for breath and was quickly proven wrong.

Daniel lifted his body again, his eyes shut tight, his breath short, his lower lip caught between his teeth and Teagan moaned as he felt himself sliding partly out of the small corner of paradise he'd been allowed into. The moan turned into a whimper of dark and painful need as Daniel lowered again, taking more to Teagan's length into his body. He knew now that Daniel had a plan and he shivered knowing that the stronger man wasn't going to stop until all of Teagan was sucked into the tight heat that was setting his body on fire. Again Daniel moved, slow and carefully and again more of Teagan slid into his body. The need to move, to thrust up and force all of his length into the welcoming desire was a torture and Teagan tossed his head and clawed at the wood floor in his efforts to stay still and accept what was being offered to him.

Impossibly, after a forever of the delightful torture, Daniel still and Teagan moaned. He lost his control and his hips tried to snap upwards again, confused and lost now that Daniel had stopped moving, but there was nowhere for them to go. Every inch possible was fitted tightly, deeply, into Daniel's body and all his effort did was cause a small twitch that made Daniel whimper and his body shudder.

"Please....oh.... oh... holy God... please Daniel.... Please...." Teagan heard himself begging and didn't even know what he was begging for. He trusted that Daniel had a plan and knew what to do and he wouldn't deny him just to be cruel. Teagan's hands found Daniel's folded legs and began petting them, stroking them, begging with touch as his voice sang out and begged with words.

His begging stopped because Daniel opened his eyes and for all the pleasure and trembling delight causing his heart to race and his body to shiver, falling into those hazel eyes stunned him. There was as much begging desperation in Daniel's eyes as anything Teagan could give voice to and the hungry lust there made was a promise. It made Teagan moan and writhe, his eyes slipping from their lock with Daniel's down across the man's body. The sweat sheen on his chest, the way his stomach rose and fell as he gulped at air, how his legs and arms trembled with control and desire, it was all a sight Teagan was willing to trade anything to have. His eyes drifted lower, down, to where Daniel's own length bobbed and shivered, angry red now and tight with need, Teagan wanted to touch it and he reached a hand to do just that.

Daniel saw the action and one of his own hands came out and caught Teagan's exploring fingers with his own. That felt almost as nice to Teagan, to have that strong hand holding his own, it felt connected and proper and he grasped it as a touch he could trust and shivered as Daniel's other hand traced across his bare chest, setting forgotten nerve endings to trembling.

It all fell away because Daniel lifted himself, Teagan's length slid with stunning friction nearly out of that welcoming home it had found and just as slowly, he lowered himself back down. His entire body felt like it convulsed the pleasure was so great. He clutched at the hand he was holding and reached to press the other one more firmly to his chest, above where his heart raced out of control.

"Oh... oh...more!" He demanded, ordered, around gasping moans and shivering breaths. He didn't have to ask twice, Daniel started moving slowly, rising up to drop just as teasingly slow back down. The movements made them both groan.

It felt too slow even as Daniel quickened the pace. Teagan had to shut his eyes, his breath a hollow rasp that made the back of his throat and mouth feel dry as he struggled to keep from climaxing. It was too soon, too late, too much to tumble into release and he wanted to hang on and see if Daniel, like some wizard in a story, was able to magically make it better yet again. As the pace increased, Daniel shifted his hips, a move that meant little to Teagan but pulled desperate, dark moans from Daniel's throat. His head tossed back and he rode Teagan's length with a frantic need.

"Oh...God...I can't..." Teagan heard himself whining, not sure he was supposed to come while still inside Daniel, wanting to come that way but uncertain and seeing Daniel shivering, moaning, riding him with such abandon didn't help him maintain control.

The hand Teagan had pressed to his chest lifted and slipped around to catch Teagan's hand. Before he had a chance to wonder or question, Daniel had wrapped that hand around his own aching, neglected length and Teagan didn't need the fingers on the back of his own to curl his grip around it. He let Daniel stoke himself with both their hands, liking the feel of being directed, of being given permission, of being shown how Daniel liked it. More, he liked the reaction, Daniel's mouth hung open now, eyes squinted shut, beyond moans or whimpers, he was lost in the shivering pleasure that Teagan was giving him.

As if the delight that thought had given him had spilled over into Daniel and become one fragment too much ecstasy, Daniel's entire body stuttered. He shivered, moaned low in the back of his throat that sounded more growl than sigh and fell into his own release. Come, sticky and sweet like the honey they'd had with breakfast, spilled out like liquid fire across Teagan's hand, sliding between his fingers to fall in fiery drops onto his stomach and chest. It was a stunning sensation, one that made him shiver and one that he'd otherwise would have wanted to savor, if Daniel's entire body hadn't been trembling, tightening, convulsing as well. The tightness around his cock that he'd managed to adjust a small fragment too suddenly grew tighter, stroking him in waves and shivers that caught Teagan completely off guard.

There was nothing he could fight such pleasure with. Not even the idea that maybe he wasn't supposed to spend himself inside of Daniel's body could stop him. If it wasn't allowed, he'd plead ignorance and virginity and beg, with words and touch, for a second chance to try again and get it right. He shivered, held on as best he could while Daniel's release slowed and finally couldn't stand it. His hold on what fragments of control he had broke, his hands slipped free from Daniel's own weakened grasp and they found the strong, trembling hips above him.

His fingers dug into the shivering flesh and Teagan lost himself. His pulse pounded in his ears, his world ended and he slammed his hips up, hard and rough, into Daniel's body. He'd been meeting Daniel's movements for a while, trying to bury himself back into the stunning pleasure sooner as Daniel had dropped himself back down onto him, but this was different. Teagan was taking Daniel, as deeply as he could as he gasped for breath. Distantly he heard Daniel

whispering soft, lusty little mewing sounds like some sated petted kitten and it just drove him to push hard, deeper, as his body lost all control and the world broke into stained glass beauty. Teagan shuddered, moaned, and came with more pleasure than he'd thought the world could contain. It went on, and on, as he pounded into Daniel's spent body, filling it with his release, feeling it slick the passage more with new heat. That feeling just made him shiver, and he groaned in regret as his body proved weaker than his will and physically reached the end of his mind shattering release.

Teagan whimpered his hands fell from their grip on Daniel's hips to thump against the floor. His heart was pounding painfully but he couldn't feel it, even his toes felt lost in tingling numb pleasure and he panted between parted lips, sucking in air. It was all worth it, if his heart stopped and he died, it would all be worth it. Fingers brushed his hair out of his eyes and soft lips kissed his face and slowly, as the pleasure retreated, Teagan knew he was nowhere near in danger of really dying but the tender touches soothed him.

Gently, Daniel slipped away and Teagan whined at suddenly being parted from the source of so much shocking delight. "Not nice..." He gasped out. "I wanted to stay like that."

A low, dark, chuckle rasped across his skin and more kisses followed as Daniel fell in an exhausted heap beside Teagan and reached to gather the slender man close. Hands brushed Teagan's loose hair back and he rested comfortably against Daniel's chest.

"Oh..." He sighed as he tried to get his breath. "That was... that was so nice." He tried not to yawn but one split across him anyway. "Nice... nice is such an apathetic word...amazing, wonderful...all too weak...need to make up a new word for that... something forceful and pleasant and good and..."

"Shut up." Daniel chuckled and pulled the still quivering body tighter

. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean... I just..." The reality of what he'd just done was cold now that they were laying, naked and spent on the floor. "I wanted to wait... give you time...I..."

There was guilt in the embarrassed voice and Teagan wanted none of that. He pulled away from the arms that had gathered him close and rose up enough to peer down at Daniel. His eyes were open but clouded and oddly, for once, his face didn't seem so expressionless and Teagan was shocked by how young Daniel looked.

"Time is one thing I don't have." He scolded.

The reality of Teagan's health sunk in, he'd been looking relatively healthy before their romp and now, well, even Daniel had to admit he looked unwell. Tired, he decided, Teagan looked tired with dark smudges under his eyes and a sense of fragility about him that clothing and stubborn will disguised. He'd made it a point to not treat or even think of Teagan differently, the way he did veterans in pubs missing limbs or otherwise damaged from battle but Teagan wasn't well and he'd forgotten that fact.

Concern, worry and guilt chased each other across the hazel eyes and Teagan frowned. "Stop that, you just wore me out, I'm fine." He reassured easily, used to from the long practice of a lifetime.

Daniel raised a hand and brushed black silk back. "Teagan..."

He jerked his faced back a little not wanting tenderness out of pity but the instant hurt it brought to Daniel's eyes made him feel badly. He glanced down and saw a thin, pink scar on Daniel's side, the cut he'd stitched shut and he traced it with a few light fingertips. "It scarred." Those fingertips found other scars, old and newer and traced a thick rough one high on the side of Daniel's ribs. "So many scars."

Daniel caught the fingertips and pulled them into his own hand. "I have to go away for a while."

Teagan nodded and glanced away, unable to meet the open honesty of Daniel's eyes.

"Your uncle wants me to leave this afternoon."

"How long will you be gone?"

Daniel shook his head and his thumb stroked the tense hand he held. "Weeks, too long." He tugged lightly and managed to get Teagan to half lay against him again, needing the feel of skin on skin for as long as he could have it. "I just...I couldn't go and risk...maybe...never knowing what it was like to have been your lover."

Teagan was used to his heart hurting, the low sharp beat of over tired exhaustion or the sharp frightening pain that struck him but he wasn't used to words making his heart feel bruised and warmed at the same time. It wasn't unpleasant to feel, in fact it made him feel pretty good. So good that he leaned down and stole a kiss.

He sighed against the responsive lips. "You'd better come home quickly. I already want more."

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Chapter Eighteen

They continued to lay that way, together on the hard floor and nude for a long while and Teagan could have happily drifted to sleep on the breathing, warm body he was pillowed on. Daniel dared to brush the long dark hair back and when it didn't earn a protest, he let his fingers smooth the tangled length. It soothed him, more than he was willing to bet that it soothed Teagan and he didn't want to have to stop.

"Shouldn't sleep here." He finally forced himself to say. When he tried to wiggle free, Teagan's fingers dug into his side, clutching for a moment before they let go. He bit back a groan and wondered at the intelligence of having rough, ill prepared sex right before he'd have to ride across a half dozen counties. Before he could berate himself too much, he glanced back and saw Teagan, stretched out, nude, hair scattered about him and an arm tossed over his eyes and he knew there was no way he could have done anything but what he'd just did. He swallowed the lump in his throat and forced his voice to sound normal. "I'll fetch some water in."

All too soon they were cleaned up and dressed and back to normal, even Teagan's hair was combed out and carefully tied back. There was such a heavy difference between them nude together, touching, and dressed and back in their social rules and places. The weight was so great that Teagan wondered if he'd imagined it all. It did seem dream like and too good, too

wonderful to be real. After all, he wasn't stripped naked, tossed to his floor and pleased delightfully everyday but he was hoping it could become a far more common occurrence.

The thought was so pleasing, he didn't protest when Daniel made him curl up in his father's chair or even when the other man tucked a blanket around his body like some weak invalid. It just felt nice to be cared after, not as if Daniel was pointing out how broken and flawed he was. When Daniel bent down, Teagan lifted his face and parted his lips, as if they'd spent years sharing kisses and it was the most natural thing ever.

"Rest." Daniel whispered after he broke the kiss but when he tried to walk away a hand, slender but as strong as iron, caught his wrist and stopped him.

Teagan felt almost panicked seeing Daniel turn to go. He knew there was a degree of danger to what Daniel did for his uncle but he knew it was silly to be so worried. Daniel was capable, he was strong, he was good at his job but in Teagan's world, people left and they never came back far too often.

He floundered for what to say, not sure what would be proper to say but not wanting them to part with so little. Finally, he settled on the truth, or some of it. "Come back to me."

It wasn't a question and Daniel felt his heart stop for a moment, freeze like winter's ice on a pond before it thudded painfully back to its steady beat. There was more in Teagan's words and more in how he looked than merely someone that wanted more touch, more intimacy and it was greater than anything Daniel had prayed for. There was hope in that stubborn command.

He reached back and let his fingers trail across Teagan's face. A stolen touch that had nothing to do with passion or lust and Teagan leaned into the contact. "Be well for me when I return."

Teagan nodded, caught the hand before it could slip away and pressed the rough fingertips to his lips. He sat, where he was supposed to be resting, and watched Daniel walk away. The weight of the blanket was oddly heavy and made him feel pinned in place, unable to stand and follow. Maybe it wasn't the blanket but who had tucked it around him that caught him in there. He wanted to follow and throw a fit and demand Daniel stay. He wanted to go to his uncle and make the man feel guilty until he promised that Daniel wouldn't ever have to leave his side again.

Instead, he sat in his chair and did nothing. Daniel was a grown man and Teagan was too old to throw a childish fit. He had to let him go, or neither of them would be happy. Even if it killed him right now, he had to trust that Daniel would come back and things would be the same. He had to trust that there was more for him to experience, more for him to learn and that Daniel would come back and show him.

The weight of it all, what they'd done and said and not done and not found words for, broke over Teagan and shattered any hold that kept him sitting in his chair. He tossed the blanket aside and hurried across the room, back to the kitchen and he nearly tripped over a chair leg in his haste to reach the door. Uncertain, tightly wound, he pulled the door open but his feet froze on the threshold.

Daniel already had his horse saddled and as Teagan pulled the door open, Daniel swung up onto the beast's back. He couldn't go out there and fling himself against a stirrup or demand on final parting kiss like some love lost young wife, his pride wouldn't allow that. But he knew, if he moved past that threshold, he'd be doing just that so he froze in place, caught and clutched the doorframe. Even how rapidly his heart pounded in his chest and how short his breath was failed to break how focused he was on watching Daniel ride away.

Only just as the horse and rider reached the edge of the lane, close to where he'd turn and be out of sight of the house, Daniel glanced back. It was just one look and the distance was too great to be sure, but Teagan thought their eyes met and words unspoken suddenly didn't need to

be said. Daniel nodded a little, a small tip of his head before he pulled his hat down lower over his eyes and turned to watch the road ahead of him. With shoulders squared, Daniel rode from sight.

“So I told that fat cow if she didn’t shut her gob, Robin Roberts’ wife or no, I’d shut it for her. Oh you should have seen how shocked she looked and your uncle, he gave me such a talking to but you could see he was really very pleased I shut her up once and for all.” Lizzie laughed and pulled another weed from the garden but when she tossed it aside onto the pile it was pretty clear that Teagan wasn’t as amused. “You’re not even listening to me.”

“Huh?” Teagan answered and he glanced up he found his aunt sitting back, gloved, dirty hands in her lap looking at him funny. “Oh, no I am, truly, I’m just thinking.”

“Hmm. What’s with you lately?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” He avoided her worried look and focused on the growing plant in front of him, checking it for weeds and bugs and half hoping she wouldn’t push the subject further.

“You’ve been up to the house, two, three times a week, had supper with us at least once a week, been to Sunday services three times in what? Six weeks? That’s a record for you since your father died and stopped making you feel guilty about going or not. Now, you don’t even protest even a little when I offer to come by today and help in the garden and worse, you don’t even fuss when I get here. You haven’t been yourself at all lately, are you okay?” She studied him closely but he looked healthy, in fact, he looked healthier than he’d appeared since his father died, excepting the absent, vacant look to his eyes and how distracted he seemed.

“I’m fine, it’s just...” He sighed and gave up trying to fuss with the plant. “The house feels empty again.”

“You got used to Daniel being around.”

He shrugged. “It’s not like he was talkative...”

That made her laugh a little. “No, that fellow isn’t ever going to be accused of being a gossip.”

“He never made me feel ill. I mean, I know I’m ill and I’ve limits but I don’t like having them thrown at me by others.” He paused when she snorted in agreement but he just didn’t feel like challenging her comment. “He just, he didn’t make me feel weak which made it easier to not have to prove anything. I never felt less with him around.”

“Teagan, he’s coming back.” But that only earned her another non-committal shrug. “He is, if something had happened we would have gotten word.”

“He hasn’t sent word, all this time and not a whisper.” It sounded stupid to say that allowed but he’d been nagged by that thought for weeks. It didn’t seem to matter how risky it was to speak it, he wasn’t sure if a friend would be so upset at not getting a letter.

“He’s busy, I’m sure and he’s a man of few words in person, can you imagine him trying to send a letter?” But there was a worry deeper in Teagan’s eyes and she’d seen the same worry in them every time he glanced down the lane and found no horse and rider approaching. She had been fairly certain about the unspoken currents between the two men since the night of playing cards but now there was no room for doubt, Teagan looked like an abandoned lover. She tugged off the gloves and smoothed out her skirts. “I’m just delighted that you two have become such fast friends. When we got word that Daniel would be coming to live out here in the countryside, I didn’t know what kind of man to expect. The whispers of his reputation are fierce but when he arrived, hat in hand, I’d never seen a boy look so alone in my life. It’s such a goodness that you two have found a solid footing.”

"Lizzie, I..." For one crazed moment he almost told her but the words he'd never spoken to anyone other than Daniel refused to come out.

"Maureen was quite taken with you, your Uncle was already planning a wedding I think."

"I'm not getting married." He wanted to snap back but the words came out sounding tired.

"I know. I've had to let poor Maureen down gently. If I'd known, I never would have gotten her hopes up."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Teagan, you know, beyond my children and husband you are most dear to me. We've been friends for years, I know I can trust you with even my most hidden secrets. We've always been more like siblings than friends, at least I've felt that way."

He nodded. "Me also."

"Did your father know?"

The conversation was growing more uncomfortable and he took up the small digging spade to work out the roots of one stubborn weed. "Know what? Really Lizzie, you're making no sense at all."

"Did he know you preferred the company of men to women, is that why he never insisted you wed?"

The words were so casually said for such a hidden, buried truth that she dropped the small tool and stared at her, wide eyed and frightened. "I wouldn't know what you mean." He heard himself whisper in denial but the voice didn't sound like his own.

She weighed the odds of being wrong, figured she wasn't and pushed forward. "Is he being kind to you?"

"What?" The question made him confused and he felt a little faint.

"Daniel. I admit to being a little surprised to see he was that sort as well but really, I had a great-uncle just the same. He married, had six children too and a best friend, William. It wasn't until I saw how little moved he was at my great-aunt passed away and how William's death broke him that I understood. He passed within a few months of William's death, their special friendship was an open secret in the family, apparently."

"I didn't know that." He sat back, falling hard on his tailbone, and still feeling in danger of fainting.

"Well, it's not gossip that comes up in casual conversation, now is it? And you never asked."

He nodded dumbly.

"So, is he being kind to you?"

"Lizzie..."

"Hush, it's okay. I don't think your uncle suspects, I'm not sure he'd wish to know but he's of like mind with me in his wish for your happiness." She smiled softly and wanted to take Teagan into her arms and sooth him the way she did her children. "And you've not said a word, I guessed and it's okay. I mean, I wouldn't go announcing your friendship with Daniel at the next Sunday social."

I wonder how many of them would be more horrified of the relationship or the fact that he's Catholic?" She teased to try to lighten the mood and joke about it and show that, for her, it really was okay. The small joke did little to chase away the worry in Teagan.

"Lizzie, I...no, he didn't know, no one does." It wasn't an admission he told himself it wasn't but it wasn't a denial either. He felt his breath coming in short, tight puffs and felt on the edge of panic now that someone knew. It was panic tinted with relief and sheer terror that he'd lose all he'd had because of one morning of pleasure on his kitchen floor.

She saw it and it broke her heart. Suddenly it occurred to her how heavy the weight of such a secret must be and how long Teagan had shouldered it alone, in silence. Lizzie smiled softer and reached across to take one of Teagan's slender, pale hands into her own, feeling the digits as cold as ice and trying to offer them some of her own warmth. "It's okay."

Two words seemed too small to bring such comfort. He felt the edge of panic back down and he stubbornly pushed the rest of it away. "Thank you."

She ignored the gratitude for something as small as understanding and love. "So? Has he been kind to you?" Lizzie raised her eyebrows in question teasing Teagan about a lover she never thought he'd have. "You two better have done something more than just look longingly at each other or I'll have to arrange for you to be locked in a cellar together."

He felt a blush creeping up his neck and tried to not let it reach his face. Of course, he failed and looked twice as guilty as any confessed words of passion could ever have made him.

The blush made Lizzie laugh and she squeezed the cold hand she was holding. "I see he has been! Good! You're not so grumpy and mean since you've met him."

He wanted to snap about the grumpy comment but having someone to talk to for the first time ever about such things, and having that person be so skilled in the play of hearts and romance, was too good of a chance to let go. "It's just, Lizzie, he's been gone so long..."

In those softly spoken words she heard a lover's worry of rejection and Teagan's habit of assuming he'd always be alone. "He'll come back."

"How can you say that for certain? How can you sound so sure?"

"I've seen how he looks at you. He'll come back."

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For all of Lizzie's confidence, Teagan just wasn't as sure. The days stretched by and he started to gradually get used to the silences around the house. He sat awake at night, with no word and nothing but his own doubts and insecurities for company and as the seventh week came and days slipped past it, even his uncle commented on his distant silences but Teagan just couldn't bring himself to even try to be cheerful.

The expectation of Daniel's return had melted into the quiet, heart aching acceptance that maybe he wasn't. Every sound no longer had him starting to a window, hoping to see a figure he knew well on a horse coming up his lane. He moved about his day in solitude that no longer felt so comfortable or proper as it had before. Only this time, he knew it was okay. After his father's death he wasn't sure how he'd ever adjust to the emptiness of the house but he had and he'd found peace in the silences. If Daniel never returned, he'd find peace again, sooner or later.

And then, just as he had stopped looking, stopped hoping even quietly, a rider came down the lane. Teagan's stood, stunned and convinced he had to be seeing things. His hands began to shake and he wasn't sure just why but they trembled so much he had to set the bucket of water he'd been hauling down or risk sloshing it over his feet. He blinked but the image stayed steady and continued to grow closer. At first he thought it was someone else, one of his uncle's men maybe coming by to check on him and help out but it was late in the afternoon and unlikely and Teagan knew the look of those shoulders even if they were slumped a little forward.

As he stood, uncertain and frozen, Daniel drew closer. The man had changed, nearly two months had thinned him down leaving slight hollows under his cheek bones and leaving him barely on the healthy side of gaunt. He didn't look unwell or ill, just leaned down as if he'd been living too roughly, traveling too much and skipping too many meals. His hair had grown out and was shaggy and the beard on his face was well over a week or more old. It made him look rough and combined with the dirty clothes and road dirty skin, Daniel looked like someone up to no good.

The horse came closer, only a few feet away now and close enough that Teagan knew the sight was real. Close enough that he could see the dark circles under blood shot eyes and the weight of exhaustion the other man carried.

"You're back." He spoke, barely above a whisper and wanted to kick himself for saying something so stupid.

Daniel nodded and the horse protested a little, picking up on its rider's nerves and he had to rein it into a tight circle to settle it down. He patted the horse's neck in a gesture that was easy and natural and soothed them both.

Teagan glanced over his shoulder to the house and back to where Daniel still sat on the horse. "Why don't you come in? I'll have dinner heated up soon, you have to be hungry."

Daniel shook his head. "Can't. Haven't been home yet." His eyes studied Teagan closely. "You look well."

Then it occurred to him that Daniel had come straight there, without stopping to rest or eat and he'd done so because he was as worried about returning to find him ill as Teagan had been about Daniel not returning at all. Instead of the questions about his health bothering him, this time, from this man, it made him feel warm. He nodded and smiled softly. "I am well, better now. Won't you please come in?" The idea that Daniel was back and near but so far still made him feel a touch frantic.

"Can't." Daniel shook his head again and glanced down. "Won't be by tomorrow, need to sleep, but day after, I'll be over."

"Daniel."

The horse danced in a little circle again and Daniel kept easy control. "I'm glad you're well."

The words carried such honest sincerity that they made Teagan shiver and he almost blushed just from the look in the hazel eyes. It made him feel cared about and for a critical few heartbeats shut down his thinking. It was in those heartbeats that Daniel turned his horse and forced exhausted beast and rider to gallop back down the lane.

The gallop didn't last long, his horse could have gone further but Daniel would have fallen from the saddle and then slept on the side of the road like some drunkard. He'd ridden miles out of his way just to make sure Teagan was well and now he had to go miles back to his own home. Miles he wasn't sure he wanted to do with Teagan offering him a chance to come inside and the memory of the feel, the taste, of the other man's skin so sharp in his thoughts.

The truth of it was he wanted to be alone, needed to be alone. He was too tired and too wound up to be sociable. There wasn't any chance Teagan could or would understand why Daniel was so silent and he knew the other man would push for an explanation. He would lose his temper, caught with too little sleep, too little food and not nearly enough whiskey in him and he'd either say something unforgivable or say far too much of the truth. Teagan was a proud man, that pride was one of the things Daniel found so attractive about him, and if he snapped like that there would be no way their growing relationship would survive.

Seeing his small cottage loosened up some of the knots in his shoulders. It really wasn't much but it was more than he'd ever had to call his own. Over the months he'd been there he'd nailed together a couple of birdhouses and hung them from tree limbs and pegged together a decent enough bench that he'd placed under his favorite tree. The black eyed susans he'd bought didn't do well in dry soil and he'd watered them as they'd grown on days when the sun had been warm and the rains hadn't come. To his surprise, they were still alive and more, looked healthy, showing signs of getting ready to pop up blooms. In fact, the whole place looked in relatively good repair, the grass wasn't too long, the house was undisturbed, his plants were thriving and it gave him a easing sense of a safe shelter, some quiet corner that he could rest and heal up in.

The horse's needs came first but as soon as the animal was tended and turned out Daniel uncorked the small bottle of whiskey he'd brought home with him. The liquor burned but it was a comforting burn. He was too tired to think about food, too tired to even consider getting a fire going in the hearth. All he wanted was to get clean and get drunk enough that he could sleep without dark and disturbing dreams. It hadn't been a lie when he told Teagan he'd be sleeping tomorrow, he'd just be sleeping it off.

He dropped his things inside his cottage and dug out his last clean pair of pants, his Sunday best and they'd only stayed clean because he'd left them at home. He only owned three shirts, two everyday and his Sunday. One of the everyday had been ruined and the Sunday shirt and the one he had on needed to be washed, badly. He stripped down with a wince, tossing his boots near the door and gathered up dirty clothes, soap, toweling, razor, whiskey and his knife to walk shirtless and barefoot down the small path to the cold stream. The cold stream would have to do, he was too dirty to heat enough water to really clean up in and too exhausted to care.

There was no rush and he took his time. Scrubbing off road dirt and just plain living rough dirt didn't seem to scrub off the dirt that wasn't physical. He didn't mind the work, he always told himself he didn't. He was trading his time and skills for something he wanted more and if he had to do unpleasant things for a while longer, he would. That was all there was too it, it was the only thing he had any training or skill at and at least he was being paid well now. He only disliked how dirty he felt afterwards, how long it took to feel like himself again. The whiskey helped with that but also shortened his temper and caused trouble. Out in the middle of the countryside, in the woods, alone, it didn't matter if he got drunk and he had earned it.

Clean shaven, slightly drunk, and dressed only in his Sunday pants, Daniel gathered up his freshly washed clothing and things and made the slow walk back to his cottage. He'd have to get his haircut, it was getting long but he was too tired to attempt it now. In fact, he could as Teagan, that would be nice and give him an excuse to be alone with the other man again. That's assuming Teagan wanted to still be alone with him, he'd had weeks to think about what they'd done, or rather what Daniel had done to him, and to change his mind. Desire and reality were often too different things and distance often made those things farther apart than anything else.

He stopped at the head of his small footpath and stood, surprised. A second horse was corralled with his own, Teagan's horse and that wasn't right. Smoke was curling from his chimney so a fire had been lit inside and that wasn't right either. His whiskey fogged mind knew Teagan had to be there but he wasn't sure just why he was there. Even as he spotted the man, gently pouring a bucket of water around the black eyed susans, he still wasn't sure why Teagan was there.

Slowly, the obvious sunk in and sense dawned. Teagan had asked him inside. Teagan who had told him to hurry home because he wanted more had asked him inside. Inside was where naughty, wonderful things happened and Teagan, proud, stubborn Teagan, didn't seem like the kind of lover to take no lightly. He'd had nearly two months of waiting and if he was as antsy to continue their relationship as Daniel was, he'd be more than willing to ride all the way out here.

Which made him both oddly happy and angry. He was exhausted, ready to fall apart and in no one up for even casual company. For Teagan to just assume that he'd be willing any time was insulting, close to the truth, but still, insulting. He'd asked for some time alone, he had things to deal with, memories and actions to lay to rest and he needed that time alone. He couldn't worry about tiptoeing around the other man and he sure as hell wasn't in the mood to be gentle, kind or intimate. He needed to be alone, needed it, badly and Teagan wasn't going to get any physical attention tonight.

He stalked over and saw the moment Teagan noticed his approach. The expressive face went from shyly expectant to worried as he saw the set stubbornness in Daniel's walk and face. It wasn't an issue of being nice, he had to get Teagan home and away as soon as he could, as directly as he could.

"Daniel..."

But he didn't stop or pause to hear what the other man might have to say, not trusting his resolve around that clever mind and quick tongue. He was feeling too violent still, too rough and too drunk. If Teagan started to push, started to tease, Daniel wasn't going to be able to behave. He'd have them naked and slammed into a wall before he knew what he was doing and he wasn't sure he would be gentle or if he'd remember Teagan wasn't ready to be taken yet.

He stomped inside, dropped his things not caring if the newly clean clothes fell on the maybe too dirty floor and scooped up Teagan's coat and hat. His boots thumped when he went back outside and crossed the lawn to where Teagan stood still a little confused and worried.

"Go home." He snapped and pushed the hat and coat at Teagan.

The dark haired man stood with the now empty bucket in his hand and still looked confused. "I'm sorry, I just..."

"Go home, I'm not in the mind for that tonight." He cut Teagan off.

It took a moment for understanding to creep across Teagan's face. When it did Teagan dropped the bucket. His face took on the stubborn, closed off look he'd worn those first weeks whenever Daniel had tried to do anything else around the farm. His eyes narrowed, his chin jutted out in stubborn pride and he looked madder than hell.

Any other man looking like that would have cursed Daniel out at the very least, more likely they'd have thrown a punch and hit him. He doubted Teagan would lower himself to vulgar cursing and violence really wasn't in the other man. Stiff lipped, stubborn, angry pride was and he yanked his coat and hat out of Daniel's hands with such indignant airs that his mood was made just as clear without a tantrum or hitting. Without a word, he turned on his heel and stiffly walked over to the corral, jamming his hat on his head and roughly pulling on his coat as he went.

Yes, he was being rude, Daniel knew it but he was kinder than he could have been and the results were worthwhile. Teagan was going home. He'd make it up to the other man, blame it on exhaustion and drink and find a way to be forgiven without saying the truth of how it was for the best. Teagan was a virgin still and didn't understand that sometimes if he pushed he'd get more than he wanted. He wouldn't understand that Daniel had been rude and short with him, hurting his pride a little now, to save him a larger hurt that might be un-repairable. Daniel knew he wasn't fit company tonight, wouldn't be for a day or two and he soothed his own guilt with those thoughts as he went back inside. It would only serve to sooth him if he didn't have to watch Teagan ride away mad.

Inside he bent to pick up his dropped washing, when he was sure Teagan was gone he'd take them out and hang them to dry. It was then that the smell hit him, not just of wood smoke and a fresh fire. There was something more to it and it made his stomach growl painfully. He walked over around his table and saw the pot hanging over the fire and the stew starting to bubble inside. On his table he found bread, set out on a cloth and a small pottery dish of butter beside it. Beside that was a small stack of clothing, neatly folded and smelling of lavender from having been in storage and it slowly sunk in that Teagan had brought him some of his father's clothing. He'd brought him food and someone had been watering the flowers. Even the inside of the cottage felt aired out and not like it had been closed up for two months.

Teagan hadn't followed him with sex in mind. He'd followed him with food and clean clothes and care in mind. The concern was surprising and something he wasn't expecting and totally unaccustomed to and it had never once crossed his mind that Teagan's motives for being there could be something so kind.

"Damn it." Daniel cursed, angry with himself for being a rude bastard. He shook his head and hurried outside, trying to catch Teagan before he rode away making Daniel chase after him.

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Chapter Twenty

"Damn it." Daniel cursed, angry with himself for being a rude bastard. He shook his head and hurried outside, trying to catch Teagan before he rode away making Daniel chase after him. Across the yard, Teagan had his horse saddled and was cinching the last buckles in place. "Teagan!" Daniel barked out and his foot caught on one of the steps, he stumbled and almost fell

face first into the ground.

Teagan never looked over so it was a good thing that Daniel kept his feet and almost ran across the space between them. "Teagan!" He called again and still was ignored. "Wait!"

The look Teagan shot Daniel would have killed a less man on the spot.

He shook off the painful glare and reached around Teagan. As the slender man started to put his foot in the stirrup, Daniel caught the bridle and urged the animal away. It forced Teagan to put his leg back down and now if he wanted to climb into the saddle and ride away without a word, he'd have to knock Daniel down first. That was something Daniel doubted the other man could do, but he was too tired and drunk to test the limits of his strength.

"Stay." Daniel demanded.

The harsh tone made Teagan raise an eyebrow and he folded his arms across his chest.

"I'm sorry..." Daniel tried to explain but the words caught in his throat and refused to come out. "I'm not... no one..." he sighed. "It's just..." He wanted to explain that no one had cared if he had a hot meal since he was turned out of the army and they only cared so he'd be able to keep fighting. He wanted to explain how sore he felt and how it wasn't in his muscles that he ached. The words refused to come out and he dropped his eyes and let go of the bridle. He had no right to keep Teagan where he didn't want to be.

It was the broken winged baby bird look that stopped Teagan's anger. Daniel could look so young and so wounded when he wasn't trying to look like he felt nothing and there was no way he could stay angry with anyone that looked like that. Added with the stammered apology and the yellow and purple bruises that covered the side of his ribs and the long half healed scrapes on the other side it made for a sorry sight that he didn't want to stay angry with.

That didn't mean he was going to let Daniel off the hook too easily. He kept his arms folded and raised his chin a little. "You stink of whiskey."

Daniel nodded but kept his eyes down. "My dinner."

Teagan snorted in disgust. "Looks like you've had drink for dinner too often of late." He was trying to sound like a critical old shrew but there was an exhausted, hollowed out, emptiness that Daniel hadn't worn when he'd ridden away. "Better stir dinner before it burns."

With a straight back and a proud set to his jaw, Teagan turned and walked on crisp stubborn steps back to the small cottage as if staying were entirely his idea in the first place. It left his horse in Daniel's care, if the man wanted him to stay, he'd have the animal back in the corral. If he really did want him to go, he'd just tie the animal to the post until they could eat.

Inside, the stew was heated through and he swung it out from over the fire before he turned to pick up Daniel's washed laundry. It was well wrung but still too wet and it would dry better hung out in the air. As he stood up, he picked up the whiskey that he been left resting on the floor and considered dumping it away. Daniel didn't need any more of the strong drink when he was already half drunk but before he carried it outside and accidentally dropped it, another thought occurred. Maybe Daniel did need it and maybe it wasn't his place to tell him otherwise. He didn't know what Daniel had been doing for the last couple of months but the man's eyes were distant and haunted and if he needed to get drunk to push some of that away, well, Teagan wouldn't deny him. Before he went outside to hang the laundry, he carefully and very deliberately, placed the bottle near the bread.

Outside, Daniel was sliding the tack from his horse and Teagan hid a smile as he found a low tree branch to spread the wet clothing out on. He finished at about the same time and Daniel had

just walked over and joined him when he had the final shirt spread out and tugged into secure place.

“Thanks.”

“You should run a line.” Daniel didn’t answer and Teagan hadn’t really expected him to but when he stepped back from the tree, the shirtless man followed him just as silently back into the small building.

The sun was getting low and the small cottage had few windows, Daniel moved produce a pair of ceramic bowls and well carved wood spoons while Teagan got the candles lit. They moved easily around each other, used to working side by side and Teagan was glad that their little romp hadn’t changed that. The easy comfort they had was something he valued and would have been upset to find lost.

“I brought you some clothes.” He broke the silence as he scooped out stew into bowls.

Daniel touched the top of the stack. “Your fathers.”

There was a weight to the words that surprised Teagan. “Yes. Don’t fret over it, he’d have wanted them to go to someone. They might be a little too big but they’ll work well enough. Figured you’d have to wash most of your things and well, they’re doing no one any good in storage.” It had been a tough choice but his father wouldn’t have wanted them kept for no other reason than sentimentalities sake. They didn’t even smell like him anymore and without that reminder, they were just clothes.

It was pretty obvious how much the offer meant to Teagan and it made Daniel a little queasy to accept it. Since there was no way he could refuse without making the situation worse and because he really did need more clothing he simply nodded. The shirt on top was well made, better than anything he owned but still a simple cut and style and it slid over his head easily. It was a little loose about the body but fit him nicely across the shoulders and would suit him very well.

“Thank you.” He muttered but the nagging sense of uneasy lingered and he quickly moved to take another swallow of whiskey to chase it away.

“Glad they’ll see some use.” He tried not to frown when he saw Daniel take another drink but reminded himself not to nag. “Should eat while it’s hot.”

They sat and ate but it was in silence. The only response Teagan got from the Daniel over the food was some abnormally loud stomach growls and some barely hushed up happy grunts over the taste. That and he ate like someone that hadn’t seen a real meal in a long time and Teagan was quick to refill Daniel’s bowl the first time it emptied. As soon as Daniel finished inhaling the second filled bowl and several hunks of bread with plenty of butter he started back on the whiskey.

“You’ll make yourself sick drinking like that.”

“Hmph.” Daniel replied and took another swallow. “I’m going to get drunk tonight. If you don’t want to see it speak up now and I’ll get your horse fixed back up while I’m still sober enough to be of some use.”

He didn’t want to go. With a stubborn set to his shoulders he reached across the small table and took the bottle from Daniel. He tilted it back and let a small trickle of the strong liquor dribble between his lips but he made a big show of swallowing to make it seem he was drinking more than he was. “Guess I’ll just have to get drunk with you.”

Daniel accepted the bottle when it was handed back and was more than a touch surprised. Teagan didn't seem like the man to drink anything really harder than wine but he took the swallow without even a wince. In mock salute, he raised the bottle to the dark haired man and took another long swallow, liking how the numbness began to spread across his body.

Teagan waited until he'd finished his own food while Daniel had mulled over his own thoughts a bit longer and downed several more swallows before he dared to say anything. "Do you always drink like this?"

There didn't seem to be any judgment in the softly spoken question and Daniel decided not to take offense at it. He shrugged. "Only when I need to."

"Like tonight?"

Daniel nodded and kept his eyes fixed to the bottle he was toying with.

"Why?" Teagan asked as gently as he could. "Why do you need to get drunk tonight?" He didn't miss how Daniel's brow crinkled up at the question or how his hands tightened around the bottle. "It's okay you know, I know just about everything my Uncle is involved with. I've been writing his pamphlets for him and the Boys for years now."

That made Daniel glance up and worry tinged his eyes. "If anyone finds that out, they'll try you for treason."

"They'd have to find out first. If it's ever traced back it'll come down upon my uncle's head, not mine and if suspicion ever falls to him they'll have a great deal more to try him for than a few rabble rousing letters." He was rather proud of his part in things. "Besides, only my uncle and you know I write for him. It's all I can do, I can't fight, I can't rise up and demand justice but I can put a pen in ink and say something. It's tiny, but it's my part toward freedom."

The words made Daniel snort softly in disgust.

"What?"

Daniel struggled for a moment with his habit of not speaking what he thought, figured he was drunk enough not to care and gave in. With another swallow from the bottle he shook his head. "You really think you're working toward freedom?"

The bitterness surprised Teagan. Daniel worked for his uncle and his friends. What he did had some level of danger to it and he'd assumed that Daniel was striving for the same goal as they all were. "You're not?" He finally managed to ask around his shocked surprise.

"I work for your uncle and his friends because they pay me, a lot, and not for spooking away poachers."

The idea had never once occurred to Teagan. "You do it for the money? How can you..." He shook his head and gathered his thoughts. "You're Catholic, how can you not be outraged by what the English law and absentee landlords have done here? How can you not want Ireland to be ruled by Ireland?"

That made Daniel shake his head. "English law or Irish law, nothing will change for me and mine."

"That's not true..."

"It is!" Daniel snapped back and cut Teagan off. "Who is it, do you think, that will hold the power once your grand cause succeeds? It won't be poor buggers like me, it'll go to men like your

uncle. The wealthy will grow fatter and the rest of us will still be starving. So? I can own a horse of value or a riffle but nothing will really ever change for me.”

“That’s not true.” Teagan found himself protesting, feeling the need to defend his uncle and their cause. “My uncle and I care little what faith a man has or what his background is. We won’t be able to move forward until we rule ourselves.”

Daniel shook his head. “Neither you nor I will see a free Ireland.” He announced and took another long swallow from the bottle. “Nor will our children or theirs.”

“No, no, we’re determined. The Colonies did it and look at France.”

“England will never let go of Ireland.”

“I’ve read on the subject extensively. So have some of the brightest, most capable minds of our day. If we remain steadfast, we will find our way to freedom.”

Daniel just shook his head. “I’m not one of your capable minds but mark me the land will flow red when you and your fellows push this further. England will slaughter every man, woman and child before she loosens her grip here.”

“But the colonies won, England gave up and stopped fighting, we can too. Hopefully with diplomacy and public sentiment but if not we’ve allies abroad and strong willed men here.” He wasn’t going to back down on this. The dream of a free Ireland ruled by Ireland was the only occupation he had.

“I was there, the only reason they recalled us was because of the cost of sending us over to die. It’s a damned sight cheaper to ship troops here.” He wasn’t going to scoff at the mention of allies. The French were unreliable at best and likely the only ones to come to their aid.

“All the more reason we need experienced fighters like you.”

“Don’t, I’ve heard the speech.” He was surprised at how angry Teagan’s blind faith made him. “Your uncle and his friends pay me well because they know I’ve no love for the English and they don’t wish to bloody their hands. I’m already guilty, Teagan, there’s no going back for me but all of you be coated in blood before this is done. I’ve nothing here to lose and every bone I break and throat I slit and stupid bit of information I pull out of some poor bastard brings me another payment. That’s all I care about, not your cause or your ideals or stupid childish, near sighted games. I want none of it!”

“You plan on living under England’s heel forever? Or do you wish to continue being a thug?”

Daniel shook his head and held his dreams to close to so easily share them. “What does it matter? I’m just a thug.”

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## Visions & Shadows

### Chapter Twenty One

"Don't sound pissy, that isn't what I meant and you know it." Teagan snapped back. "You're better than what you're doing, capable of anything. Do you truly only wish to be someone hired strong arm?"

Daniel took a long swallow and set the bottle down. "I killed my first man before I saw my fifteenth year."

"You were a solider."

He shook his head. "I don't mean in battle, the smoke and noise, you never know with certainty if you've killed someone in battle. He was a Captain of our regiment and I put a shot through his skull."

"Why?" The look in Daniel's eyes was a mix of guilt and stubborn pride and something cold and dark that frightened Teagan.

"Because I'm good with a rifle and he needed killing. This is what I do, it's what I'm good at. People have cause to be frightened of me. I am a thug but for now I'm a well paid one." He shook his head and glanced away into the fire. "You should go home Teagan, I'm not fit company tonight."

From something dark and frightful to the wounded bird look again and Teagan wasn't sure which glimpse was a more true sight of the man. "I'm not here expecting to be entertained."

"Why are you here?" Daniel wanted to hear the hint that Teagan was here for a continuation of their sexual relationship, that he'd hidden the desire behind the surface appearance of concern. It would be easier, it would affirm that he wasn't a person worthy of care and that would make the horrible self accusations he heard inside his head a little more solid. He wasn't a good man, he didn't deserve to be cared about and having even the hope that Teagan might feel something for him other than lust was a brutal, aching pain he wasn't sure he could survive.

"I needed to be with you." Teagan heard himself whisper in answer without a thought to how it sounded. It occurred to him Daniel's first thought to why he was there and he blushed. "Not like that, just, around you. I..." he sighed and glanced from Daniel to the fire but there were no answers there. "I missed you. I was fearful you wouldn't return."

The hushed confession felt like a knife into Daniel's heart. "I thought of little but you while away." The words spilled out, he was too drunk to stop them and too aching in his soul to try. "I had dreams of you ever night."

"I had a few dreams myself." Teagan blushed and amusement tinged the words.

"Not just those kind of dreams." Daniel couldn't help it, seeing Teagan blushing and grinning like a school boy made him feel better but the memory of his dreams quickly chased that away. "I would have nightmares of returning and finding you gone. Some nights, I dreamed I returned and found you set to wed that woman." The words spat out and he heard a touch of a slur to them. He was more than a little drunk now and he'd have to try harder to watch what he said.

"That woman... oh Maureen." He shook his head. "That would be a nightmare."

"In one, you told me the wedding had to be rushed because she was with your child already. That

you were disgusted to have ever lain with me now that you'd known her." That was one of those things he hadn't wanted to say but the fear had haunted him and driven him to Teagan's house even before he'd returned to his own.

That made Teagan outright laugh, which he knew he shouldn't do but couldn't help. "I can barely stir up interest with a woman!" He shook his head and reached for the bottle. "With you, a look and I'm desperate." He took another shallow swallow and placed the bottle down on the other side of him. It was now safely out of Daniel's reach and if the man wanted more he'd have to ask for it instead of drinking from it without thought. "I had nightmares too, of you not returning because I bored you. Or, because you didn't wish to be bothered with someone who was ill when you're so...so...vital." And strong and sexy, and alive, and his mind filled in a hundred more adjectives that didn't equally apply to him.

"I told you, I don't do things half way."

He nodded. "But no one's ever cared to be with me, even as a friend. I frighten most people. Being ill makes them nervous as if they could catch mortality by touching me. No one touches me and most people only ask after my health when they speak to me. I grow so weary of that."

It wasn't something he'd ever thought about. People avoided him because he looked like someone they didn't want to mess with or because they knew his reputation as a brawler and Daniel had grown to accept that. It was easier when no one wanted to get too close to him. Made loneliness easier to accept and he tied it all up as what he had to do to get what he wanted, it was all choices he'd made and ones he knew he had to live with.

It wasn't so for Teagan, he'd never asked for his life. He hadn't made the choice to isolate himself, not really. Daniel had assumed it was entirely from Teagan's choice when they'd met, that the man simply preferred his solitude but it had never occurred to him that he preferred his solitude over the obvious avoidance and isolation presented to him by others. Daniel had accepted his lack of social contacts because of his lifestyle but Teagan had never been given the choice or option. He'd always be that poor sickly Walsh boy to everyone and they'd always look upon him with kindness and pity and never with real affection.

"I've never thought of you as someone who was sickly." Daniel spoke as gently as the whiskey in his veins would allow him.

"I know." Teagan smiled softly. "You're the only person besides my father to do so. Do you remember your father Daniel? I was very fond of mine. He had this way of laughing, he never chuckled or giggled, it was always this deep laugh that shook his whole body. It couldn't have been easy for him, a widower with a daughter that was so wild and son that was so ill but he laughed all the time."

"My father didn't laugh."

"You remember him?"

Daniel nodded. "He worked the mines when there was work to be had, farmed our land after his shift. When the mines didn't have work he hired out to our neighbors. I started with him in mind when I was eight, when he was killed in a collapse I took his position in the line."

"How old were you?" The idea of a child so young working so hard stunned Teagan. He knew it was done and quite commonly but his own childhood had been sheltered by wealth and illness and for the most part he'd been happy.

"Eleven, nearly twelve, I weren't quite big enough but we needed the money and I was told if I could keep up they'd let me try. It was just my mother and four younger sisters, my brother was just an infant. He died the next year."

"I'm sorry."

Daniel shrugged. "Needed doing." Which was all he could say on the subject. It had been a bitterly difficult time for him. He'd return home exhausted and spent and still had a long list of work that had to be finished but while the mines had need of men there was money and money meant shelter and food. When they'd shut down again, he'd scrambled for work on neighbors farms, picking up a few jobs as he could while he struggled to manage their own land. The army had seemed almost too easy after the work he'd been doing but he'd rather have stayed and continued working.

"And you've no idea what became of your mother and sisters?"

It didn't occur to Daniel to wonder how Teagan knew his family had gone missing. The night was comfortable, he was drunk enough to not mind talking and he wasn't so lonely with Teagan near. "I looked for them."

"With no luck?"

"There had been a fever, a lot of our neighbors hadn't survived. Most had moved off to get away from the illness. The few that remembered my family, some said the fever took them, another that my mother had wed some man from another county and moved, another said that they were certain that they'd gone to live with a sister but neither of my parents had a sister. I looked around, followed some rumors but never found them." He drew a long breath. It had just grown easier to think of them as dead than to be gnawed by worry and regret.

"And they just left no word for you? Knowing you were away and would return?"

"I was wounded. I fell on the field, thought dead. It wasn't until the prisoner exchange that anyone knew I'd lived."

"So they didn't know." The rough scar on Daniel's side, the one that followed his ribs under his arm came to Teagan's mind and he wondered what had happened to cause the wound and how Daniel had managed to survive. Tonight, he figured, wasn't the night to ask when Daniel already seemed to be in such a dark mood.

"They're blameless." But it still hurt him to have been abandoned, or worse, to have them think he'd abandoned them. He'd promised his mother to return, it was likely she'd died thinking he'd broken that promise.

"We'll solve that from happening again. Next time you must away for one of my uncle's projects, you must send me some note on occasion to let me know you're well. Even a single line with no name will assure my nerves." He'd hoped every day for nearly two months for a single line to ease his mind and none had arrived.

"I can't."

"Surely a few words would cause no harm. It would greatly please me, tell my uncle that and they won't refuse." There was a need for secrecy, he knew that but he also wasn't sure he could stand another span of weeks of nervous wait.

"No, I can't. I can't form words."

He waved that off. "They're formed as you read them, doesn't have to be scholarly scribe perfect."

Daniel shook his head and glanced back to the fire. "I can't read them neither."

“Oh.” That was a thought that Teagan hadn’t really considered.

“I can make my name. The friends I’ve spoken of from the army, they saw I knew how.”

“Well, we’ll think of something before you must away again. For now, you’re home and home safe and that’s all that matters.” That was the truth, it made him ill to think of Daniel going away again and made him ache to take the other man in his arms. “All that matters.”

“Will you...” Daniel started and stopped and had to study his bare feet to finish. “Will you be staying the night?” He wasn’t sure what he wanted more a positive or negative answer. It was safer to be alone but he wasn’t sure he wanted to be safe.

Teagan hadn’t thought that far ahead. “Would you like me to?”

“I’m too tired... I can’t...” Daniel tried not to blush thinking about his previous mistake and didn’t want to repeat it.

“I know. I just needed to be near you.” The honest hurt but he needed to say it. “I don’t expect anything more, ever, I’m willing but I don’t expect that you won’t have changed your mind on the issue while being away so long and I’d be blind not to see how exhausted you are, I...” He realized he was rambling and shut up. “I’m sober enough to make it home.”

But did he want Teagan to go? He hurt less with the man beside him, felt less crazed and broken, more whole and like himself. “Would it be too much to ask...”

“What?” He prompted when the words died off and Daniel’s eyes took on a tortured desperation again.

“Just sleep.” The need to be certain that Teagan was still waiting for him had been painful and the idea of falling asleep with the black silken hair loose about him and the slender pale body in his arms felt like a dream. His life wasn’t about dreams but he desperately needed one tonight.

“Sounds perfect to me.” He’d never slept with anyone in his bed before, never shared a bed for any reason with anyone but he was so in need of touching Daniel it didn’t matter if he slept at all.

Daniel closed his eyes and told himself it was real and it was okay. “The bed’s not that large.”

“Oh. About that, you haven’t seen?” Teagan suddenly felt nervous.

“Seen?”

“Well, while you were gone, we had this storm and I thought I should come by and check on this place. It was fine.” He was quick to reassure. “But the plants needed weeding and watering so I did that and came back to check on them and aired out the cottage. Then I swept the floor and got everything ready, a fire ready to be lit and new candles brought over and oil in the lamps. I checked in the other room and it looked so empty and I’ve so many extra linens. Are you angry?”

“That would depend on what you did.” He answered carefully.

Teagan sighed. “Go look.”

With care because he was drunk enough to be light headed and unstable, Daniel stood and took up one of the candles. He moved to brush aside the blanket that covered the doorway into the only other room in the cottage and the light spilled inside. The bed was large enough for two if they were willing to sleep close together but it had an old mattress over the ropes and the blankets Daniel had tossed down were simply there to keep him warm.

He barely knew the room. It had been swept well and looked like it had been washed down as well. A shelf that had hung broken and waiting to be repaired on one wall was now fixed. The bed had a new mattress that looked stuffed with something soft and far thicker than Daniel was used to. Over it was clean sheets, new pillows and one of the well made and warm quilts that he'd seen at Teagan's place.

"Are you upset?" Teagan asked softly when Daniel walked into the room and placed the light on the now functional shelf. "There's room under the shelf now to put the clothes chest you have out in the main room back here. I really didn't do much, it's just things I've about anyway and I had the time." The silence was starting to make him nervous. "Say something?"

Daniel was about as close to weeping as he ever came and that was entirely the whiskey's fault. The room looked like a home, it even faintly smelled of lavender from the linens that had so recently been in storage. It was a balm for a wound he'd never known how to start healing and there was nothing he could say in words.

Even barefooted, Daniel's steps across the small room seemed loud and Teagan flinched a little when the other man moved toward him. Only there was no blow or angry words, the arms that moved reached out and enfolded him, wrapping him up close in a hug that allowed Daniel to hide his face in Teagan's hair. Short puffs of breath ghosted across his skin and Teagan slowly got over the shock and wrapped his arms around Daniel in response.

"Thank you." Daniel managed to force out.

The words eased the last of his worry and with a sigh, Teagan relaxed into the hug. "Welcome. Now, let's get you to bed before you fall asleep standing up."

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Chapter Twenty Two

Teagan woke slowly, content and warm. He was tucked in a soft bed a body curled around his own. His legs were tangled with the comforting weight of another pair. Under his shirt, resting against the skin of his stomach, was a strong, calloused hand. It felt amazingly good and he sighed happily and wiggled a little to get tighter the warm body behind him.

"Finally awake?" Daniel whispered into an ear when he was certain this time Teagan was really awake.

The question made him whine and borrow deeper into the blankets. "No."

Daniel sighed and brushed dark strands into more orderly lines and used his hand on Teagan's

waist to pull the still sleepy but very much awake body closer. "I never knew anyone that could sleep as soundly as you."

It was pretty clear Daniel wasn't going to give up and let him drift in hazy half asleep delight so he sighed, puffed a few strands of hair out of his face and turned in the tight embrace so he could look at the man he had woken up in bed with. "I was comfortable. You make an amazing pillow." That was his last memory before sleep had sucked him down. Daniel had pulled him close, so close that he'd had to rest against the strong chest. One arm had wrapped around him and kept him so close and the other had methodically slid across his hair, almost as if he'd been afraid Teagan would slip away if he wasn't held close.

"I was up and about already but you didn't stir." More than that, Teagan had slept so soundly, so deeply that it betrayed the other man's illness. When he'd fussed at all his chores and the choice had come to wake Teagan or lay back down with him, well, it wasn't much of a choice.

Teagan just shrugged and pulled away enough to be able to really see Daniel. The eyes were still bloodshot but no longer so sunken and while he still looked worn thin, he no longer looked bone tired exhausted. The sight made him smile and shake his head. "I'm glad you're back."

Daniel just glanced down and away, unable to hold Teagan's honest gaze when he'd spent so many hours just laying there, watching the dark haired man sleep, wondering how long he'd be able to hold such a delight before it would disappear like morning mist. All of life was a moment, some better than others but moments faded and passed. No matter what Teagan said, he was still very innocent and once some of the innocence was gone, he'd move on to a man better suited to him. Daniel wasn't blind to the realities of life, he just wanted to cherish things as long as he had them.

The avoidance was painful to see but Teagan wasn't sure it was because of him or because Daniel was still brutally shy with his own thoughts and emotions. The man was shut down, closed off, bricked up inside his own defenses and it made Teagan want to shout to him about wasted time and chances. It made him want to smash Daniel down until those defenses were gone but he knew to do that would damage the man he found so attractive. Daniel needed to be drawn out not forced out and Teagan was nothing if not stubborn.

Instead of pushing he yawned and stretched, arching against the lean body he'd snuggled so tightly too. "Stay in bed, I won't be gone long." He smiled and tried to keep it innocent, he really tried but from how Daniel glanced over at him quickly it must have had a some what wicked edge to it.

As he slipped from the bed, his shirt pulled from his pants, his feet bare and hair loose, he yawned again and staggered, still groggy, out of the room. He didn't mean it to sound wicked or naughty, but he did intend to keep Daniel in bed as long as could. All he wanted to do was lay under the soft blankets with that strong body eased around his own. All he wanted to do was soak in as much of the feel of just being touched as he could.

With his face washed and his bladder emptied he returned to the small cottage, expecting to have to entice Daniel back into the narrow bed. Instead, he found the hazel eyed man just as he'd left him, still under the covers. Only now Daniel had rolled onto his back, an arm lifted and tucked under his head and his tussled hair messy about him. It was like something from a dream and Teagan stopped in the doorway, smiling.

"You said to stay here." Daniel spoke softly when Teagan froze and didn't approach further.

"Yes but I never imagined you'd listen to me. You're terribly stubborn."

That made Daniel snort a little but he made no move to rise and leave the bed.

"I just..." Teagan sighed and instead of explaining he moved to crawl back into the bed. "I just want today."

The request was nearly painful to hear but one Daniel couldn't debate. Teagan had forever from him, if he wished it, but saying so in words wasn't something he could do. Instead of trying to speak and say silly romantic things that the thought, Daniel just slid over a little and welcomed Teagan on the bed, that was all he was able to do.

"Do you trust me?" Daniel asked when they'd laid there, side by side for long moments.

"Completely." Teagan answered without a pause or thought.

Again words failed him, it sounded stupid inside of his head and would only come out in stuttered half sentences if he tried to speak. He needed to feel Teagan against him, it wasn't a sexual need though he couldn't swear it wouldn't be an arousing experience. He just needed that time wrapped around each other with no cloth or barriers between them. Without trying to explain, he squirmed and managed to get his shirt off without dumping Teagan onto the floor. When he reached to ease the shirt from Teagan's own chest, the dark haired man required no prompting and quickly stripped the cloth away.

He would have stopped there. Unsure of being nude in a bed with Teagan, not sure what Teagan would think of that. There was little doubt that he wouldn't become sexually aroused lying innocently in bed with the slender man if they were naked. That few bits of clothing were his only defenses. Teagan had other ideas, he peeled off his shirt and instantly moved to remove his britches, sliding along Daniel as he stripped bare under the covers. Faced with such boldness and it occurred to him such a similar desire, Daniel was unable to use logic to refuse and carefully removed the last of his own clothing as well.

Which left them together, with nothing between them. It wasn't meant in a sexual way but Daniel wasn't surprised when Teagan's breath caught a bit in his throat as their skin glided across each other or when he felt that Teagan was partially aroused as he was. It was nice, warm, safe and even with Teagan resting on a still painful bruise on his side, he felt better than he had in a very long time.

The sigh that rustled across his hair made Teagan smile. It was sexual and sultry and horridly naughty feeling but it wasn't the lightening strike passion of before. That was okay, more than okay because the lightening was there, curled up, waiting to be released. For now, the feeling of Daniel stretched out with him, bare as he was, felt good enough to get intoxicated upon and far easier than the strong drink of the night before.

"Daniel?"

"Hmm?"

"Tell me about your first time?"

The request was the last thing he'd expected to hear and it made him tense up, as if expecting a blow that he knew, logically, wasn't something he could physically block. "Why?"

"Well," he nuzzled against the shoulder he was propped on and tightened his grip on Daniel's waist. "You cared for him, them, him, whichever. I can hear it in your voice. That means it was important to you and I'd like to know about it." The body under him stayed tense and he wondered if he'd crossed some line by asking. The silence stretched out until Teagan wasn't sure he could stand it, the tension seeped up from Daniel and into his own body.

"My first time was with a lady of pleasure in the city." He finally said simply to break the silence. "I was almost nineteen and my father was worried about my lack of interest in women. He felt I

was avoiding such matters due to being ill, I couldn't explain to him the truth of the matter. Worse, he took it upon himself to take me to this lady." It had been a painfully embarrassing memory but laying there, naked, with Daniel, it just seemed silly now.

"It was a horrid disaster. I was in this little flowery room with ugly curtains with a woman that I assume was attractive. I mean logically I know she was, my father picked a very nice woman for me but it seemed a touch obscure to me. I was nervous unto fainting and she thought it was simply from my being a virgin. Poor woman, everything she tried just made the situation worse." He chuckled now at a memory that used to make him cringe. "She eventually sussed out the real reasons for my difficulties because none of her questioning about the young women I knew had stirred anything. Once she noticed it was speaking of some of the young men I knew that put me more at ease, well..."

"Well?" Daniel questioned, soothed and drawn in by the open confession.

"I offered to just spend some time sitting on the edge of her bed before leaving. She refused, smiled, said she understood. She pulled me into her arms and touched me, told me to close my eyes and think of whomever I wished. It was just barely enough." He laughed now, remembering how she'd touched him until he was nearly finished before finishing the act almost on her own. Which was a good thing too since consummating the situation had nearly chased away what interest he'd managed to stir up.

"She boasted to my father about what stallion I was once I got over my nerves. I think that nearly was worse than the situation itself." Daniel had eased below him so laughing at his own embarrassing past had done the trick. "Father was very pleased so it was worth it I imagine."

"He just wanted you to be happy."

"I would have been a sight happier if he hadn't made me do that! Awkward, horrible, embarrassing, rotten situation..." he laughed again and liked the way one of Daniel's hands gently stroked across the side of his hip.

"I don't remember my first time with a woman." Daniel confessed. "I was too drunk. It was the only way I could do it."

Teagan continued to chuckle. "That's awful."

He nodded. "The next time I wasn't quite as drunk." He shrugged. "I remembered it well enough to know women did little for me."

"I lied, in a way." Teagan admitted and still smiled against Daniel's skin but the man remained silent. "I said I'd kissed men before, that was, kind of a stretch. It was just one man. Just enough to know that it really was men I desired. Which I shouldn't have needed given the amount of, well, self relief I'd done to thoughts of other men. I don't care what the church says, that can't be a sin?"

"Which?"

"What?"

"Which can't be? Self relief or thinking of men while doing it?"

It took a moment for it to sink in that Daniel was teasing him and it made Teagan laugh again.

"Well, both I'd imagine."

"Every man does it."



“Not while thinking of other men.”

The light teasing made Daniel shake his head but his thoughts were serious and heavy. “The captain I killed, the one I told you about?” He started carefully.

“Yes?” The laughter died and Teagan sensed the seriousness of what he was being told.

“My friends warned me of him. I didn’t know just what of but just to take care around him. There were a half dozen new recruits of my age in the regiment. When we set to sea, I was the only one of the half dozen not violently ill. This captain required the most junior of us to serve as page. When he called for me, one of my friends took me aside and said, don’t disobey an order, stay strong and find me when you’re released from duty. He was so serious...” His friends warning had scared him a little, made him apprehensive because he’d heard that the captain had oddities. Oddities no one actually openly spoke of to him.

“What happened?” Teagan asked carefully.

“I shined his boots, ran messages for him, fetched his dinner and poured his wine while he ate. Nothing that should have made a warning necessary, nothing at all until I thought I was to leave and he told me to come closer. He grabbed me between the legs.”

“God, what did you do?”

Daniel shrugged. The moment had been odd because he’d never been sexually aroused before but the Captain wasn’t an unattractive man and his touch had stirred things that Daniel had always been too busy to bother with. “I stood there. He ordered me to open my pants and touch myself while he watched. When I paused, he made it an order so I did it.” He pulled Teagan closer and stroked the slightly chilled skin of the other man’s side again. “After a time he opened his own pants and ordered me to kiss him there. He said to me, that I would find it perhaps disagreeable at first but I would learn to enjoy it as time and experience was passed.”

“Oh, Daniel, I’m so sorry.”

Daniel chuckled now and stroked the dark hair. “Don’t be, I wasn’t, I found it wonderful. The captain was startled once he’d finished to find that the state I was still in. He laughed and dismissed me.”

“What did you do?”

“I found my friend.” Achingly hard, smelling of sex and confused, he’d found the friend he promised to directly go to upon being dismissed. “He had known the captain’s habits and had expected me to be, well, shaken, not so interested. I tried to question him but he shushed me and quickly found the others of their circle. They took me to a quiet corner and took me into their friendship.”

It was still one of his fondest memories. They’d carefully questioned him about his time with the captain and gently explained that men, so long alone with each other’s company, found comfort together. Their only problem was the abuse of power the captain used and his choice of such young men. They’d been charmed that Daniel had been truly a virgin and ignorant of any sexual contact between people.

Once they were convinced that his time with the captain hadn’t left him hurt in any way and that his desire was valid. It hadn’t taken much to strip his pants to his ankles and Daniel hadn’t protested. They’d sat him on the lap of one of his friends, his back to the man’s chest, his legs spread wide and another friend had done to him what he’d done to the captain. He couldn’t have asked for kinder care and instead of it sating his desire, it had only fueled it. He watched, awed while two of his friends slipped to the side and one took the other and he wanted to be one of

them and didn't know which one he wanted to be, the one giving or receiving, both looked to be lost in pleasure. They'd cared for him and it had been weeks before they'd allowed him to try, but when they had, Daniel had found all he wanted.

"So you killed him because of that?" Teagan questioned carefully, not sure if he agreed or not and trying very hard not to judge.

"No." He shook his head. "Not for that. He went against orders, tried to make us charge into a fight we'd been ordered to withdrawal from because he wished glory."

"Following him would have gotten you all killed. His life or all of yours."

"It's not just that. He didn't hurt me because I'd rather be with a man but the other young soldiers? It wasn't one thing but he needed killing."

Teagan nodded and let the words sink in. Daniel spoke so coldly about killing his captain, his voice held only resolve and no remorse. It was easy to view the quiet withdrawn man as emotionless and empty because no one should speak so coldly about murdering another person. Only, he remembered the self hate and regret that had clung to Daniel the night before. Smothered in drink and bitterness, there was nothing cold or empty about his words when he spoke of killing his captain then. Teagan had no doubt which was the false mask and which was the truth and it twisted him up inside to know Daniel carried such remorse and guilt.

He softly sighed. "Then you did the right thing." Absolution might not be so easily offered but Teagan wouldn't knowingly add to the weight Daniel carried. "These friends of yours, I'm glad they were kind to you. You don't see them anymore?"

"Three of them fell in battles, one died of fever after I fell and the last, well, he didn't live to return home I never heard what killed him." The words were difficult to say but he had no wish to lie to Teagan.

"I'm sorry." The pain in Daniel's voice hurt him as well. He had no doubt now that the other man was speaking of the loss of a family, people he cared dearly for and that the words he used glossed over so much that he wouldn't say.

"Most of the men I served with were killed." It was a raw truth and one he knew. They were an Irish regiment and so sent into some of the worst fighting.

"Still. I'm sorry." He stretched against the strong body and moved to ease from the bed. "We should get up, we've lazed about and I've animals at home to tend."

Daniel shivered at the feel of Teagan slipping across his body and chilled by the idea of him leaving. He caught a slender arm and held Teagan in place. "They can wait." He whispered and leaned up to press a kiss to Teagan's lips.

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## Visions & Shadows

### Chapter Twenty Three

Daniel shivered at the feel of Teagan slipping across his body and chilled by the idea of him leaving. He caught a slender arm and held Teagan in place. "They can wait." He whispered and leaned up to press a kiss to Teagan's lips. It wasn't even so much the lingering feel of bare skin against his own or even how attractive Teagan was, it really came down to how much Daniel had missed the other man.

Yes, he was stubborn and proud and could be a royal bother. Yes, Teagan often reacted with anger and harsh bitterness over silly unimportant things but Daniel liked that. He liked that Teagan wasn't easy or simple, he liked the spirit and fire that flashed in the cynical green eyes. He liked seeing how those proud eyes tamed down and gentled at a single look, touch of kiss.

It didn't hurt that Teagan was the sort of man he'd always been drawn to and had never been able to touch. Sleek and elegant, lean and handsome and nothing like his own sun burnt skin and work roughened hands. Being allowed to rest his eyes on Teagan was a delight, touching him bordered on heaven but neither compared to being touched back by him.

Teagan's eagerness had surprised him. Somehow he'd expected someone raised to wealth and privilege to be more timid. Added in with the man's general ill health and being sheltered due to the fragility of his own weakness, Daniel had been expecting a shy, reserved lover. Which was as far from the truth as he could have found. Teagan's often open and unashamed frankness about their continued relations had shocked him, delighted him surely but also shocked him.

It had taken him off guard that mix of innocence and bold want. It had followed him across the miles and hours. When he should have been thinking about work, he found himself thinking about the curve of Teagan's shoulder. When he didn't want his mind to linger on what it just was that he was doing, he found his thoughts thinking of the teasing delight of Teagan's mouth. The man had become his obsession and had driven him harder to finish his task and return home than any promise of coin could.

Now here he was, nude and bare with so much of the pale skin exposed to his eye and touch. Worries of returning to find Teagan out of reach or worse yet, ill, were soothed and some of the guilt and shame that lingered in his heart had dissolved with comfort and rest. It was too much to have Teagan simply slip from his arms and back to their daily lives and he knew, after the misunderstanding of the night before, that he'd have to be the one to initiate anything further between them.

The lips he brushed with his own were shy at first, uncertain and startled but as Daniel nibbled a little they softened. He felt the tension drain from the arm he held in his grip and liked the way Teagan dropped a shoulder down a little, angling it closer to Daniel's own body. The man was so responsive, every look, every move of hand or head, held meaning and layers of meaning that made Daniel feel drowned in the depths he couldn't plumb.

It took only a little urging to get Teagan back in bed but the covers had slid down and the filtered sunlight made his paler skin glow. Daniel inched a little away from Teagan, making the dark haired man follow him to continue the kiss. It made him smile, how blindly Teagan advanced those fragments of inches, following his mouth like a child in a story followed bread crumbs. Inch by inch he pulled Teagan back into the bed and as far from the edge and ordinary life as he could and it was only then that he wrapped his arms around the slender, shoulders. Silken strands of hair tangled in his fingers and he glided them across the length, a motion and feel he was fascinated with.

The fingers pulling across the tangles in his hair, tugging lightly, twisting around the strong hand, made Teagan moan and he broke from the kisses. Below him, Daniel lay looking smug and pleased with himself, his hazel eyes half closed and his mouth parted as he drew in panting breaths. The feel of those fingers sent tingles down his spine and reminded him of a question he'd wanted to ask.

"Is it wrong?" He managed to get out around soft, brushing tease kisses.

"Hmm?"

"Oh, that's nice..." Teagan sighed as Daniel's hands again traced a path across his scalp. "I think I'd like you to pull my hair, is that wrong?"

The whispered voice was mixed again with innocence and want and Daniel moaned a little, his body shivered. Instead of answering with words, he simply fisted a hand into the dark hair. He'd been itching to get a grip on it since the moment he'd touched it but had promised himself to be gentle with Teagan. Now, he used the tight grip in the dark hair to pull the lips back to his own and instead of upsetting Teagan or scaring him, it made him moan.

The mouth that met his no longer wanted to tease and was open and hungry. Teagan was learning to kiss far too well. The man's stubborn determination to do it right didn't get in his way of enjoying it and the combination left Daniel unable to think clearly. It didn't help any that at the rougher pull at the dark hair, Teagan had lowered his body down to rest against him and there was no room to doubt how much the slender man enjoyed having his hair pulled.

He pulled the dark hair again, lifting Teagan's mouth from his own and far enough away that he could see those dark green eyes. Teagan whimpered, his lower lip trembled a little and the look in those eyes made Daniel want to roll the slender man under him and take him, slow, long, and very, very deeply. That look in Teagan's eyes made it very difficult to behave.

"No..." He managed to gasp out around panting breaths. "It's not wrong." He ached to take Teagan, he knew even sex as they'd shared it would do little to quench the need that burned in him. He needed to take Teagan, and that was an independent need from his desire to be taken. "So long as you enjoy it..." He finished his thought, shocked he even had thoughts still.

Teagan leaned his head away from the tight grip Daniel had on his hair but the hand didn't move with him and the pressure on the caught locks increased. It made him shiver to know he was truly being held, captured as it were, in place. "I like it." He whispered, surprised at the sultry sound to his voice but liking the almost predatory look to Daniel. He arched and rubbed his body against Daniel's, chest against chest, legs into legs, his cock dragged along the side of Daniel's hip and it was a tormenting few inches of contact. "I like when you hold me in place, or pin my arms down so I can't get away. I like feeling how strong you are..." He sighed and arched his body to rub again along those few teased inches of contact. "I like being captured by you... God....Daniel, I've missed you so much..." The sultry tone turned into a little whine but it was forgivable because Daniel pulled his head back down and claimed another bruising kiss. When his mouth was freed and Daniel began to nibble on his chin and neck, he sighed. "I've missed you so much." He didn't care if it sounded clingy or needy, he was and there was no denying it when he was this turned on with a man he found so amazing. "I've missed the sound of your voice....the feel of your eyes on me....oh God right there.... Oh....please...please..."

But his begging didn't make the kissing continue, instead, Daniel stopped and lifted Teagan away slightly. There was something painfully desperate about the look in Daniel's eyes, even how his shoulders were squared and tight spoke of coiled and too tightly wound control. One more kiss might snap that control and Teagan wanted to push and see if he could cause it to break, unafraid of what might happen should Daniel let go and do whatever it was he was thinking of doing.

"Teagan..." Daniel gasped and ran his thumbs over the stubborn cheekbones on his lover's face. "Do you know what I want?" He managed to ask and knew it sounded stupid.

Teagan blinked, uncertain but figured being honest would work best. He shook his head no between the strong hands. "Doesn't matter, whatever you want, I want it too."

The words made Daniel whimper and he shut his eyes, gasping for breath and control. He reminded himself that he couldn't bury himself in Teagan's body, not yet, maybe not ever and he couldn't assume Teagan really meant those words. But... oh...what wonderful words!

He swallowed hard and forced his eyes open, hiding what he really wanted away. "What do you want, Teagan? I'll do anything you want..."

Something wicked and teasing flitted across the deep green pools of Teagan's eyes. "Really?"

Daniel nodded.

"I want to kiss you."

The simple request made Daniel smile. He made his lust see how innocent Teagan really was to prove to his desire that Teagan really wasn't ready to go so far yet. "You have kissed me."

"No..." Teagan shook his head again. One of his hands slid from Daniel's chest lower and curled around the fevered length he found. "I want to kiss you here." The thought alone stole his breath and made his heart beat faster. "Like you kissed me..."

The request shocked Daniel but at the same time didn't. It was that odd mix again of innocence and want that so fascinated him, he just hadn't expected it to show up at this moment. The thought of Teagan between his legs, sucking on him, dark strands of hair tangling about his thighs, nearly drove Daniel mad. He shuddered, his hips snapped up into the teasing hand and his eyes squinted shut trying to hide how desperately he wanted Teagan to do just that.

Teagan chuckled softly at the strong reaction but it wasn't from any maliciousness. Seeing Daniel turned into a creature of want and need because of him made Teagan feel stronger than god, stronger than death and convinced he could really live forever if he just could keep this perfect moment from ending. It made him feel sexy and like a tease and even how Daniel shivered at the chuckle made him want to lick the other man.

So, he did. It started out as a whim but Teagan found he liked the way Daniel shivered as he licked and nipped his neck. He liked the hands that caught his waist and pulled him to straddle Daniel's hips while he kissed the sharp collarbones and suckled on the hollow of Daniel's throat. Just to tease, Teagan arched his back and rubbed hard against Daniel, maybe a little too hard because the length he was gliding against slipped back, behind his own and rubbed against his ass.

"Oh, God!" Daniel cried out, his fingers dug in tightly to the hips he was holding and he tried to remember why he couldn't just push forward, into that tightness. He really didn't even think Teagan was trying to be a tease because when he was able to open his eyes, the green pair he met was lusty but slightly confused.

"That..." Teagan began carefully. He gently arched again only this time he deliberately rubbed Daniel's weeping cock against his ass. The pleasure that tingled along his nerves was from more than the dark whimpers Daniel was making. "That's nice..." He tried once more, experimenting with the angle and pressure and moaned softly in surprise. "Oh, I like that..." but before he could try again, the hands on his hips stopped him.

“Don’t.” Daniel groaned and pushed Teagan a little lower over his hips so his length was safely away from temptation.

“But...” Teagan sighed. “I liked that...didn’t you?”

All he could do was nod for a moment until he was able to think straight. “You’re not ready...”

Teagan snorted. “I’m not afraid.”

“I am.” Daniel swallowed hard and shook his head. “I don’t want to hurt you. I won’t...” but he wanted to pull those hips up and push himself deep into that tight, hot passage and lose himself in the pleasure he knew he’d find. He knew what that would feel like and he knew when they finally went that far, Teagan had better be as prepared as possible because he wasn’t going to be overly gentle. Daniel wasn’t even sure that in a moment like that, he’d even remember to try to be gentle, so great was his wanting need to take Teagan.

The desire that twisted Daniel’s face up looked too close to pain and Teagan decided that he didn’t want to hurt Daniel either. Which meant he had to stop teasing, stop pushing. He knew he was ready, thirsting with the want of all that Daniel promised with the hunger in his hazel eyes, but he also knew that Daniel wasn’t ready. With a sigh, he leaned down and kissed the tense lips.

“I’ll behave...somewhat...” he teased. He may not be able to explore what it had felt like to be taken, to tease the weeping crown of Daniel’s length against his body, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t explore other new things. At least, new things for him and that seemed like a grand idea.

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Chapter Twenty Four

“Teagan...” but whatever protest or warning he was going to make died on his lips because Teagan’s hands were gliding over his body, teasing his skin with a rougher more demanding touch.

“This won’t do.” Teagan shook his head and easily pulled the covers off of Daniel’s body, exposing him to the morning air and easy view. It was such a nice sight that he slid a little off of Daniel to be able to take all of him in. The long legs were a little splayed and formed a lovely inverted V that drew notice to the proud length there trembled, wanted, between them. His chest was adorned with bruises and scrapes and that only seemed to make him more handsome, more desirable.

He let his hands wander across the strong chest. Gently he touched the bruises and damage. “My warrior.” Teagan sighed. “You’re not hurt too badly...?”

Daniel shook his head and watched Teagan, not wishing to sway the other man but needing desperately and hoping this all wasn't some game. When Teagan's lips quirked into a wicked grin, he shivered.

"Shall I kiss it and make it better?"

The skilled and teasing voice was one of Teagan's best weapons, Daniel had known that from the moment he'd met the slender, ill man. It teased and mocked in rich tones of sarcasm. He used it to hide behind, sheltering away the truth of his exhaustion and pain that he never wished to show to the world. Now Teagan had learned a new attack, one just as devastating as his quick wit and sharp tongue. He used sultry desire like a dagger, cutting away resistance and protest and with a few words teased more than if he'd said a thousand. The dark lusty tone to his voice was velvet and Daniel dissolved into its touch.

"Hmmm, I think that's just what I need to do." He was quickly growing addicted to feeling so alive, so healthy, so vibrant in only the way Daniel's lust clouded eyes on his skin could make him feel. He trailed just the tips of his fingers across Daniel's shoulder in warning before he slowly lowered down and followed their path with soft kisses. He'd never been bold enough to venture below Daniel's shoulders with his mouth but now he did, nipping the underside of a collarbone and kissing softly down his chest.

Carefully, with a high level of uncertainty, Teagan circled an already hardened nipple. He liked how Daniel moaned, whined and increased the pressure and force of his touch. "Oh, does that hurt? Let me kiss it..." he teased with a grin before he lowered down and brushed his lips in a whispery soft contact to the hard pebble. He liked the feel of it against his lips but he loved the whimpering sound it pulled from Daniel.

Teagan paused to watch the look of hungry lust that darted across the normally expressionless face. "Sounds like it does hurt, let me try harder to make it better."

"Oh..."

He wasn't sure if the sound was meant to be encouraging or a protest and he didn't care. This time he licked the hard nipple, teased it with his tongue, before suckling it into his mouth. He didn't stop until Daniel was gasping for breath, his eyes squeezed tightly shut and his hands clenched into the sheet below him. Then, when he did stop teasing the one, he moved to torment the other side. When Daniel's breathing had been reduced to hitching gasps, and only then, did he stop.

Watching Daniel reduced to weakness was to tempting not to watch. The man that could fight foes in the dark, the man that worked without complaint or exhaustion for hours, lay panting and broken, hungry for more. He had to stop and watch, knowing it was one of the most beautiful, most perfect things he'd ever be allowed to witness. It was a sin to waste a heartbeat and he needed to burn the image of Daniel aching and needing into his mind.

It wasn't until Daniel's breathing slowed and he noticed that Teagan was no longer touching him that he opened his eyes, just the slightest bit and begged without words or pride for more. He didn't have to make a sound, there was no need, Teagan heard him, understood him and it softened his smile. There was no way he could stop himself, he reached out a hand and gently caressed the side of Daniel's face. It made him tremble to see how Daniel leaned into the touch, hungry for more.

It was a hunger he didn't wish to deny and he slid his fingers from Daniel's face down to his body. There was so much he wanted to touch, so much he wished to kiss and taste and it seemed unreal that it was all there for him. Not only was he allowed to tease and explore as he willed, Daniel wanted him to and that seemed like a treat far to great to comprehend.

He didn't pause to tease this time, frightened a little that he'd lose his nerve now that he had everything that he wanted. Daniel was before him, nude, aroused, moaning and above all else, letting him do whatever he wanted but butterflies of nerves chased each other in his stomach and Teagan was worried if he paused too long to enjoy the sight that he'd remember how unimpressive and ordinary he really was. Certainly he was nothing worthy of such wonders and he felt suddenly trapped by habit and nature, frightened of mistakes and regrets and desperate for the chance to try.

When he stroked a hand softly across Daniel's thighs, they trembled below his touch. When he brushed lower, inside the strong legs Daniel moaned and parted them wider, inviting Teagan to do as he willed. Up his fingers trailed and the higher they traveled the shorter Daniel's breath grew, the tighter his grip on the sheets below him became. When his hand traveled up, cupping the softness of Daniel's most vulnerable flesh, it struck him that he was touching his lover. He stroked the tense manhood lightly and knew that this was his lover and the term of possession filled him with warmth and courage. Daniel was his lover, he was Daniel's and it felt amazingly good.

The tip of Daniel's length wept at his touch and the feel of the sticky hot fluid made Teagan moan, made his own length shed its own tears of pleasure. He glided that moist peak across the palm of his hand and spread the slick fire, it was a mark from his lover and Teagan found he very much liked that. The fire burned away his doubts, burned away his sharp awareness of his own limitations and weaknesses and left him raw, primal and bold.

Caught in that boldness, he tilted over, leaned down slowly, drawing his face and lips closer to the swollen desperate length. Daniel had his eyes closed, lost in a world of pleasure that Teagan had created, and so was unaware and unwarned in the moments before Teagan lapped softly, shyly, at Daniel's hardness.

Even though his tongue barely stroked Daniel's shaft, the stronger, normally so controlled man arched and gasped in a sharp, ragged breath. Hazel eyes flew open and were too hazy with lust and need and something more, something deeper that Teagan didn't know how to name, to even beg silently. They were filled with want and awe and amazement and this time they stayed open as Teagan took another careful, hesitant lick to the hardness he'd been toying with.

The burning in the eyes watching him screamed that Teagan was doing something right and he pushed onward. He found he liked the heat and hardness against his tongue so he pressed his lips to it, showering down soft kisses like falling petals. He found he liked the scent, musky and male with hints of sunshine and woods that Daniel always had clinging to him. It was a scent of health and vital, wanting male and of Daniel, his Daniel, and he found the scent alone made him shiver in want. Even the hints of taste his lips pulled from the heated, swollen flesh he found he liked. It was bitter and salty, musky and rich, not pleasant but not unpleasant and oddly appealing, those hints of taste drew him in deeper.

What he'd found so far he liked and slowly he grew bolder, moving to follow his hand up to the weeping crown. Daniel whimpered when he pressed his lips, softly, to the very end of the length he was tormenting. When he lapped at it with his tongue, gently at first but rapidly harder, wider, stronger when he found the feel and taste agreeable, Daniel dropped back onto the bed, clutched the sheets and moaned like something wounded. Teagan liked that sound, liked knowing he'd caused that sound and suddenly he understood why Daniel had so enjoyed being the one kissing before. It was better than wine, better, almost, than being the one kissed and that thought mixed with the remembered pleasure Daniel had given him, made Teagan bold enough to part his lips and gently slip the teased tip of Daniel's length into his mouth. The sounds Daniel made at such a small kiss combined with how his entire body writhed in its struggle to stay still and controlled, thrilled Teagan and he slid more of that delightful hardness into his mouth.

Daniel hissed a little and his eyes sprang open. "Careful!" He warned and reached to catch



Teagan's hair or shoulder but stopped with his hand open and halfway to where the dark haired man knelt.

The warning surprised Teagan, he'd thought he'd been doing well, and he quickly released his mouth from its captured prize. "I'm sorry."

"No..." Daniel panted and shook his head. "Just..." he felt his face blushing a little at having to explain and not being able to think clearly enough to find the words to do it. "Teeth... have to be careful of the teeth..."

"Oh." It hadn't even occurred to Teagan but when he thought of how vulnerable the position was and how sharp teeth could be, he understood. "I'm sorry."

"No...no...sometimes...it's good...just be careful..." He was already struggling with the need to grab Teagan and if he did, Daniel wasn't sure what he would do, force his head back down to finish what he'd been teasing with or roll the slender man under him and take him as he so desperately wanted to do. "Never be sorry..." He panted out and dropped his hand back down to clench the bed, trying very hard to behave.

"Should I continue?" Teagan asked as properly as if he were in class, asking if he should read the next paragraph.

"Only..." The thought of Teagan continuing was perfect and he had to swallow hard to remember to be patient and gentle. "Only if you wish it..."

Teagan nodded. "I like it, I like the feel of you in my mouth." He whispered again in the deeper, softly sultry tone and it or the words he used made Daniel shut his eyes and moan deep in his throat. "I like it very much." He whispered before he returned to his careful teasing exploration.

There was no shy uncertainty this time. Teagan held Daniel's length steady with one hand and held his hips still with the other. They tended to twitch and shiver and told him without the moans and pants that he was doing something right. Carefully, he took Daniel back into his mouth, mindful of his teeth this time and tried to repeat all the wonderful, delightful things that Daniel had done to him. He knew he fell short, knew he wasn't experienced enough to know just what to do but he licked and nipped, sucked and swallowed and teased his way along, enjoying just being able to explore nearly as much as the delightful reactions it earned him.

He would have happily continued exploring, learning which things earned the most reaction, if Daniel hadn't groaned, low and with a dark, hidden tone and half sat up.

"Stop..." Daniel panted out. "Te...Teagan...stop...I...I...can't..." His entire body sang with the need to find release, desperate now, shivering and almost beyond control and he was just barely able to remember that he couldn't come this way.

"I finished this way with you..." Teagan sighed and rubbed the side of his face against Daniel's thigh. "I want you to finish the same way. It's okay."

"Oh...oh fuck me..." Daniel cursed and felt his body arching, felt his toes curling as the request alone teetered him on the brink of release. Teagan saw it, grinned a wide wicked smile and again took a good half his length back into his mouth. The feel, the words, the sight, all became too much. "Oh...fuck...Teagan...I'm...I'm...oh..." Daniel couldn't speak, his vision blacked out, his voice twisted into stuttering moans and he came with nothing hidden or held back.

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Chapter Twenty Five

The progress on the final sections of fence that had to be torn out and replaced was slow. Daniel didn't like admitting defeat but he was sore and tired and until the bruises healed he knew well enough to take it easy. That meant sticking to easier tasks about the farm for his first week back which still were numerous. Even if he had been caught up there were extra things he wanted to do like repairing the old bird houses he'd found in the back of the barn and making a little fence to go around Teagan's garden. Nothing was vital or serious but it was all little things that made a farm feel lived in and well tended. He had plans for the farm and had been thinking of it in terms as partly his, even before his relationship with Teagan had progressed so far and even knowing it never was or could be his.

While it bothered him to leave the fences so close to being finished and yet not, he was glad to have the work that kept him busy and beyond Teagan's reach. The tasks he set himself didn't need two men, which meant there was no excuse for Teagan to help him. That was a good thing because he couldn't focus on work with the other man beside him, working or worse, watching him with those deep green eyes that seemed to be plotting wicked, evil things.

It wasn't like he really was complaining about the turn their friendship had taken. He wasn't, he knew he wasn't, but it made his heart ache when they touched. He was lucky to have Teagan as a friend, and there was little doubt even in Daniel's own mind that they'd become friends. He was even more lucky to have Teagan as a lover, because, well, that was just an extension of the friendship really, but it broke his heart to know that's all they ever would be.

Because he knew himself too well, knew that most people mistook his silences for stupidity or a slow wit but he was thinking all of the time. For too many weeks, months, his thoughts had centered around and settled on one man, Teagan, and even before he'd known that his employer's nephew shared his inclinations, Daniel knew he harbored emotions deeper than friendship. He knew he was prone to love too easily, which seemed an absurd idea given how distant and stoic he appeared to the world around him. There was no denying his nature, he didn't care half way and there was no way he could stop himself from loving Teagan. His only hope had been to keep that love as platonic friendship, brotherhood, but with one kiss he'd been lost.

Which brought him back to the fence and his mostly healed bruises. The work needed to be done but being alone with Teagan out in the far side of the field, surrounded only by tall grass and the line of trees to the other side, made work difficult. Teagan helped, as much as he was able, the same as always, but he wore a smirk that let Daniel know what was going on inside the dark head. Worse, those deep, lovely, green eyes were completely focused on his every move, watching with an intensity that made Daniel blush and think of things other than work.

That first day back into the fields, he made it almost until lunch before he snapped and grabbed Teagan. They'd tumbled down below the line of the tall, sweet smelling grasses, mouths struggling to consume each other. Teagan had learned enough, grown in confidence enough, the he boldly pulled at clothing, stretching fabric to expose Daniel's neck to be nipped and teased,

pulling open the front of his britches to shove a hand inside. It was that night that Daniel transferred some of the salve he'd purchased while away to a smaller, more portable tin because he didn't want to have to settle for hand or mouth when his body wanted more.

He'd grown comfortable being taken with amazing ease. It was normally a position he didn't assume with other men, preferring to be the one taking not taken. Only his friends, men he'd loved deeply, had been welcomed, hungered for, the way he did for Teagan. That didn't quench his burning need to take Teagan. Thoughts of seeing the dark haired man below him, whimpering, begging for more the way Daniel did under Teagan, woke him in the middle of the night, breathless and hard. He wasn't going to be fully satisfied until he had lived that fantasy or been told that Teagan was now totally unwilling to try.

That was the reason why the last few hundred feet of the fence was taking three times as long as it should have. They'd start in the morning, making good progress and Daniel would glance over and see that look in his lover's eyes.

"No." He'd mutter and keep working, ignoring Teagan's snicker at his denial.

They'd work a little more and Teagan's hand would brush against him, or a hip against his own. It was always some innocent seeming contact, something small and easily dismissed that never failed to make him shiver because Daniel knew it wasn't innocent.

"Work." He'd say and shake his head to ignore the sighing breath that tested his control. It was a single sigh that made Daniel question the value of working when he could be tussling in the grass with the slender man.

They'd continue for longer until Daniel was unable to work another moment. He'd struggle with his focus and control until every accidental touch that wasn't accidental nearly made him moan, until every moment of contact between their eyes made his heart flutter. When he was breathless from something other than the heat and sun and hard work he'd finally surrender.

"We should take a break." He'd suggest. It was innocent enough, something he'd have made before just to give Teagan an excuse to rest. Only now, with the evil lusty wickedness in Teagan's glances, his suggestion of rest never drew any protests.

"About time." Teagan would say as Daniel dropped to the ground.

Together they'd stagger into each other's arms. Teagan would knock Daniel's hat back to free his eyes from the sheltering shadows before reaching back to loosen his own hair. He's surprised Teagan with the small tin of salve and his willingness to be taken so boldly out there in the field.

It made getting the fence finished an almost impossible task. Daniel even considered sneaking out to the farm at night to tear apart that days work so that their time working in the tall grass together would continue forever. The only reason he didn't was because he knew the summer wouldn't last lifetime and sooner or later the tall grass that sheltered their lovemaking would fade and wither. Knowing that made their time alone under the sun all that sweeter and trying to falsely prolong that time seemed wrong.

"Daniel?" Teagan asked one day as they lay together, the water they'd brought into the field for their break was forgotten. He sat up from where he'd collapsed and glanced to where Daniel lay, his clothes in disarray, britches pulled low and exposing him. Seeing him there, so exposed in so much more than flesh, eyes shut, still flushed and panting for breath from their exertions made Teagan smile softly.

"Hmm?" Which was as intelligent of an answer as he was able to give until his brain made up its mind about functioning again or not.

"When will you take me?" It had seemed that Daniel had held an interest in swapping their places before but now days, weeks, had slipped away without it being mentioned. He was growing curious.

The question, spoken so softly and innocently, shot his eyes open and his brain tripped over its own feet. "What?" He asked but he knew from how Teagan was studying him just what he meant.

"Unless you don't want to now?"

"No...no I do...I just..." he glanced up to the blue sky above him to tell his body the conversation was just words and not worth getting excited about. "I thought you had no desire."

That made Teagan grin in a happy, wicked way. It was a smile he was wearing far too often of late. "No, I want to but only if you want to."

The grin nearly undid him. Daniel reached up and brushed black hair back before pulling Teagan down for a kiss. "I very much want to."

"Good, it's settled, next time you take me."

That made him grin now too. "Not that simple, but... next time... we'll start getting you ready." The grin turned into a scolding frown. "Stop pouting."

"I'm not..."

"You are."

"Okay a little, promise though that you will?"

Daniel just nodded.

"Good!" He stretched, yawned and struggled to get his pants straightened and closed.

"Just, not out here, we'll do it right."

"Right?"

"Not in a field."

"I like it in a field."

Daniel sighed.

"But I miss you naked against me."

"You shouldn't say such things."

"Shame that I do say them." He grinned again and stood up, his fingers chased after his scattered hair and pulled it back. "Shit."

"What?" He sat up but stopped himself from standing up.

Teagan glanced down but other than Daniel being naked and the grass being smashed a little flat there was nothing to give away what they'd just done. "Get dressed, my uncle's halfway across the field." Inside his head he was cussing his uncle's concern and his need to always check up on him. "Why is it he's always arriving at the worst time?"

"We could do these things less often."

Teagan just snorted and turned back to where his portly uncle was closer. He waved. "Hello Uncle!" He called out in greeting before lowering his voice down. "Not a chance about decreasing the amount of time spent in illicit affairs."

That wasn't something Daniel thought he could manage but he liked hearing Teagan deny the possibility. He was struggling to hide his own smile as he moved to make himself presentable, pulling up pants and finding his hat before striking a casual 'I didn't just bugger your nephew' pose.

"Well, if you boys are going to take a break you should have found a shadier spot!" Robin announced as he grew within eyeshot of where Daniel half sprawled on the ground, water set between him and the empty spot that had obviously held his nephew.

Daniel climbed to his feet but didn't answer.

"Fence is coming along nicely, indeed, nicely." Robin nodded and surveyed the work that had been done.

"Thank you, sir."

"What brings you by, Uncle?"

"Eh? I need a reason to visit my favorite nephew?"

"I'm your only nephew."

"Bitter child!" Robin scolded but laughed. "Wanted to stop in and see how Daniel was faring, heard you were in a bit of scrape while away."

"I'm fine."

"Good, good to hear. Teagan, lad, those supplies you ordered? They were brought up to the house, I ran them by for you to save the trip."

"Thank you, Uncle."

"Say, what's it all for? A slate and chalk? Books too basic for you?"

"I'm going to teach Daniel to read."

"You're what?" Daniel spoke out of turn, surprised that an issue he thought put to rest was so unexpected raised again.

"I'm going to teach you to read." He raised an eyebrow in challenge.

"I don't know..."

"Well, I for one think it's a grand idea! Frightfully hot out here..."

"We were about to come in for lunch." Which was kind of the truth, they normally came in for lunch after their rather active break.

Daniel gathered up the bottle of water and followed behind the pair. They talked of neighbors and gossip that he never really listened to but his ears perked up when they were closer to the house.

"Your aunt is right, you look almost healthy lad, truly almost healthy. Whatever was vexing at you a couple of weeks ago settled itself out?"

Teagan nodded. "It's Daniel's credit. He sees to it that I have fresh meat several times a week and I'm able to rest so much more with him here to help."

"Good! Good!" He puffed as they crossed the yard. "Garden looks real nice, Teagan, the books are on the porch, take them in before they get ruined."

He nodded. "Yes, uncle." But knew it was more because his uncle wanted a word with Daniel alone.

Robin waited until Teagan was to the side of the house before he turned on the younger man. "See now, I doubt you've any interest in learning your letters but it's the first time since his father passed away, god rest his soul, that Teagan's had any desire to do anything of the like. You'll let him teach you, do you understand? Consider it one of your duties to him."

"Yes, sir." Daniel nodded but in truth he wanted to try to learn. A man that could read wasn't the slave to those who could.

The easy compliance surprised him but he nodded. "Good. It pleases me, really pleases me to see the friendship between you two. Lizzie said you were a good sort, she's delighted by the by, simply delighted. Said I'm to think of you as one of the family." He clasped Daniel on the shoulder in a friendly way and was surprised by how startled the younger man looked at the words and contact.

"Mr. Walsh is a good man." Daniel muttered but the formal name felt odd on his lips.

"I've told him a dozen or more times to call me Teagan." The subject of their conversation announced as he came around the edge of the house. "He gets all formal around you, I think you scare him Uncle."

That made Robin snort a little in laughter. "I doubt that." He doubted the chaos and horror of Hell itself would scare the silent man his nephew was so fond of. "Now that you're back sticking your nose into our conversation, the social picnic is this week, it's our turn to host it. Don't make that face, your aunt is expecting you to attend. Bring Daniel along, it would do you both good to socialize with the young ladies more."

"Sir..." Daniel tried to protest.

The summer picnic social was hosted by the better families in the county and they took turns. Technically, everyone in the church was invited, everyone in the town really, but it was mostly the landowners that attended and never the Catholic.

"Would that be proper?"

Robin shrugged. "I wouldn't see why not, he is our man after all and it means you've no excuse to not attend. If you grew weary, he can see you home safe."

"True..." Teagan was thinking it would be a good excuse to leave the function early and have Daniel forced to come home with him. That would lead to happy things indeed!

"So it's settled. Good, good, your aunt will be delighted. Hmm she is right, the farm is looking quite good. I think maybe Daniel should come stay here, help keep an eye on things." Lizzie was all for the idea but Robin hadn't expected Teagan to ever agree.

He wanted to, desperately, but knew how odd that would be for him. "Really, Uncle I manage quite fine. I don't need someone in the house..." He paused to think about it, or at least pretend he was. "Come to think of it, it might not be a bad idea, if he has your permission that is, to stay here occasionally. It'll give me a better chance to tutor him and there are several smaller projects to tend to."

Which was far more acceptance than he'd thought to ever wrestle from Teagan. "Well, good then, hear that Danny? Stay here at the farm when it suits your work. I'll see to it that it's known you can be reached at your cottage or here."

He wasn't sure if he should be seething mad at being so ordered about or delighted that he now had a legitimate reason for spending the night, alone, with Teagan. "Yes sir." Daniel answered meekly but he planned to scold Teagan about being a brat when they were alone again, maybe even spank the man, that could be quite amusing. Those thoughts kept him on the pleased side of the emotions and he soon forgot to be angry at having his will overridden so easily.

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Chapter Twenty Six

"Stop frowning so, no wonder you scare everyone, wearing a face like that." Teagan teased as they rode the last distance to his uncle's house for the promised visit to the social get together.

"It's the only face I have." Daniel answered, and tried not to frown any more. Teagan looked quite nice, he'd been surprised as he'd only seen Teagan dressed in his Sunday best from a distance. There would be women there, all of them trying to flirt with his handsome lover and Daniel would spend the day trying to remember why he couldn't yell at them to go away.

"I don't know, the face you wore yesterday was less threatening, more...well...lusty."

"Teagan..." Daniel warned and glowered more.

"I know, I know." He sighed and glanced to the gathered collection of wagons and horses around the barn. "We're almost to prying eyes." Daniel had been so nervous about this function, about any casual mistakes or slips that could give away their relationship, that seducing him had been twice as difficult. He'd flat out refused to spend the night until they could face all of the county and pass as mere friends to even the biggest gossip. It had been his one condition for attendance but it wasn't one Teagan liked. "We won't stay long, I promise."

Daniel just nodded.

The gathering was quite nice, if he was going to look at it objectively. Daniel knew far more of the wealthy men of the county than he was ever willing to admit, or that were every willing to

admit knowing him. It wasn't all the most upper of crusts, there was a nice grouping of working class and the like but he noticed quite quickly that none were Catholic. That wasn't unusual or unexpected and if he was willing to look beyond that it was a nice afternoon for a social party.

The food was wonderful, but he was easy to please. Most of the women brought something and the assortment of meats, cheeses, fruits and breads was a pleasant surprise. There was plenty of ale and whiskey punch mixed up and music floated across the summer air. Everyone was dressed in their best and seemed in a pleasant mood, laughing and talking, catching up on births and illnesses.

It was all the things Daniel had never really had, that connection to community and home that he'd always lacked. Even now, he was there but he wasn't, not really, and he was introduced as the hired man he was so his place was never forgotten. The laughter and music reminded him of his childhood, for the celebrations of a neighbors wedding or the like that they'd attended. Times when his father hadn't been so serious and worried and his mother had smiled with no darkness in her eyes, only those parties had been filled with the coarser working class Daniel belonged to.

The only comfort he found as he followed Teagan around the lawn that was spread with blankets and people, was that while women did openly flirt with Teagan, none of it felt serious. Women did flirt, young and old, married and single alike but it all felt teasing and far from serious. He was pretty certain they picked Teagan to flirt with because they knew he was unlikely to take the words seriously and because it was equally obvious that his lover was very skilled at the art.

What did surprise him was how many women tried to flirt with him. Every time Daniel was more than a half dozen steps from Teagan some young woman was standing in his way, smiling and batting eyelashes at him. Not just the working class women either, a good share of them were quite well dressed and obviously from money and he was baffled by all their efforts. It confused him so much, in fact that it wasn't until the second or third that he even understood they were trying to flirt with him and after than Teagan still had to pop over and laugh and save him from being unforgivably rude.

It grew worse when Teagan stepped away with his young cousins as they dragged him away to show him something or the other but Daniel was expected to stand and listen to his employer introduce him to a man he wasn't supposed to know. Daniel was smart enough to know it was ruse to talk about rebellion and revolution in less obvious ways. The only problem was, when they had finished introducing him, Teagan was no where in sight and the women soon descended on him like some Biblical plague.

"There you are." Teagan announced as he rounded the building and found Daniel sitting on the old woodpile. The shed had been used by his Uncle as a small workshop when the man had been younger but now housed a small still and was mostly a place for him to come and have a few too many drinks with his friends on occasion away from the proper manners of the main house. Which meant it was hardly in use and slightly out of the way and the first place Teagan started checking on his search to find where Daniel had disappeared.

Daniel just gave him a look again, the one that almost begged to be allowed to go home.

"I came back from seeing the bird's nest the children had found and you were gone."

"I was outflanked by females."

The tone Daniel used was so miserable that he found himself outright laughing. "They do indeed seem quite taken with you." He laughed again at the long suffering scowl. "It's not you're fault you look like some broken hearted, pained character in a tragedy. Maybe if you tried to be nicer to them they wouldn't try so hard. Women love a challenge you know."

Daniel shook his head. "I wouldn't know."



"I like a challenge to."

He snorted.

Teagan grinned and liked knowing that even the prettiest of women that had flung herself at Daniel had only earned disinterest or score but the right words, the right tone of voice from him and Daniel was his. He offered a hand to help Daniel rise from where he was sitting. "I'm getting tired, we should go home." Which was only partially a lie, he wanted to be still somewhat alert when he got Daniel back to the farm because he had no plans of letting the man leave before dawn.

He knew he shouldn't take the offered hand. He knew what the touch of that hand even against his own hand could do to him. It wasn't safe, it would make him think and feel things that they couldn't give even a breath of a hint to. He took the offered hand anyway, hungry for Teagan's touch that had been denied him for most of the day.

It was as bad of an idea as he thought it would be. Teagan's fingers were as chilled as always in his hand. He felt his fingers caressing the slender fingers, trying to impart some of his own strength and warmth to the other man by contact and sheer will alone. It made him want to touch more than just a hand to a hand and made the idea of returning to the gathered group of people and the restrictions they imposed almost painful.

Teagan saw it all in Daniel's too expressive eyes and he stopped the stronger man from walking away. "Wait." He whispered and when Daniel glanced to him he reached his free hand up to the side of Daniel's face and brushed his fingertips across the worried tension held there. Only those hazel eyes, now focused on him so directly, made saying what he wanted to say more difficult.

"Daniel..." He had to glance away. "I'm glad you were rude to the women, I would have been uncontrollably jealous otherwise." He sighed and shook his head. "I don't mean to tease you for it, not when it pleases me that you'd rather hide back here than face their efforts at seduction."

That was too much. It was more than a hand held so carefully in his own, more than their tumbles in the tall grass. For a moment he wasn't sure he could breathe and he staggered under the effort to keep his control. It was too much, simply too much and far more than he'd ever dream of hearing from Teagan's lips.

There was nothing he could do, he pulled on the hand he held and gathered Teagan close to his body. His arms wrapped around the slender shoulders and held Teagan tightly. It startled the dark haired man for a second or two until it sunk in that the embrace felt amazingly good and he lightly rested his hands against Daniel's strength and hid his face against a shoulder. Somehow, held there in the circle of Daniel's arms, nothing else in the world mattered. And just as he thought it couldn't get any better, Daniel spoke.

His voice was hushed, deep and low, a secret confession he wasn't sure he should make but was helpless to prevent. "All I want is you." He whispered against the tucked away head and tried not to tighten his arms around Teagan too much.

The moment would have been pristine and perfect, something shared and private but a brightly colored ball rolled past Daniel's line of sight. As he turned to track the motion, his arms unwilling to let Teagan go until he knew the situation was safe, he was caught half turning by a man he knew by sight.

"Oh, my." The man whispered and came to a dead stop. His eyes had gone wide before he crouched down to gather up the ball he'd been chasing. "... my...just after the ball." He turned quickly to go.

Daniel was frightened he might be the one to pass out now. A thousand horrible fears settled on his shoulders and mind but still his arms were unwilling to release Teagan. It was all over now, they'd been reckless and sloppy and someone knew and soon whispers would be spread and it would all be taken from him.

Against the strong shoulder that was now tense and trembling, Teagan sighed. "My pastor." He admitted before he patted one of Daniel's shoulders, worried that the normally unshakeable man was on the verge of simply running away. "We'd best go see what he's saying before he says too much of it."

The calm, almost bored, words shocked him and Daniel glanced down to see if maybe Teagan had lost his mind. All he saw was determination and stubbornness. One he knew wouldn't be satisfied until he gave in and he felt himself nodding because he simply couldn't think of anything better to do.

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Chapter Twenty Seven

"It's my fault." Daniel whispered but unable to look at Teagan and all he was so close to having and now had lost. "I'll take the blame, I won't see any harm coming to you."

Teagan lightly slapped the side of Daniel's face, teasingly and in a friendly way. "Silly, overly noble, fool." That got Daniel's attention. "If you trust me there will be no blame to be given. Now, how do I look?"

"What?"

"How do I look?" He asked again as if the having to repeat the question was stupid. "Do I look sick?"

Daniel shrugged. "You always look sick."

"Hmm." Teagan drew a slow breath and slouched his shoulders. He figured enough of his hair had slipped free from its control to make him look a little thread worn and he finished the look by slacking his mouth into a little bit of a frustrated line and holding his head as if it were too heavy on his neck. "What? You don't think I've been an invalid my entire life and not learned how to look both healthier and sicker than I feel?" He shook his head and let him smile for a moment. It was the worry that still clung to Daniel that stopped his teasing. "Don't fuss, I'm not giving you up. I'll make myself sick for real and demand you care for me first."

The seriousness of Teagan's words worried him and thrilled him. "I trust you." Which wasn't something he did lightly or often and rarely meant even when he spoke those words. This time

he did mean it but he mentally began to prepare for a back up plan, several actually, depending on whether or not Teagan was willing to go with him.

“Good, now lets see where that man’s gotten to.”

Daniel followed him like a specter, grim and foreboding doom with the dark and pained look on his face but Teagan couldn’t bring himself to tease or scold the younger man. He was nervous as well, frightened they had been caught and what companionship he’d managed to find for the first time in his life would be taken from him by one stupid accident. The trouble was, being frightened would do absolutely no good. This was a social problem and if there was anything Teagan knew it was how to get out of a social situation with his skin and his reputation intact.

Father Boudlin wasn’t difficult to spot. The ball he’d retrieved was being played with by a group of children who’s game had carried them closer to the woodshed but the pastor had moved back to the main gathering of adults. The man had scurried like a cat with its tail on fire straight to the picnic’s host and currently stood with his uncle away from other people. He was leaned in close, one arm clutching Robin’s arm and his eyes and face quickly darting over to where they had emerged from behind the small building.

Teagan sighed but moved toward where Lizzie was laughing as she walked away from a group of women. He caught her eye and her laughed faded and she hurried over and saved him the trip of trying to catch up with her.

“Daniel.” Lizzie grinned a little at the silent man following her nephew. “Teagan, dear, you look dreadful and you’re a total liar. I’ll cover for you if you two wish to escape and go home early.”

“Not that simple.” He answered and hoped that Daniel didn’t grasp her meaning from the gloating look she’d given him. Daniel was so worried about anyone knowing about them, he couldn’t say how the man might react to knowing Lizzie had guessed on her own.

“Hmm?”

He tossed a look to where his uncle was looking more and more concerned. He was shaking his now and frowning at them. Lizzie followed his look and shook her head. “What’s happened?”

“Just malicious suspicions.”

“Just that?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Promise.”

“Well, that can be quelled. Along with you now.” She slipped forward and helped to quietly steady him as she would if he had been really ill instead of faking it. It was a fine balance between trying too hard to show how exhausted and ill Teagan was and making sure every eye that fell on them noticed the careful way she slowly moved the pair across the lawn and into the house.

“Thank you, Lizzie.”

“Thank me when this is settled. Both of you, get in there now and you trouble child, lay down and look ill.”

“I think I can manage that.”

“And hold your tongue when I bring them in. Can you manage that as well?”

“Wench.”

But instead of staying to exchange banter, Lizzie had hurried back outside and left them alone. Teagan gathered a small velvet pillow from a well stuffed chair and a blanket from over it's back and moved to the long, ugly wood bench that had been in the house forever. It had a nice high back, a wide seat and a tall blocky arm on each end and it was the perfect size for Teagan to stretch out on when he was feeling faint.

"Don't look so, it'll be okay." He grinned lightly to where Daniel stood in the far corner of the room, his back to a wall facing the door and still looked as if he was about to face his own execution. Teagan's attempt to comfort fell on deaf ears as it seemed it didn't ease Daniel's mind one bit so he shook his head and settled down on the bench and tried to look as miserable and ill as he could.

It wasn't too long of a wait until footsteps and door slams echoed in the house and male voices, hushed and short tempered bounced in the old hallways. Lizzie was the first to arrive, moving with a small ceramic bowl of cool water and a damp cloth to fold her skirts about her and kneel by the bench to play the part of nurse maid. Father Boudlin was still slightly clutching at Robin and his uncle was still shaking his head as they hurried into the room.

"What's this nonsense now." Robin demanded. "We're in private and we're all quite old enough to speak plainly. If you've some fault with my nephew, I'd hear it." Robin glanced to where Teagan lay, looking pale and sick and over to where Daniel stood looking like death made flesh and wasn't sure which man frightened him more.

"Abomination." The clergyman hissed softly, as if he was afraid just saying the word would unleash some unseen evil. "I saw it, with my own eyes." He declared and wrung his hands together, pained at having to deliver such news.

"Saw what?" Robin demanded, frowning now and not liking the implications.

"The evil that brought down the cities of old, the vulgarities of the continent!"

"Really, if you two are going to speak in riddles go elsewhere, can't you see Teagan isn't well?" Lizzie scolded and soothed the damp cloth across Teagan's pale face.

"If only this could be so easily dismissed, Mrs. Roberts, but I fear not! I saw them, when I chased the children's run away ball and a blessing it was I that followed that toy into the woods!"

"Saw what?" Robin demanded in growing frustration.

"Those two, your woodsman and nephew, behind the shed..." the clergyman had to pause to gain courage. "Embracing most passionately! Most closely!"

"Are you accusing my nephew of sodomy?" Robin asked shocked and not at all surprised that the plain, bold speech didn't shock his wife.

"I know what I saw and this can not be taken lightly."

"You saw these two young men in an embrace?" Robin questioned, suddenly growing more annoyed than angry.

"Yes."

"And it was Teagan being held so closely, was it not?"

"Quite closely, intimately, head cradled against chest."

"I can see why you'd mistake that."

"Mistake?"

"My nephew is quite ill and you know this but perhaps his valor in the face of his own limitations has done him a disservice. I will not mince words here because this accusation is so bold. Teagan is dying, he's outlived the longest we've expected him to survive by nearly a decade. He has good days and he has poor days but across it all that young man has held a sense of dignity and pride I can only wish to gain facing my own decline."

"But I saw..."

"You saw a man who often grows faint and unable to even stand on his own strength who has, for the first time since his father passed away, god rest the man's soul, a friend and confidant that he can show weakness too while holding the scraps of his dignity together."

"But they were hidden away..."

"Would you wish to be a spectacle every time you felt ill?" Lizzie tossed out in defense snappish words.

"I..." The clergyman glanced to the ill man who did look tremendously sick but who was virtually a stranger to him and, he suspected, someone that wasn't fond of him and over to the silent man who's reputation moved about the county like a brush fire. "No, I wouldn't wish that."

"You've made a serious accusation, you should apologize." Robin folded his arms across his chest.

"I'm..." He had to draw a breath. "For leaping to the worst and wrong conclusion, I beg the forgives of you and your family. I shouldn't have thought such things." But he'd seen it and it hadn't looked like anyone was about to faint, but it had looked like Teagan was being supported. Doubt settled in and he couldn't fully swear to what he saw, not when Robin Roberts was siding with his nephew.

"It's a human mistake." Robin smiled. "But I'm sure no one here wishes such a nasty rumor to be spread about. It would be wrong to tarnish anyone's reputation needlessly."

"Yes, yes, quite right. I'm sorry, I should return to the party and leave you attend your family. I do hope and pray for a rapid recovery."

Robin patted the other man on the shoulder and with comforting words to soothe embarrassed egos, he guided the man out of the parlor and out of the house. As soon as he'd removed him he hurried back to where his wife and nephew waited.

"Praise the good Lord, it's a miracle, you've recovered!" Robin mocked as he rejoined them.

"I wouldn't know what you mean, Uncle." Teagan sighed, a hand tossed over his face.

Robin snorted. "My wife isn't the only one capable of seeing through your little shows, lad. May as well sit up if you can and someone had better start telling me what's going on."

Teagan groaned a little, swayed a little and it wasn't in show. It took a little to get sitting up and stop feeling light headed and he heard the shuffle of Daniel's feet as the man struggled with coming over to help him or to stay put. The choice was taken from him because Lizzie was closer and moved faster to steady him.

"Nothing is going on to tell, Uncle."

"Is it now?" Robin glanced from his nephew to Daniel and wasn't sure what he was seeing there. Slowly the suspicion of the truth began to sink in and he moved to drop his weight into a chair. He cursed vividly and creatively under his breath as he glanced between the two men.

"Really, Robin, is there a need for such language?"

He narrowed his eyes at his wife. "You knew! You knew and you let me strip down a man of God and practically call him a liar!"

"There's nothing to know, Uncle."

"Snakes and liars all of you!" He shook his head.

"Sir..." Daniel tried to speak but the look Teagan shot him was withering and he had to stop to gather his thoughts. "I take full responsibility."

"How could you do this? He was a good boy!" Robin scolded.

"I'm sorry, sir." Daniel apologized.

"Not you, not you, that sneak of a nephew I have."

Teagan sat up straighter. "What?"

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Chapter Twenty Eight

"Don't what me lad!" Robin nearly roared and pushed his bulk to his feet. "Looking all innocent and vexed at accusation won't work this time!" He moved over to the crystal decanter that sat on a table and poured out a finger width of strong liquor. He slammed it back before pouring more, only this time putting some in three more glasses. "And you," He said as he turned back to where Daniel looked stubborn and dangerous as he stood ready to charge into hell if ordered and pressed the tumbler of drink at the young man. "He maybe my nephew but I'm well away what an indulged brat he is, I won't see blame falling where it doesn't belong."

"Hey!"

Robin passed out glasses to his nephew and wife. "Teagan!" He scolded and took his seat again with his second serving of drink. "Do you really think you could have fooled your father, god rest his soul?"

Teagan glanced from Lizzie to Daniel to his uncle. "What?" Only now there was no protesting

tone to his voice and he was really confused. "What did you say?"

Robin snorted, tickled that for once he'd caught his clever nephew off guard. "Do you think your father could have been so close to you and never noticed? Here I was, the fool I am, comforting him that your lack of interest in women was simply from illness."

"Father knew?"

"Suspected." Robin shook his head and glanced to Daniel before settling back on his nephew. "Why is it you think he just suggested you return to that lady in the city instead of escorting you there? Neither your father nor I are so provincial to think that a good woman can change a man's mind about this matter."

Teagan felt like he might faint, his head was far too light and he was dizzy but it wasn't physical. "And this is okay?"

"No!" Robin snapped back. "It's not okay, lad! It's against the laws of man and God, if you believe those things. It's not okay and it won't be okay simply because your health is fragile! Just because most will turn a blind eye doesn't mean this is okay, far, far from it!" He swirled his drink in his glass and watched the liquid spin. "However..." he continued with a less harsh tone. "I'm in agreement with your father's belief and would only wish you happiness, lad. I had hoped it would never be an issue that required addressing."

"Uncle..."

"Were the two of you being indiscreet?"

Teagan knew Daniel would answer honestly so he snapped to answer first. "No, I was off balance. Nothing was observed beyond what was said." It wasn't entirely a lie, Daniel did make him feel off balance and a touch weak in the knees.

The words made Robin snort and he sat thinking. He knew from the look in his wife's eyes that she'd known or suspected and more that she approved but this was a situation larger than their own family. He frowned when he glanced to Daniel, a man he'd never would have suspected of having such tastes and saw protectiveness in his hazel eyes, fierce protectiveness.

"You had no right." Robin finally spoke and he let his eyes slide back to his nephew. "I understand loneliness lad, I do, bitterly so." He glanced to Lizzie and felt a small smile tug at his lips, she was the end of his loneliness and it was an end he'd thought himself too old to find. "But that is no excuse, Daniel is a good boy, I've never known a stronger man. You'd no right to wheedle until you gained your own way, not in an issue like this. You should have let him be or at most just been a friend. I know he seems older but he's barely old enough to shave and as the older you should have shown more restraint."

It was only a slight stretch, Daniel was a mature, fully grown man but he was young. Teagan sometimes was caught, surprised, when some of the glow of pleasure was starting to fade. He'd glance to Daniel and be almost shocked at how young the other man looked when he wasn't trying to look like an expressionless stone or trying to hide his eyes. Daniel was young, far younger than a man that had done and seen the things he'd experienced had a right to be and it gave him an air of maturity that wasn't entirely fair. He was still young enough that he should find a good wife, raise a family, have children, not be wasting his time soothing one sick man's lonely heart.

"You're right." Teagan heard himself whisper, suddenly both broken hearted and sick knowing he had pushed Daniel into a relationship. He'd demanded more at every turn and hadn't stopped until Daniel had relented. "I'm sorry." He dropped his head, unable to do what was right while being able to see Daniel. "I did push, demand. Daniel has attempted to be proper in every regard

but I insisted upon more.”

That was too much. Daniel stepped forward ready to physically pick up Teagan and carry him bodily away from such nonsense if he had to. “No.” He growled out and pried his eyes from Teagan to lock them on his employer, knowing he was throwing away the best job he had ever had as well as the only home he’d managed to call his own and he didn’t care. “Stop it, sir.”

Robin pointed to his nephew. “He took advantage of you!”

“No!” His hands balled up into fists but this wasn’t a fight to be one with them. It would take words and that had never been his best weapon. “I don’t have many years, but I’m not innocent.” He struggled to breathe, desperate to say whatever was needed to protect Teagan. “I... I like men. I always have, no one, man or woman, can force me into anything I don’t will, no one.” He glanced around the room and felt trapped by the steady, accusing eyes on him but he couldn’t escape so lightly. If he was going to leap from the cliff, he was going to leap as far and wildly as he could. “My protests to your nephew’s advances toward me have strictly been because I know this sort of involvement wouldn’t be allowed and I wished no harm to come to him because of me. I would do anything, anything, to protect Teagan.” He had to drop his eyes, trembling now from having to be the center of attention and all the fears of what would happen if they’d been caught. “There is nothing more important in the world to me than your nephew.” He heard himself confess. “I’ll pack up and be gone before nightfall.”

He wanted one more look at Teagan to take with him but it was a bad idea. The green eyes were cold, shocked looking but the expressive face was twisted up in emotion. He looked ready to faint, too pale with dark circles under his eyes and quiet ill without faking or stretching how he felt. He looked haunted and fearful, remorseful and brokenhearted. More so, at his statement of leaving, Daniel saw a look of sheer terror cross the mobile face and heard Teagan’s breathing grow shorter. It made him want to take the slender body in his arms and soothe the dark hair until the man had calmed down and the threat of a collapse had faded.

That was something he couldn’t do, had no right to do. The only thing he had left that he could do to protect Teagan was to leave him be. They’d nearly been caught and they couldn’t risk it happening again. He knew his willpower when it came to Teagan was nonexistent and he had to put miles between them to keep from making another mistake and not being so lucky the second time. It didn’t matter that it would kill him to go, he’d known it couldn’t last but knowing that didn’t make it hurt less.

Daniel made it a few steps to the door, Robin actually let him get that far only because he was surprised the younger man was so bold as to be willing to go away to protect his nephew. The look of such haunted torment in his hazel eyes had overflowed and made his normally stoic face look torn by agony as if every step was over broken glass and it shocked Robin. Shocked him almost as much as seeing the look repeated on Teagan’s face, his nephew looked noticeably more ill with every step and it was at the small, trapped animal moan that he made that Robin stood up and stopped the little scene.

“Hold, lad!” He barked out. “Who said you could just so easily run away?”

Daniel stopped, frozen by habit at the snapped order but wished he’d have broken into a run instead.

“Do you think I’ll approve of you becoming involved with my favorite nephew only to skip away and leave?”

“Sir, is what’s best.” Daniel muttered.

Robin noticed how Daniel’s hands were wrapped so tightly around the glass of untouched drink and worried that the younger man would break the glass and badly cut his hands. He stood,



careful to move slowly knowing how tightly wound up Daniel was and how deadly the man could be, and covered the younger man's hands with his own. "Does it feel like what's best, lad?"

Daniel only shook his head, unable to speak now that he was torn into pieces by the war between his heart and mind.

"Teagan, lad, do you believe it's best for Daniel to go away to avoid the chance of your relationship being discovered?"

"I don't give a bloody damn if it is!"

Which was about what he thought his nephew would say he nodded and glanced to his wife just to make sure she was in agreement and found only a small, soft smile on her face and knew she felt their relationship was a good idea. "Not the most productive attitude but I understand the emotion." He rested a hand on Daniel's tense shoulder. "Sit down and finish your drink, son."

The voice was warm, kindly and not what Daniel had been expecting. He glanced over, startled and saw only the same emotions on the older man's face. There was nothing to do but nod and take a seat on one of the wood straight backed chairs near the wall. The glass was warmed in his hand and he downed the liquor in one quick, burning swallow and was grateful as it hit his stomach and spread its warmth.

"You okay, lad?" Robin asked his nephew, worried now that the man really might pass out he was growing so pale and faded looking.

Teagan nodded and found that he could breathe again. When Daniel had tried to leave he couldn't find any air in the room to take into his lungs and was pretty sure he was going to become violently ill. Which might not have sounded terribly productive but if he'd blacked out there was some small hope that Daniel would wait until he was awake again to leave.

"Good now, if you're not planning on running off like a frightened schoolgirl and if you aren't going to make yourself sick, maybe I can have a say?" He was starting to feel smug but young lovers were all fools, didn't matter what gender they were in.

"Now you're just showing off." Lizzie whispered softly into the silent room as both younger men nodded.

"Hush, wife." But he was trying not to grin a little, happy his wife knew him so well. "Now, I want to never hear a whispered word about the two of you beyond what you should be. Nothing more than how an ill man has befriended his man and how loyal you are Daniel, understood?" He waited for more nods. "I don't want to ever...ever... have to contemplate your....relationship. I may be progressive enough to not scream at the two of you about sin and damnation but I don't want to think about it any, ever." He shook his head, tried to picture the two men in a private moment and frowned a little. "In fact, the less I have to think about it, the better off, I say. I'm happy pretending to be a blind old fuddy duddy. Understand?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Good, good..." Both of the young men still looked miserable. "As far as I'm concerned, you two are just good friends, that's all I need to know and all I should ever hear."

"Yes, Uncle."

"But right now, I do know so, Teagan lad, keep this in mind. You are older, act like it and behave and don't badger the poor boy. Behave and be respectful, Daniel seems to have a good head on those shoulders of his so if he warns caution you damned well better listen!"

"Yes, Uncle."

"And you, Danny boy, don't you hurt him. You've gotten yourself mixed up with a stubborn, spoiled fool."

"Hey!"

"But he's a kind hearted fool at that." Robin ignored his nephew's protests. "You've mixed yourself up with him and I won't take it kindly if you hurt him, in any way."

"Yes sir." Daniel muttered.

"And son, I know your past, at least what all of us know. You treat my nephew right, care for him and be kind, well, I can see it like you're one of the family yourself and I'd think it right for you to think of me as more than just an employer."

It was the last thing Daniel had expected to hear, ever. People never cared for him, he drank too much if he had access to it and he fought too easily if provoked and he had no trouble drawing blood. People didn't just not care for him, they were outright frightened of him. He'd grown used to that distance and was comfortable in it. He'd never expected to have it be anything different when the option to come work for Robin Roberts had been presented to him.

He certainly hadn't expected the man to understand all he had. At the least, Daniel should have been asked to leave, maybe even have been fired from the groups private employ but he was willing to bet his skills were more useful than his desires were distasteful and they'd have just shuffled him somewhere else. At the worst, he had expected to be condemned and turned out, off of the property and county and out of the groups hire. He hadn't expected to be allowed to continue as if nothing had changed and never would have dreamed that he'd almost have Teagan's family's blessing for the relationship.

It was too much, far too much and it unmanned him. For the first time since his father's death he felt small and young and unable to cope. It left him feeling trembling and weak and he wanted to escape only this time he wanted to escape someplace private and safe with Teagan at his side.

Teagan saw the other man struggling with emotion that didn't hardly even reach the surface and he knew that Daniel wouldn't ever be able to speak when he was like this. "Thank you, Uncle." He spoke softly, warmly and with all the gratitude he felt.

"Well," there was nothing teasing or bitter in his nephew's voice and that was such a rare occasion it left Robin nearly speechless. "Get on with you two. Danny get him home where he can rest, you've both had a fright, let it teach you to be more careful and let's never talk about this again. Right then, I've a party to host, you too my dear."

Lizzie stood and patted Teagan's shoulder as she brushed by but she took the hand her husband held out to her and squeezed it. "That's my good, good man." And the love in her tone made the older man blush and sputter about nothing as they made their way back outside and left the two young men alone.

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## Visions & Shadows

### Chapter Twenty Nine

It left them sitting alone together inside the parlor that Teagan had shared tea and gossip in more times than he could remember. Only now, the weight in the room was almost enough to crush his breath away and he sat, trying to steady himself. He felt like his head was spinning, the sudden emotional ups and downs had shocked him and made him ill but sitting there now, alone with Daniel suddenly felt like the most difficult thing to accept.

He might not have gotten it pulled together if Daniel hadn't looked worse off. The younger man sat, eyes slightly too wide and looked shocked. Stunned might be a better word for it but he didn't look well. The look on his face was blank and this time even his eyes were empty. It worried Teagan to see and he forced himself to stand and go over to kneel by the chair Daniel had dropped in.

"Are you okay?"

That earned him a few rapid blinks and slowly Daniel's eyes focused on him but still he didn't speak.

"Daniel?"

Work roughened hands snapped out and caught the sides of Teagan's face but froze there. A look of desperation crossed the normally unreadable face and Daniel's breath moved to fast. Teagan could see he was struggling with whatever it was he wanted to say or didn't wish to do.

He covered one the hands with his own and smiled. "Take me home?"

That earned him a little more focus and Daniel nodded, his hands slid away. "I'll get the horses." It was a good escape, something logical that he could run away and do. He needed that, some task that had logical steps for him to focus on and do or else he feared he might fall apart or find out he'd gone crazy and it all was some madness of his mind. "Horses." He nodded again and stood up.

"I'll be ready to go as soon as you are." But he may as well have spoken to himself, Daniel was out of the room as if he was frightened to be alone with him for a second longer than he had to be.

Teagan waited just long enough to finish his own drink, sipping a little at it before downing it in a big swallow. He figured he was going to need the strong liquor to brace himself against Daniel's odd, stunned mood. With it burning a happy spot in his stomach, he set the glass down and stood with a groan, clutching at the arm of a chair until he felt a touch more stable. He wasn't going to really fall ill, not until after he got Daniel behind a securely closed door anyway.

By the time he'd made his careful and slow paced way to the barn, Daniel had made good on his promise and had the horses ready. He ignored the looks he gained, mostly from his uncle's hired men but some from the picnic as well that had gone for walks to help digest the lunch they'd just had. He knew he must look awful but he was used to that and used to ignoring those glances.

Daniel was about the only person not looking at him, his eyes were kept firmly down. Which meant that Teagan had an almost impossible task of figuring out what he was thinking because if Daniel didn't want him to know, he wasn't likely to guess. Luckily, Daniel didn't have to feel like sharing to instantly know that Teagan was worn out and unsteady, he moved and helped hold the horse in place and balance Teagan a little as he got himself pulled up into the saddle.

"Thank you." He spoke softly but Daniel just nodded and showed he had no trouble getting on his own horse.

They rode in silence, and it almost became a physical discomfort to Teagan. Like some itch that he couldn't reach to scratch but there seemed no way to draw Daniel out. The man was even going so far as to ride a few feet slightly to the side and behind Teagan, adding physical space to the distance of silence between them. It wasn't long until they were away and with no houses around and Teagan thought he might snap if they continued without speaking.

"Guess you're not feeling very talkative." And even he flinched from the acidity in his tone.

Not surprisingly, the only answer he got back was the sounds of the horse's hooves.

The only thing that saved him from fuming in near rage deep anger was his own exhaustion. He had to focus to stay safely on his horse and toward the end of the trip home he wasn't sure he was going to make it. It was only knowing if he stopped for a break that he wouldn't get back into the saddle and would have to walk or be lifted onto the horse like a child that kept him pushing until he got home.

"Thank God." He sighed as he brought his horse to a stop and slipped back to the ground.

Only his knees buckled, his legs simply gave out. He started to fall and clutched at the saddle which half spooked his normally steady horse and caused the poor thing to skitter a little to the side. It could have ended badly and would have ended with Teagan dumped onto the ground of a strong hand hadn't appeared around his waist and another one caught the horse's bridle.

"Shhhh easy now, easy...." Daniel soothed to the beast but it seemed to work for the man as well and got both steadied and still. He slid his hand from the side of Teagan's hip to all the way around his waist, arm encircling the slender man.

"I'm alright."

Daniel grunted a small sound that was neither agreement nor disagreement.

It felt good, to be held there between the strength of the horse and Daniel's quiet protection. He sighed a little and relaxed, easing into and against the body behind him. "I'm just tired."

"Go inside, I'll take care of the horses." Daniel spoke softly and struggled with letting Teagan go. He wanted to scoop the man up and carry him in, set him down and make him rest but he doubted that kind of care would be welcomed.

He nodded but it was a second before Daniel let him go and then Teagan wasn't sure he wanted to be let go. He sighed and slipped away to go inside and wait, praying that Daniel wouldn't simply scurry away while he wasn't watching. That would be bad because he was too tired to chase after him, at least not until after he had a chance to rest and settle himself down.

When the door opened, Teagan thought he might pass out. The sound set his heart to beating too fast and it felt thready and weak but he pushed the sense of concern it gave him away and turned to glance at Daniel. The younger man still had his eyes down but he looked suddenly as nervous as he had those first days after that first stunning kiss. He paused inside the door before shutting it behind him and sweeping his hat off his head as almost an afterthought.

"You don't have to stay." Teagan heard himself saying but he really didn't mean it. He stood up and still Daniel didn't move. "I need to rest, I'm just tired."

"Teagan..." The name about choked him. He'd been dreading have to have a conversation about what had happened. The last thing he'd expected was for Teagan to just brush it off and tell him it was okay to leave.

For as still as Daniel was, when he moved it was quickly and Teagan barely had time to notice the movement before arms wrapped around him. There was nothing restrained or gentle in the embrace, it caught Teagan and pulled him crushingly close. Daniel's arms consumed him and left not even a breath of space between their bodies. It was how Daniel tucked his face as tightly to Teagan's neck as their bodies were pressed together that about broke his heart. There was something desperate to the embrace, something near panic and totally unlike the Daniel he'd known.

"Daniel?" Teagan questioned after a moment.

For a moment the hug tightened before Daniel was able to loosen his grip a bit. "I nearly lost you." He muttered and felt his arms tightening again.

"Well you seemed ready enough to walk away." It wasn't what he wanted to say, it wasn't even what he was really thinking, but the words came out.

The accusation was cutting but truthful and he could only answer by not looking at Teagan. "I would do anything, endure anything, to keep you safe." He had to swallow hard to keep his control. "Even if it means giving you up."

It was noble and wonderful and his arms rose to hold Daniel nearly as tightly as he was being held. "That's the most idiotic thing I've ever heard."

If he hadn't heard the warmth in the sharp retort it might have hurt him but he could tell Teagan understood. Which was good because he found himself unable to explain further and unable to let go.

"I do need to rest."

He nodded.

"Lay down with me?" He sighed when the arms tightened again. "It would bring me great comfort to fall asleep with you there." And he knew he was being unfair because there was no way Daniel would or could say no to that.

"Can't promise I'll stay."

"I don't expect you to sleep, just, stay with me until I do?"

Daniel drew a long slow breath, taking in the scent of Teagan's hair and skin and using that to steady himself. "Alright." He would do nearly anything to keep holding Teagan close and if that meant laying down for an afternoon nap, he'd lay down gladly.

He wasn't expecting Teagan to lead him back to his bedroom, his bedroom not the one that Daniel had been in before. It had thicker curtains over the window which helped to explain how Teagan was able to sleep in so late some days and most of the fabrics were in rich, dark colors. It suited the man but he tried to picture Teagan as a younger child living in such a space and failed. It felt too serious for a boy but Daniel was quick to admit he had no real idea what a wealthy young man's bedroom should look like. He'd never had his own room and it wasn't until

he was released from service that he'd ever spent a night alone in a room without the sounds of others sleeping near by.

Teagan paused and smiled softly. "You don't nap?"

Daniel just shook his head.

"I'm an expert. I'll fall asleep sitting up if I'm tired. Boots off and get comfortable."

"I'm not sleeping."

"I don't care, I don't want the imprint of a button on my forehead."

He tried to look upset but it was difficult to hold that look when Teagan was easily and eagerly peeling layers of clothing off. It wasn't quite naked but it was close enough that he found his own hands stripping away waist coat and jacket as well, draping them over the edge of the bed to have ready for when he slipped away later.

With boots off, Teagan climbed onto the bed and dragged a light blanket from the far side. It would provide no warmth but just the comfort of the weight of it always made him feel better. He was breathing too hard now, exhausted to the point of near sickness, he had to rest and he hoped that Daniel would stay long enough for him to really, deeply be asleep. For now, he was just happy he didn't have to coax Daniel onto the bed, the man slipped onto the soft surface easily.

Teagan waited only long enough for Daniel to half prop himself up against the wood headboard on pillows before he slipped in and curled up on Daniel's chest. It was his turn to dig his hands into the loose fabric of Daniel's shirt and pull him close, to hide his face against the other man.

"Don't you understand?" Teagan said softly into the still and silent bedroom. "Just thinking about you leaving in some convoluted idea of protecting me makes me sick. I don't know how I'd function without you any longer." The softly spoken words earned him no words in reply but one of Daniel's hands rose up and gently cupped the back of his head. It felt perfect and he felt safe and sheltered and it wasn't too long until exhaustion and illness clawed him down and he fell asleep.

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Naps were just that, a few hours of rest to help him get along the rest of the day, and sleep didn't hold Teagan down for too long. Awareness crept back in with small patches that slowly built to form a larger whole. He noticed that the sunlight still seeped in around the curtains and that the angle showed he'd only been down for a few hours. His neck hurt and his body felt a little numb and sore, which wasn't unusual when he'd had a rough afternoon. What was unusual was that he wasn't curled up around pillows and it slowly sunk into his sleep fogged brain that it was Daniel he was sleeping on. That made him smile and a sleepy, happy sigh escaped him as he slowly stretched to wake up.

That made a hand stroke his hair, which was loosened and he hadn't remembered doing that, and pulled another sigh from him. "I'm awake." He muttered but didn't feel all that willing to crawl away from the lovely, comfortable embrace he'd slept in. "You stayed." The idea made him smile and that simple choice and the chance to wake up again in Daniel's arms made him smile.

"Fell asleep." Daniel admitted.

The idea of Daniel, Mr. Work-until-all-work-is-done, falling asleep for a quick afternoon nap made him chuckle. Teagan squirmed around a bit until he was turned to look up at Daniel. "Good, oh I like waking up and having you here."

Only now that he was awake and rested and not feeling so lightheaded and sick it all sunk in and he clutched a little at Daniel and refused to remove his head from the man's chest. "My uncle knows."

Daniel just nodded.

"He knows and isn't angry or hateful."

Daniel stopped nodding and stroked back a stray strand of hair off the proud face. "He cares about you."

"I've always known that but this is a big thing to overlook."

"He's not overlooking it. You're very lucky. My father he wouldn't have taken it so well."

"My father knew, or suspected, oh, I wish I'd have spoken to him about this, I..."

He glided a thumb across Teagan's cheek. "I don't think he was upset that it went unspoken."

"He was a good man, you'd have really liked him." He never spoke of his father if he could avoid it. Even after the distance of time it still hurt to remember that he was gone, really gone. "I shouldn't have outlived him, the fever should have taken me."

"Don't say that."

"It's true. Even at his worst, he didn't believe the fever would take him, he couldn't imagine passing away before me." Daniel, who never once looked at him oddly or thought of him differently because of his illness now watched him with a look of near panicked fear at the conversation of about his death. "I didn't understand before, why I've lived so much longer than I should have but I think it was so I could meet you. Don't worry, I'm actually pretty healthy. Couple of years ago, I was sick all the time, one thing after another. I'm about as healthy as I get anyway." He smiled softly because the look of hidden unspoken worry didn't seem eased and he really didn't want the specter of his death to haunt what they had now.

"See that you stay that way." Daniel heard himself scolding but he caught the back of Teagan's head, hand buried in black silken hair and gently lifted the man up, bringing him close to kiss.

The lips were teasing against his own, sensing it was more of a comfort kiss than one of passion but Daniel had little doubt that Teagan would happily accept a deeper contact if he was willing to push. All he wanted to do was grab Teagan, wrap his arms around him and never, ever, let go, which wasn't practical or useful and he wasn't going to do it.

The kiss was sweet and tender and Teagan sighed against those lips that expressed so few words but spoke so loudly with such gentle contact. "I'll make us dinner."

He wasn't really sure he was going to stay once Teagan was awake but he found the casual assumption that he would be too strong to break. "Okay." Besides, he did have a list of chores that he could do, small things, while Teagan fussed with food. He wouldn't really be staying to spend more time with the proud, slender man, he would be staying to complete his job better. It was a total lie, he knew it was a lie but it was a happy one that let him do what he really wanted to do without having to debate it with himself first.

Teagan sat up and stretched. "Stop thinking so much, go on, do whatever it is you need to do, I'll call you when I've something thrown together."

Dinner was simple but far better than either man was really used to. For Teagan it was the company, he'd never noticed how much he hated eating alone until Daniel had begun to share meals with him occasionally. It made even the simplest of meals taste better, even though Daniel rarely spoke it was just having him near that seemed to add flavor. For Daniel it was even simpler, the food was far better and anything he did around Teagan just felt more solid.

Teagan cleared the plates as soon as it was clear Daniel was finished and hurried so that the man wouldn't try to stand or worse try to leave. "Stay still." He warned and hurried about to gather up slate and chalk and the small pile of books he'd ordered.

Daniel spotted them and frowned. "Teagan..."

"Painless, I promise, it'll be totally painless."

He wanted to refuse, worried of looking stupid in front of the obviously well studied man, but he did want to try to learn. Worse, it was obviously making Teagan happy to have at the attempt and there wasn't much fight in him to deny Teagan something that would make him happy. He tried to look reluctant and grumpy and un-amused but that only seemed to make Teagan happier.

"Here." Teagan placed the wine bottle on the table between them and pushed two cups closer to Daniel. "Told you it'd be painless."

"Hm." He poured and set the bottle down.

"Okay." Teagan pushed the slate and chalk toward Daniel. "You said you can make your name."

He nodded warily.

"Well, go on."

The chalk felt awkward in his hand, too fragile and light but he took it up and carefully formed a D. "Fat man." The chalk eased over a little and he felt silly but he formed the A. "Tent with stake."

"Is that how they taught you?"



Daniel nodded. "Only way I could remember it."

Which told Teagan that Daniel was far more visual and creative than he'd given the man credit to. It wasn't just flat out memorization, they'd made him a story of the letters and even after so many years and such time of disuse, Daniel still remembered it. "Go on."

"Single mountain, small lash, snail shell, long lash."

It was an odd mix of capital and lower case letters, all printed like a child but legible and not poorly formed. "Daniel, D, a, n, i, e, l, Daniel. Good, go on?"

"Ah..."

"What?"

Daniel shook his head. "Happy mouth..." The letter made him hide a smile but he doubted Teagan would be shocked by the truth of the memory cue his friends had given him.

"Happy....oh..... Oh!" The meaning and reality of who had taught Daniel, at the time a very young man, sunk in. It made Teagan chuckle. "It does look like that...clever....lewd but clever."

"Rain drop, man with cane, tent with stake, little lash, tent again, single mountain."

"O, the rain drop is an apostrophe, r...a...i...a...n."

"I don't know the letters."

"It's all letters, Daniel. They group together and make everything."

"Hm."

"Painless I promise." He took the chalk and slate back and made quickly, neatly, lined it with the alphabet. "Let's start with the letters and the words will take care of themselves."

Daniel took a long swallow of the wine and braced himself. "Going to need more wine." He muttered.

"Now, a...b...c...d..."

He was going to need lots more wine if any of it was going to make sense.

As the night wore on Daniel's hand felt cramped up from holding the chalk but he was growing more confident with the letters that Teagan was having him form and name as he went. This time, he was making the line of letters without Teagan's to copy from and it was proving both easier and more difficult than he'd expected.

"Good..." Teagan encouraged when Daniel had figured out the next in the line without help. As the line grew, Teagan grinned, pleased and proud and convinced they'd done enough for one night. If Daniel was able to remember a third of them at their next lesson that would be amazing and they'd keep going over the letters until Daniel knew them all fully and well.

That wouldn't be tonight, and to spend the rest of the night sipping wine and getting chalk all over them seemed such a waste. He had Daniel alone, in his house, for the night if he could manage it and he wasn't going to waste all of that time on learning.

"There you go." He nodded as another rough spot was passed and he slipped a hand onto Daniel's knee under the table. When the man formed another letter, he glided the hand a little higher. The thigh flinched a little but Daniel continued to ignore the distraction and focus on the next letter. Completing it crept the hand higher and Teagan was watching the steady, unmoved, face as much as the slate. "Better." He whispered now, hand at the top of the thigh and the line of letters growing shorter.

Daniel hissed in surprise and struggled to concentrate when another letter formed earned him that hand higher still, off his thigh, to lightly cup his groin. It was bold and teasing and nothing above the table but the evil glint in Teagan's eyes gave away what was being done below the table. He had to stop for a second, as pleasure flushed his body and he grew hard against the light touch. The line of letters wasn't finished and the teasing hand was still against him, Daniel understood what he needed to do and with a groan he forced his now inactive brain to spit out the next letter.

"Oh..." Daniel sighed, his legs sliding apart of their own will as that teasing hand stroked him over the cloth of his pants.

"That isn't an O." Teagan scolded but he understood.

"W."

"Better." He grinned and pressed the heel of his palm into the wonderfully hardening length.

"Teagan..."

"Just a few more...you want more don't you?"

It was getting far more difficult to concentrate. The wine had given them both a happy mellow feeling that melted into the flush of lust and need that Teagan had so unexpectedly sparked. He clutched the chalk so hard he was frightened it would snap but with shaky hands he formed the cross lines of the next letter.

"X."

Fingers skillfully freed buttons but the teasing hand stayed firmly outside of the fabric.

"Y. Oh...god..."

"One more..." Teagan whispered, he tugged and pulled the shirt from pants.

Gentle fingertips danced along the skin at the bottom of his belly, just above the open fabric of his britches and Daniel struggled after the last letter. The game Teagan was playing was horrible and delightful at the same time. He wanted to press those teasing fingers tight to his flesh, press them lower down to where they'd matter the most. He wanted to toss slate and chalk and letters aside and pull the other man into his lap, remove the cloth that hid him from view and taste his skin.

Instead, breathing far too hard for merely learning his letters, Daniel formed a very shaky couple of lines. "Z."

The hand slipped down and past fabric, fingers found and curled around hidden desire and the chalk snapped into two parts in Daniel's hand. "Oh...Teagan..."

"See? Told you this would be painless." He grinned pleased with himself, happy and the slightest bit drunk and stroked what he'd found. "Stay the night with me?"

"I..." The parts of the chalk fell from his numb fingers and left little untidy marks on the slate when they skidded across it. His legs parted more and he wanted painfully, wanted Teagan under him, wanted Teagan in him, wanted Teagan totally.

"Stay the night..." He prompted again and stroked the tightly confined length harder. "Stay the night with me..."

"Yes..." Daniel agreed without thinking and wondered if it was safe to let Teagan have him on the table because he wasn't sure he was going to make it to a bedroom.

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Chapter Thirty One

"Good... I want to wake up in your arms again." He grinned and leaned over and stole a kiss but Daniel's mouth was far more hungry than he'd expected. Hand settled on his neck and slipped down to his shoulders. Their grip tightened and pulled him closer and Teagan closed his eyes and let himself be guided.

When the kiss broke, Daniel glanced to the table in desperation and the scatter of books, chalk, slate and wine didn't seem like the sorts of things he could just throw to the floor.

"Mmmm, I can't get enough of that." Teagan sighed, liking the look Daniel got when he was aroused and wanting. "Not here, though I do like the idea of taking you over the table. Oh... that is a lovely thought...for breakfast maybe?" He let his fingers trail across the skin behind Daniel's ear. The simple touch made Daniel's eyes drift shut and his body shudder. "I've a wide bed, it's very private..."

Teagan watched as his words sunk in and the reality that it was now okay for Daniel to spend the night followed on its heels. The hazel eyes, nearly shut a moment before popped open and Daniel stood up. His chair legs scrapped along the floor and sounded loudly in the room and he snatched up Teagan's lingering hand.

"Bed, now..."

It made Teagan chuckle a little and he moved very slowly to his feet.

"Teagan!" Daniel scolded.

"I should put the glasses away..." He didn't and wasn't but the look of want and need made him happy and he liked to see how far he could push the younger man.

Which tonight, wasn't very far. The idea that Teagan would bother to put the wine and glasses away snapped what small fragments of control he had left and Daniel half growled as he caught the slender man around the waist. "Not now..." He groaned and with ease lifted the dark haired man up and tossed him over a shoulder like a sack of flour.

"Put me down!" Teagan demanded and started to squirm.

Daniel shook his head and brought the flat of one hand down with a stinging blow to the backside over his shoulder. "Behave."

The flat of Daniel's hand landed on his back side with stinging, surprise and Teagan yelped and fell still. It wasn't because it had hurt, Daniel hadn't used near enough force to hurt, but it lit up sparks of pleasure across his body and he felt his cock twitch in interest where it was trapped against the broad shoulder. It surprised him enough that he stayed still for the rest of the trip down the hallway.

Daniel slid the now docile Teagan from his shoulder in the darkened room. "I want a lamp burning. I want to see you." He whispered and leaned forward, hand along the side of Teagan's face and claimed a quick kiss. He hurried back to the kitchen for one of the lamps and returned to find Teagan sitting on the edge of the bed with an odd expression on his face. "Teagan?"

"You spanked me."

Daniel paused and wondered if he'd ruined the night with one playful smack. It wasn't likely anyone had ever raised a hand to the other man, ever. He braced himself for the worst and set the lamp on the table. "I'm sorry."

"I liked it." Teagan whispered.

He was suddenly glad he'd put the lamp down because there would have been a real fear that he'd have dropped it. "Wh..what?"

"I liked it, is that wrong?"

He just shook his head and tried to remember that he couldn't let himself come so soon. The odd mix of wicked, lewd innocence was driving him mad and every time he thought he had a handle on Teagan he stumbled on something new. When he'd caught his breath enough to speak he cleared his throat. "I've known... known of... others who've....like it too..."

Teagan pulled his shirt off, he'd waited until Daniel returned mostly because he liked the feel of the man's eyes on him while clothing was removed, and dropped the fabric on the bed. "Will you do it again?"

"I...I don't want to hurt you...ever..."

"Daniel..." Teagan smiled and let his hands wander across his body, knowing he was being showy but he almost had to touch himself in some way when Daniel was watching him with such need in his eyes and yet so frozen and still. "Life is going to hurt me....are you going to protect me from that? I want to feel and you make me feel....help me....please...I can be naughty if that's what it takes for you to do it again..."

That pushed Daniel past all bounds of reasonable control and he surged across the room and

took Teagan in his arms. The slender man sighed and his mouth was parted waiting and ready for the lips he knew so well to cover his own even before Daniel knew he was going to kiss him. They tumbled together onto the wide, soft bed with far too much cloth trapped between them, their bodies writhed together, one of Daniel's thighs parted Teagan's legs and it bubbled up wanting moans from the pale throat.

None of which did Daniel any good in maintaining his own control. He'd pretty well settled into which role was his in their relationship but still woke at night, alone in his bed, from dreams of Teagan below him. Those were thoughts he barely could control on a normal day but mixed with Teagan asking to be spanked with the man half nude and slightly drunk and wanting below him, it nearly killed him to keep some semblance of control.

"You...Teagan...I'm yours..." He whispered and knew he couldn't refuse the man. "I'll do anything you want." The shadow of Teagan's health made him bury his face in the slender, proud neck and hold the man tightly close below him. If Teagan wanted anything, he couldn't refuse him because their time was limited, it was just a matter of how much and how long and how many memories. It was a thought Daniel couldn't stand.

"Hey...it's alright..." Teagan spoke gently and stroked a hand across the hidden head. "We don't have to if you don't want to. I want you to enjoy it too..."

They stayed frozen like that for a moment, long heartbeats faded between them before Daniel kissed the neck he'd hidden against. "I'm fine with it and when aren't you naughty?"

Teagan broke into laughter and arched his hips up into Daniel's. "You like me naughty. You've corrupted me into your naughty boy."

He pulled away to brush dark strands of hair away from the mocking face but felt serious. "Perhaps I have."

"More like you've given me an outlet to explore my own corruption." Teagan smiled and ran his fingertips over the tight, serious lips above his own. "Perhaps you're the best thing I've ever found..."

The words glided like sweet warmed honey over Daniel's skin and he shut his eyes to enjoy the tingles of pleasure they gave him. When he opened them Teagan was watching him with a lewd grin and looking like he was going to be trouble.

Teagan stretched, snaking his arms around Daniel to stretch them high over his head, opening himself up to a vulnerable pose and using the long slow pull of his body to rub against Daniel's. "So do I have to be even more naughty, I can you know..."

The slender pale arms glowed golden in the dim lamp light and gave Teagan more of an air of health than the harsh sunlight was willing to impart. Daniel transferred his weight and balance to his legs to free up his hands to trace up over the narrow ribs, higher, up over the undersides of the raised arms. Every touch made Teagan sigh, his eyes drifted shut and his body writhed to gain more contact as Daniel traced his hands up over the rounds of elbows, along forearms to clasp the graceful fingers with his own work thickened ones. It left him stretched out full on top of Teagan, holding those long arms down and in place. Daniel let himself just enjoy the simple, stunning pleasure of tasting the proud man's skin. He nipped at lips and licked small wet laps over his chin. He dropped kisses, soft as petals to the pale face, the closed eyes, the shell like curve of the pale ears that hid in the tumble of black silk. Daniel would have been delighted if this was all he could have of the man, stolen kisses, tastes, teases of how responsive and sensual Teagan was but to know that this proud, stubborn, beautiful man wanted him to do anything he willed stole all the breath in his lungs. It was a painful weight of responsibility because Daniel was never going to mar such trust, such an otherworldly perfect man with a harsh touch or mistake. His body was scarred and damaged, his past was sullied and dirty and

he would die before he allowed any such harm to come to Teagan, any such mark of flesh or memory.

“Daniel...please....stop being naughty...” Teagan breathed into an ear before he nipped it. The words and light bite made Daniel moan and writhe and it was an opportunity Teagan wasn't going to waste. His arms may have been trapped, pin in place by delicious strength but his legs suddenly were freed to move.

It would have been nice to arch back up and rub tight against Daniel's still hidden desire but that was expected and he wanted something else. It took a little squirming, a little wiggling but Teagan slipped his leg free from between Daniel's and before the younger man knew what he was doing, Teagan had both of Daniel's legs between his own.

“Ohhh...” Daniel moaned and his hips snapped forward, rubbing hard into the body below his own. It was shocking to suddenly be in a position that was so very close to sex with their clothing still on. This was one of Teagan's favorite ways to top, with Daniel on his back, legs spread, face to face because he said he liked seeing Daniel's eyes. Daniel didn't care, he wasn't particular when it came to how he was taken just so long as he was taken.

It seemed that the position was going to be one of Teagan's favorite with their roles switched as well. Daniel hovered there, forced to balance some of his weight on his arms beside Teagan's own now, and shivered as he struggled to remember why he couldn't simply strip them naked and plunge deep into the offered body. As he was lost in the thought, in the fantasy of his imagined dreams, Teagan lifted his hips and locked his ankles around Daniel's waist.

“Oh...oh...Teagan...” Daniel moaned and his body thrust forward, pressing his fabric trapped desire tight to the offered body, gliding against teasing cloth covered flesh and the hidden, virgin entrance he wanted so desperately. “I can't...oh...you are naughty...”

That made Teagan laugh, rich and dark and low. He felt so good, so amazingly good. “I can get naughtier....”

The idea stopped all thoughts and Daniel whimpered.

“Mmmm love that sound...will you make that noise when you're in me?” Teagan whispered and wasn't surprised when Daniel's eyes popped open wide or at the lust and desire lurking in their expressive depths.

Teagan arched up and nipped at Daniel's parted lips. “Either take me or spank me...make me feel...”

“You...you might not like it...”

“Then you'll never have to do it again but I want to try, Daniel....I want to know what it feels like...please...” Teagan wasn't sure which he was trying to talk his lover into because both were things he wanted.

Daniel pulled back and away, sliding from the bed and where he had Teagan pinned. Along his waist, his skin tingled at suddenly finding Teagan's legs missing from their hold but he needed that space, needed to retreat. It didn't help much, Teagan stayed sprawled on the bed, arms raised, watching him from lowered eye lids with a look that begged to be molested. He swallowed and took a couple a slow breathes.

“Okay, we'll try it but if I hurt you or you want to stop, we stop.”

The suggestive, lusty look on Teagan's face faded to one of expectant delight and he scurried to sit up. His hands fell to his pants and began to unbutton them.

"No, keep them on."

"Daniel..."

"For now... " He wasn't sure he could stand to smack the pale exposed ass and then have Teagan decide he didn't like it and want to stop. It was better to start slow and light and carefully.

"Well, fine, but you're taking your shirt off too. At least be that fair."

Daniel nodded and pulled the fabric off and tossed it aside. He didn't want anything in his pockets either since he wasn't sure if he would have Teagan over his lap or not so he put the smaller tin of salve on top of where he'd dropped his shirt on the bed. Teagan's eyes glinted at that and Daniel blushed a little. He had Teagan experienced enough that the man often had his fingers slicked up, prepping him, before Daniel had even noticed the tin had been opened.

"You spoil me." Teagan grinned and slid the tin closer at hand. "How do we do this?"

The idea of trying to explain about made Daniel die of sheer embarrassment. Instead he stepped over and caught Teagan's hips and physically lifted and pulled the slender man until he'd gotten him turned over. Then with a good grip on the back of his britches, he pulled until Teagan slid from the bed and his feet were on the floor but his body supported.

The rough handling made him shiver and Teagan stayed limp and let himself be flipped about. When Daniel pulled him back and half off the bed he wiggled and moaned, pressing his length to the bed below him. "Oh God I love that..." He moaned and gripped the bed sheets. "Mmm I have this thought of you just grabbing me and tossing me...OH!" He jerked away and lost his train of thought when Daniel's hand landed with a stinging blow on his back side. It wasn't with the full of Daniel's strength, he could tell, but it was hard and it stung and he liked it. "Again..." He demanded and held in the startled yelp at the next blow.

Daniel had never actually spanked anyone in a sexual way before but he'd been on the receiving end once. He'd done something stupid and the first moment they'd had alone the eldest of their group had taken him aside and told him so. Daniel had, like most young men, been unwilling to listen, they'd fought and he'd been told if he was going to act like a child he'd be treated as one. That had descended into a scuffling fight that had Daniel turned over the man's knee and being spanked like an infant. Which had made him feel humiliated and embarrassed and shocked and painfully, painfully aroused.

After the spate of blows which had landed hard enough to turn his ass red through his pants, his friend had stopped to catch his breath and gather his composure. When he'd started to apologize for loosing control and actually spanking him, Daniel had shut him up by ripping his pants open and sucking the man into arousal and then demanding he be roughly taken right there.

This was different. There was no anger, no spike of fear, no sudden shock of emotion and struggle. He wasn't sure how he'd feel about actually hitting Teagan beyond a tender tap to his bottom but the first blow had landed a little harder than he'd planned. He just wanted those teasing, tormenting words to stop and they had. Only now, as he continued to spank the cloth covered ass so temptingly offered he began to see the appeal.

Teagan was braced against the bed, ass up and with each blow his hips twitched and wiggled. His legs had slid apart, his shoulders pressed down into the bed. It made him look shockingly fuckable. Daniel began to wonder what he would look like, posed like that, naked. He began to wonder about how easy it would be to just slip into the man, take him like that, fill him every time a blow made him gasp a little and arch his hips in response. It was getting to him, making him breathless and hard and he was starting to really like this new experiment.

"Wait..." Teagan gasped and he unclenched his hands from the sheets.

Daniel shivered but he stopped. "Stop?"

"No... just... something missing..." he tossed a look over his shoulder and was startled by how bothered Daniel looked. A light sheen of sweat covered the exposed chest, his skin was flushed, his lips were parted and he was so hard, so achingly aroused that the crown of his cock peeked out from the loosened fabric of his unbuttoned britches. "What's missing?" He asked, breathlessly.

Daniel knew, he knew from memory and from what he wanted to see but he wasn't sure he should.

"Please...please... Daniel..." He tossed his hair over his shoulder knowing how much Daniel liked the dark length that he'd only ever considered a statement of fashion before Daniel's hands had touched it. He knew how much the other man liked the look of it loose against his pale skin.

He could have asked, Teagan like this was more than willing to do as he was told, but something primal was rushing in Daniel's veins. Instead of asking he simply reached over and around those twitching hips and began to tug and pull at buttons. When Teagan tried to help, he pushed the hands away and kept roughly, single mindedly, pulling buttons open. A tug on a few ties and the only thing holding the cloth in place was how it had snagged on Teagan's arousal. Teagan's breath hitched when Daniel's hands caught the fabric and with rough, stubborn yanks he pulled britches and under britches down over hips, over knees and down to pool at Teagan's ankles.

"Oh....yes....please...yes..." Teagan sighed as cool evening air washed over his heated flesh. He raised his ass up higher and tossed a heated look over his shoulder to where Daniel stood behind him. "Please." He whispered again, low and sultry, when those lost hazel eyes met his own. "I need it, Daniel, please."

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The blow landed and this time the contact of skin to skin caused them both to gasp. The sharp smacking sound filled the room, chased by Teagan's stuttered gasp. Daniel paused there, his hand hovering unable to let another flat handed spank descend on the bare bottom. He just stood there and watched the faint outline of his hand slowly form in soft pink against the pale skin.



The slap was more gentle than Daniel had delivered to him with his pants as protection but the impact was like a shock wave. It trembled startled stinging pain and sharp unexpected pleasure across his nerves and Teagan arched and moaned at the feel. The sound of the single contact was bright and clear in the room and nearly as pleasing as the feel. It was such a surprising feeling that he had to pause to catch his breath before glancing over his shoulder again.

“Don’t stop.” He grinned. “I think you’re enjoying this too.”

Daniel didn’t answer with words, he just brought his hand swinging down again. He liked the sound, the feel, the sight of his hand across that bare skin. He found he really liked the way Teagan arched, almost thrusting forward, at the impact. More, he loved the sounds the man made, gasping, sighing, shocked moans as he himself were torn between startled pleasure and stinging pain.

As the smacks continued, slowly, giving Teagan time between each one to refuse instead of whimper for more, Daniel watched the way the skin flushed pink and then to light red. He watched Teagan’s cock swell from mildly aroused to fully, watched how each blow made it swing and twitch. Even how the slender man’s hands writhed across the bed sheets, seeking a purchase to hold onto and finding only soft comfort was appealing and sultry to watch.

When one of Teagan’s hands slipped backward, Daniel wasn’t sure he could stand to watch the man stroke himself while being spanked. That seemed too dirty, too sexy, too much like some forbidden pleasure but he totally lacked all will to stop that hand’s progress. He brought his hand down in another low, easy spank and was considering maybe stroking himself while he watched Teagan do the same only the fingers didn’t stop so far forward. Instead, they crept further back and Daniel saw the slick sheen of ointment on them.

Logically, he knew what Teagan was going to do, there was only one option really and Daniel wasn’t a stupid man but his brain simply refused to believe it. The hand he’d last brought down onto Teagan’s ass lingered and petted the pinked flesh with a soft soothing touch, as he stood frozen and entranced by the idea that Teagan really was going to be that naughty. He felt like he couldn’t breathe and as one slick finger slipped inside the tight, hungry entrance, Daniel’s hand gripped the side of the hip he’d been petting roughly.

“Oh...oh....don’t stop...” Teagan moaned and stretched to get the finger a little deeper. “Please, Daniel....oh....please....”

He was trembling, his hand shaking but he managed to swing it down for another smacking slap, a little harder this time.

“Oh! God...!...oh...I do this....when I’m alone....ahhh god...thinking of you...”

Smack.

“Ah, oh harder....please....I try to pretend I’m you....”

Smack.

“OH!” His moans stuttered away into needy whimpers and another finger joined the first in their advance and retreat into his body. “I try...oh so good... I try to imagine what it feels like...”

Smack.

“Mmmm ah oh god, Daniel! Feels like...oh....when I’m in you.... only...”

Smack.

He forgot how to speak, his entire body shivered and he heard himself moaning in lost need for a moment. "Oh...please, just like that...please....oh...only...god...only I pretend it's you in me..."

Smack!

Teagan's knees gave out and he fell forward on the bed, whimpering, moaning, unable to keep his hand in place and unsatisfied. "Oh... shit...I can't....too good to stand..." He whined and tried to figure out how to get his arm, now trapped under his body to stretch another few inches to keep pleasuring himself.

It was almost like the choice had been removed from him. Daniel's hand moved with a will and desire of its own. Before he was aware of acting, one of his fingers was tracing the curve of Teagan's ass, following the contours before slicking down the crevice to circle the barely stretched and so very desired spot. Even that light touch had Teagan moaning, his hips wiggled trying to gain leverage to draw Daniel's teasing touch inward.

In all of their contact, in all of their play, Daniel had been so very, very careful to avoid touching his ass. The outer globes yes, Teagan had learned the man liked to grip his hips and backside while they were joined but never anywhere close to even hinting about any sort of penetration. He'd touched himself just to see what it felt like and had found it pleasant but he'd penetrated his own body to try to know what it was like to be taken.

None of it compared to the feel of Daniel just barely touching him. There was no waiting left, no quiet faith that eventually Daniel would get the nerve to take him. Teagan knew it had to be right now or it would be never and the only difficulty was getting Daniel to understand that as well. There wasn't anything that could move Daniel if the man had set his mind against it and Teagan was too scattered in delight to think of some wicked and naughty plan.

Worse, any hope of thinking died as one of Daniel's fingers carefully, almost shyly, slipped into his body. He was tight, he always seemed tight even if he'd touched himself for a while, but the finger filled him, promised more and was so very gentle. Quite a bit more gentle than Teagan ever was with himself and he hung there, lost in the shocking pleasure and stunned still by knowing that finally Daniel had moved to reverse their roles.

"Oh....more!" Teagan cried out, demanded, and tried to get his knees braced on the bed to push the finger deeper. For a long moment Daniel said nothing and he didn't move, the room filled with their breathing, short panting airs of desperation.

"You're so tight..." Daniel finally spoke, trying to imagine how Teagan's body could accommodate him when he was larger than his finger. "I..."

Teagan growled and finally got his knees solidly on the bed. The more stable position allowed him to push back, forcing all of that finger deep into him, far deeper than he managed to get on his own and he moaned, head tossed to the side like some wounded creature at the increase in pleasure the depth brought with it. Slowly he rocked his hips away and then back toward that teasing pleasure and gasped as his cock wept and his body trembled.

"Teagan...oh..." Daniel shuddered and wondered when his lover had been replaced by some mythical fey sensual creature that seemed to know and trust far more than he ever could.

"Fuck me Daniel....oh....God....please....take me.....I can't....I can't s...stand....stand it....any...anymore....please....God...oh....this feels so...so....mmmm....please....." He shivered and pushed back harder feeling a tickle of something better than anything he'd experienced but unable to quite reach it.

Daniel stood there, caught between what he wanted, what Teagan wanted and what he thought

was right. He knew he should be careful but Teagan was enough to drive any man mad and with his eyes wide open, Daniel surrendered and fell off the edge of reason.

The next time Teagan pushed back, a second finger filled him. "OH...th...that's it...Daniel...th....thank you...." Teagan sobbed feeling stretched now and a tight low burning sensation that wasn't quite pain. He knew this from his own explorations and didn't let it slow him down. A hand stroked up his spine, across his shoulders, tangled into his hair and slid over his ribs and he shut his eyes and whimpered.

"Easy..." Daniel soothed. "Slowly..." The word was a pain to whisper when all he wanted to do was loosen his pants and replace his fingers. He gulped lung fulls of air and tried to steady himself enough to catch and still the demanding body.

"No... no... pl..please....more..." Teagan sobbed when the kind hand stroking his skin stopped his hips and held them solidly in place. He groaned and struggled but couldn't figure out how to wiggle free.

"Shhhh..." Daniel hushed and took over the movement. If they were going to do this, he'd see to that it was done right and not let Teagan hurt himself in desperation. "Shhhh....there now...."

"God....you....you sound like....oh...like you're soothing a horse....OH...oh...fuck yes...please..."

"I...I ...don't..." Daniel denied and just teased with the idea of a third finger. He wasn't sure Teagan could take three but if he couldn't take three he couldn't take something larger and Daniel wasn't sure he could make it another day, another hour, without having had Teagan.

"Yu...you do... oh...just....ride me....oh...please...harder..."

The total lack of shame made Daniel blush for the dark haired man and he added a third finger. It was frightfully tight but Teagan didn't cry, he didn't ask to stop, he just whimpered in the way he had when he wanted more and held very, very still. Teagan was too tight, too inexperienced and Daniel knew they needed to stop there. It was further than he'd expected to get their first time and as much as it clenched his stomach into knots to stop, he knew they would gradually build up to Teagan being able to take more.

Daniel groaned and slipped his fingers from the tense body. The strong muscles clung to him, begging him with flesh and lust not to go and when it sunk in that he wasn't returning the whimpering moans took on a pained desperate sound. He shook his head and it took a moment for him to remember that Teagan couldn't see it.

"No more tonight." He gasped out and promised himself that he'd soon be on his back, Teagan deep in his body, trying not to moan like an utter whore. That almost made it okay, almost and he closed his eyes, one of his hands rubbing at his throbbing length without conscious thought. He just needed to be soothed a little bit, just a little if he was going to remember to stay in control.

Only one hand turned into two and then three and then a mouth that kissed his stomach. Daniel's lungs froze and he heard a rush of blood in his ears and he just barely got his eyes open in time to see Teagan dip lower to lightly lick at the tiny amount of flesh that peeked from the fabric of his pants. It was a tease, another game and something snapped and broke away inside of him.

It wasn't until he had a handful of Teagan's hair and was pulling that deliciously tormenting mouth from his body that he knew what had snapped was the last thread of his control. He tugged that hair and watched as Teagan's eyes drifted shut and he moaned wordlessly but he didn't protest being lifted up. The normally bitter, sarcastic mouth was soft now, parting and willing and hungry when Daniel devoured it and the more aggressively he claimed Teagan's lips,

the more the man's hands clawed at his body and tried to tug the fabric of his pants down.

Daniel released his handful of hair and felt too much the predator. It was how he felt on a job, with violence and anger so close to the surface, focused and direct. He let Teagan fall away, back on the bed a little and he nudged the man to force him just slightly away. With quick violent motions he stripped his pants away and took a firm grip on his own flesh.

"You want this?" He nearly growled and trembled as he stroked himself.

Teagan nodded. "Yes...oh....god..." And normally he would have slipped forward to try to take his lover into his mouth but not tonight. Tonight he saw something just as desperate in Daniel's eyes. Tonight, instead of gliding forward, Teagan lay down on his back, knees parted, legs spread, cock bobbing in the air like the mast of a ship.

"I'm trying..." Daniel shut his eyes to the tempting sight and found it lingered on the back of his eyelids. "You're too tight, this will hurt." God, he was going to hurt Teagan, he prayed not too badly, prayed that it would be okay but was certain God wasn't listening because he knew he was going to be buried in that tight, tempting body and he wasn't going to care if it hurt.

Teagan arched his back and spread his legs wider apart. "Hurts more not to have you....please..."

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Chapter Thirty Three

That was the best and worst thing Daniel could have heard. He moaned and forgot to even stroke himself. All that mattered was getting on the bed and taking all that Teagan was offering. He'd never, not once, wanted anything as badly as he wanted to have Teagan. There was nothing he wouldn't do, nothing he wouldn't trade to have the man. It was a burning need, a fire that consumed all reason and logic. He growled and swooped down like a hawk onto a mouse only Teagan was no one's helpless prey.

"Mmm.....please... please..." He begged and let the strong hands catch under his arms and drag him further back onto the bed. The bed held him and he writhed and arched against it until those strong hands traced across his skin, down, low, to catch his knees and lift his legs. Teagan moaned and a tried to brace himself and nothing happened.

He opened his eyes and Daniel was above him, hovering like every dirty little fantasy he'd had about the man but he was just there. His face, normally so empty, so expressionless, was tormented now, twisted up in want and pain, mixed with desire and stubborn will. It made him smile and forget to be a begging brat if just for a moment. Teagan reached a hand up and ran his fingertips over Daniel's tormented face.

"Open your eyes.... Please... Daniel... let me see your eyes...." He could see the struggle in the other man but slowly the hidden eyes opened and Teagan fell into hazel that needed more than anything he'd ever seen before. He was doing this, he'd driven Daniel beyond all chance of control and it sent a small shiver of fear and dark, luscious lust down his spine. "Do it." He whispered to those eyes and he would have loved to be able to keep his eyes open to watch the expression on his lover's face and in his eyes but something hard, blunt and very welcome slide against his ass, teased his opening and Teagan's entire body shivered in want and need.

The shiver that raced across the slender, beautiful body he held pinned below him was the most erotic thing Daniel could imagine. He was only human after all, he could only stand so much. It wasn't wrong to accept the offer given so boldly to him, it didn't matter if he still felt guilty, like maybe he was stealing something that didn't rightfully belong to him, he was going to take Teagan and nothing was going to stop him. He was honest enough with himself to know that in that moment, with Teagan pinned below him, bare and naked against him, he wasn't sure even a refusal from Teagan would stop him and that thought scared him silly.

"Do it... please... I need to feel you in me....please Daniel....." Teagan whispered but his words stuttered away when the very crown of Daniel's want pressed to his body. "Oh...oh...please..." He moaned because this time it wasn't just a random touch, this time he knew Daniel was going to finally take him.

Daniel trembled with the will to hold still, the tip of his length resting lightly there, right at Teagan's slick and ready entrance, a breath away from taking the man, taking his virginity, filling him and finding unspeakable pleasure in his body. A breath away, merely a breath away from every dream that had haunted him, every stray thought that had distracted him. Daniel took a long, slow breath and pushed just barely forward.

He heard a small, tight, hitched breath from Teagan, it could have been a protest, it could have held pain but Daniel's mind simply couldn't process it. All he wanted was to push forward, slam tight and deep into the shocking, near painful, tightness his cock was slowly breeching. The smallest of joining wasn't enough, it was merely a tease, a hint, a promise to the deeper pleasures in the tight, virgin body. He bit his lip and moved very slowly, sliding deeper with each slow, long breath he took and it was a victory by tiny degrees and what felt like massive movement was merely the smallest of twitches.

"Oh...Oh...."

Daniel knew he should stop, open his eyes, check on Teagan, do everything in his power and care to not hurt the man. He knew Teagan wasn't ready, he knew it but here he was, pushing deeper and not retreating. All of his courage was gone, he hide behind his eyelids like a coward, knowing he'd hate himself even more if he opened them and saw pain on Teagan's face because there was no way he could stop. It was better to not see and hold onto the illusion that he wasn't doing something immoral.

It wasn't fair, he knew it wasn't fair. Barely in Teagan's body and Daniel was shivering with the shocking, raw, desperate pleasure he was finding. It was better than fantasy, better than dream or hope, and he found himself lost of all sense of right and wrong. He hadn't remained celibate over the years, finding encounters where he could, some more experienced than others, some more casual than others. He'd taken men, older and younger, been the first to more than his share but nothing was like this. It was unfair because he knew that to be this tight would hurt, and

Daniel was too lost in pleasure to stop even knowing that Teagan wasn't sharing it.

Until he found with another long slow breath that there was no further to go, no deeper he could reach and he stopped, flush tight against Teagan's body. He felt on fire, burning with lust and need, consumed with the pleasure that sang to him of deeper delights if he just moved, glided from the hot slick, indescribably tight body only to slam hard and deep back into it's welcoming inferno. He stayed still, buried fully in Teagan's body, wondering if he even needed to move to come, wondering what it would be like to fill Teagan with his release from something so simple as just merely gliding into his body a single time. The thought teetered him on the edge and Daniel struggled to back away from it, gasping for breath, knowing if he found even a small release from the tormenting pleasure he'd remember how wrong this was, how it was too soon and he wouldn't get the chance to really take Teagan. It was a chance he needed, a chance to try to bring Teagan some of the pleasure he was feeling and to return the pleasure he'd been given when their roles had been reversed.

Hands stroked his body, light, teasing, gentle and found and caressed his face. That was wrong, he should be soothing Teagan not the other way around. The guilt made him open his eyes, worried at what he'd see on his lover's face, driven to desperation by his want for the proud man. Only, with his eyes cracked open to mere slits, he was surprised to find Teagan half smiling. He looked wicked and lewd, suddenly it occurred to Daniel that Teagan looked very much like housecat that had a small mouse cornered and was plotting out what to do with it. Yes, the fair skin was paler and had a slight sheen of sweat and yes the dark circles under Teagan's eyes seemed wider and more bruised looking but there was no outward side of pain let alone the unforgivable pain Daniel had feared he'd inflicted.

Teagan licked his lips, they felt dry and tight and grinned. "What're you waiting for?" He whispered. It had hurt, yes, a little, and he was honest enough to admit that but the look of such hunger in Daniel's eyes, the seas of pleasure in his hazel eyes chased away any lingering worry or uncomfortable sensations. He knew first hand how good it felt but he was a little disappointed with their situations switched. Daniel had always seemed so consumed in pleasure while being taken and so far Teagan didn't feel the same.

"Y...you al..alright?" Daniel managed to ask around short panting breaths.

Teagan arched up and brushed his lips to Daniel's. "Shhhh and fuck me."

Daniel whimpered and his eyes fell shut again, too heavy with lust and need to keep them open, too overwhelmed with the sight of Teagan below him, his hair spread across the bed sheets. They'd gone too far, he had gone too far, to be able to stop and with Teagan still encouraging him onward, Daniel whimpered and clenched his jaw and slipped slowly from the tight fire that he was lost in.

That sent shivering pleasure radiating across Teagan's body. "Oh..." he sighed. "Tha...that's ni...nice..." The tingling pleasure was closer to what he'd been expecting and as Daniel slowly filled him again it set off warmth and delight that felt really good. Not as spectacular as taking Daniel was but good and wonderful and pleasant.

If it was a little disappointing Teagan found the sheer raw lost pleasure Daniel was showing enough to make up for it. It didn't have to be wonderful for him because it was obvious from the dark, soft, almost painful moaning that Daniel was having an amazing time. Not that it was awful, far from it, as the Daniel moved the pace faster Teagan was surprised at the increase in pleasure but it just wasn't as good as he'd expected it to be. There just was something not quite right and he figured it was just as Daniel said, some men preferred this and some didn't and he knew now he must be one of the later. That was fine, he could accept that and he was lost in the warm pleasant pleasure building in his body and the near agony of delight in Daniel and let his lover lift his hips just a little more.

“Oh! OH Fucking God!” Teagan cried out, blinded by sudden, unexpected raw, horrible, perfect pleasure. His breath froze in his lungs, his heart flipped over and he felt his cock trembling, begging to come.

Daniel chuckled, low and dark and tried to get a grip on those sweat slick hips again to lift Teagan back into that perfect position.

“Dan....Daniel.... oh....OH God!” Teagan’s entire convulsed up as that spiking of unspeakable pleasure poured into him again. It just made Daniel groan and chuckle in the back of his throat again. It sunk in to his suddenly delirious mind that it was the position and Teagan struggled to get himself back into that perfect spot. “Oh, ri...right there...Oh God.... Dan...Daniel...harder...plea...please....harder....” He begged and knew it sounded bad but couldn’t help it. Something was exploding deep in his body, setting off cascading delights he’d only gotten glimpses, hints of with his own explorations. It was the reason, he suddenly knew, that Daniel lost all of his control and will while being taken. It was too much delight, too much of everything wonderful and Teagan closed his eyes begged silently and with stumbling, faltering words to have that pleasure given to him again.

That was what Daniel had been looking for, searching for, trying for and when he found it his own pleasure increased. It wasn’t enough to just feel good himself, he needed Teagan to feel just as good and now, finally, he knew the man was. It didn’t surprise him that wringing out pleasure from Teagan’s body wouldn’t be easy, the man kept so much to himself that it was no surprise that finding that single, brilliant spot had been a study in patience. It was a vulnerable thing, to be so given over to physical pleasure and he knew Teagan well enough to know the man didn’t accept his own vulnerability well.

But finding that spot, that one angle, depth and pressure that set the dark haired man’s blood on fire was worth waiting a lifetime. He forced his eyes open to watch as Teagan writhed and clawed at the bed below him and Daniel’s body above him. He watched the way he tossed his head and how his hair clung to his skin and he knew that for once, Teagan knew what real, deep, unrepentant pleasure was.

It was a good thing he’d found that spot too, Daniel was trembling on the knife’s edge of his own release. Twitching there, needing to come every time Teagan called his name and clutched at his skin. He gripped the hips that writhed and danced around him still and took the slender body harder than he’d dared. It would leave bruises, he knew his hands would leave behind smudged purple blue spots from where his fingers had dug in to tightly, the stronger touch only made Teagan moan more loudly.

He let himself go, knowing he was lined up with that wonderful place deep in Teagan’s body. Every hard, deep thrust may not have hit it dead on but it was all close enough that Teagan stopped moaning, his voice cracked and fell away. The only sound from him now was a soft, gasping mew like something small and helpless and it only drove Daniel to take him harder, fill him deeper, push him harder.

Teagan was caught there like an ant in sticking honey. He hung between the desire to have the consuming pleasure end and spare him from something that felt impossibly good and the deep cloying need to have it continue forever. Biology was his own downfall and one hard, shiveringly wonderful thrust in from Daniel had him arching up to meet him and the crown of his length caught and rubbed against Daniel’s body. That was too much and Teagan came with startling, unexpected suddenness. He tumbled into release like an unschooled boy, surprised when it overtook him and with no control. Worse, he didn’t care, he just moaned and shivered and tried to breath and lost himself in the stunning, brilliant, wonderful instant of release.

It didn’t just catch Teagan off guard, it caught Daniel as well. He was already too close to his own climax as it was, struggling to maintain control and make things last as long as he was able. The suddenness of Teagan’s body tightening around his own, the feel of the man as his entire body

surrendered and gave into pleasure, forced Daniel right to the brink. He knew himself too well, knew that when he came there was nothing in the universe but pleasure and sensation and he really, desperately, wanted to be aware of every long heartbeat of Teagan's first climax from being taken by him.

It was a self defeating desire. The sounds Teagan made would have been stunning even if he wasn't so close to finishing. The way he writhed and how his face twisted up, his eyes clenched shut, pleasure strung over every nerve and fiber of his body would have been arousing. All of it combined with the feel of Teagan's still too tight body clenching around his aching desire added up to only one solution and he hung on as long as he could but it didn't feel like it could ever be long enough.

From one heartbeat to another, watching Teagan, experiencing Teagan's release, went from the thing he struggled for the most to what he surrendered to as he clutched the pale legs and hips and drove as deeply as he could. There was no thought now to finding that perfect spot but from the sharp, startled cries from Teagan he must have been close enough for his lover's over sensitized body. All Daniel knew, all he could care about was filling that delicious no longer virgin tightness with his own length. All he wanted was bury himself as deeply as he could and somehow claim the slender man as his if only for a little while. He came, mindlessly, and the heat of his release swirled around him and filled his lover and Daniel lost himself in knowing that for a single time, for Teagan's first time, the man was his and his alone.

Daniel had no sense of how long it took him to come back to his own senses, time had seemed to have run away and he was in no mood to debate the issue. His heart was pounding in his chest and his breath burned but it was from more than just physically holding Teagan in place and the exertion of really amazing sex. His heart pounded in emotion and nerves, his stomach flopped over with things he wasn't sure he should feel or that were safe to feel. It wasn't the time or place to try to say anything because while his words would be the truth, men were too often likely to say things they didn't mean after great sex and Daniel didn't want to hear something from Teagan that the man would later regret.

He opened his eyes, his arms trembling with exhaustion, trying to see if he could flop down beside Teagan or if the man had managed to take over the bed. Instead he saw Teagan limp below him. His skin was pale and clammy to the touch with patches of flushed fever to his face and neck. His eyes were shut and as Daniel's sudden and horrible sense of fear settled in his stomach and grew he couldn't swear he saw the man breathing.

"Teagan!" He eased the man's legs down and gently broke their joining. It was normally a feeling he hated, that leaving not to return, but this time he didn't even feel it. "Teagan?"

Teagan groaned and flopped an arm over his eyes. "Oh, God..." He moaned and drew a long slow breath. "How do you stand it?"

Daniel swallowed that spark of fear and cupped the still face before claiming the lips in a soft kiss. "You okay?" He asked softly, hoping it would be mistaken for the obvious and not a question that would betray his worry that the sex had actually killed him.

"Mmmhmm, dead tired but oh.... how do you stand it?" He sighed and rubbed his eyes and wondered if he could talk Daniel into kissing him gently as he drifted to sleep.

With a groan, Daniel collapsed down beside the slender man and pulled his unresisting form against his body. "Stand what?" Daniel mumbled against the top of the dark head, hiding his face and soothing his fears in the silken length.

"All of it." He had to stop and yawn, nuzzling in to the strong chest, still shivering from the strength of his release. "The pleasure, the emptiness of it stopping...."



For Daniel, the emptiness of stopping only made the experience sweeter. It was that loss, that emptiness that made him treasure every heartbeat while joined with another body. Those were thoughts he was too exhausted and felt too rough to ever put into words. Instead he pulled Teagan close and let one hand pet over the man's hair and arm, back and hip. It allowed him to avoid answering as Teagan quickly fell asleep in his arms but for as exhausted as Daniel felt, he lay there, struggling to remain awake and memorize every sensation and moment he'd been given.

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Chapter Thirty Four

Teagan woke to the sound of water splashing. He was normally a sound sleeper but the quiet noise drifted him up from a sound sleep. As sleep faded, he found himself in his own bed but naked, tucked under the covers. How he came to be nude made him grin in the light of the single lit lamp but he had no memory of getting himself under the covers, that had to have been Daniel's doing.

Daniel wasn't in the bed and as Teagan cracked an eye open he saw his lover across the room, at the wash stand. He was nude as well, standing in the warm glow of the lamp's light, quietly washing up in the basin. The sight widened his lazy grin and he lay there, awake, watching as Daniel washed off.

It occurred to him that Daniel was fastidious about washing up. The man never came to a meal with dirty hands and never arrived to a morning's work unwashed. It was an odd practice for someone of Teagan's social standing, someone with access to hot water and servants to provide it and with rooms well made to block most chill inducing drafts but for someone of Daniel's social standing it was almost unheard of.

Teagan was far more concerned with cleanliness than most anyone he knew. It was his father's training that he'd just grown used to. Being clean, staying clean, even at the risk of catching a chill, had been very important to his father and the man had been certain that it was the most healthy thing for Teagan. Even if some of the doctors that had seen to him in his youth had been horrified and questioned how Teagan survived a weekly full bath and daily scrubbings. His father had never backed down, keeping the house as well as his son and his own person as clean as he could manage. Even when Teagan had been ill and confined to bed, his father had always seen to it he'd stayed clean.

So he had his reasons for being so fussy about cleaning up but Daniel? Daniel shouldn't have,

certainly not enough to bother getting up into the chill of the night and wash up. As he watched, Teagan wondered more and more at the odd habit and the question pressed itself with such force and demand that he soon was more concerned with it than the lovely sight of so much naked skin.

“Come back to bed...” He whispered mostly to let Daniel know he was awake.

“Soon.”

Teagan sighed and stretched out on the bed. Muscles hurt, his ass was a sore, he could feel bruises on his hips and legs but he'd never felt better in his life. “Why are you so fussy about getting clean when I'm here naked and so vulnerably exposed to whatever wickedness you'd care to inflict?”

Daniel glanced over his shoulder and the sight of Teagan sprawled out, still looking half asleep, tempted him. “I'm dirty.”

“But it's because of me and I like it when you're dirty because of me.”

Daniel shook his head and poured clean water over a wash rag, wrung out the excess and tossed the cloth toward the form on the bed. “You're dirty too.”

He sighed lazily, knowing he was dirty. He liked waking up feeling sweaty and sticky and dirty from such a wonderful cause but he knew if he was going to entice Daniel back into the bed he would have to clean up. With a sigh, because he knew Daniel was right and he knew he'd sleep better with clean skin, he flapped the cloth open. That was as much as he was going to do, he wasn't going to get out of bed when he was feeling so languid and lazy, the cloth came under the covers into the bed with him.

Teagan finished wiping his skin down, gaining some sense of cleanliness and dropped the cloth onto the floor beside the bed. He watched as Daniel patted his skin dry and moved, unconcerned with his own nakedness, to retrieve the wash rag from where Teagan had dropped it. He shook it out and hung it on the wash basin.

“I didn't mean to wake you.” He apologized as he came back to the bed.

“Didn't, must have known you'd slipped away.” Teagan stretched and got the lamp off and prepared to snuggle in for another wonderful night curled around Daniel.

“Didn't think you'd mind.”

“Hmmm? Mind?” He yawned. “Oh, the washing.” He lifted the covers and made room for Daniel slide back under, willingly giving up some, but not all, of the warm spot he'd made for himself. “No, don't mind, just, don't be mad at me but I'm just surprised...you're always so concerned with getting washed up...just seems....odd for a man of your... you know...” There was no nice way to say it.

“My background?” He would have been upset if he hadn't been settling in next to the man, enjoying the feel of his slender weight back in his arms.

“I don't mean it that way, not really, goodness knows most people of my class wouldn't know soap if it attacked them...it's just....”

He petted the tangled hair. “You've never been forced to live in filth.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I've always lived here, never elsewhere. If I'd grown up in a more rustic climate I'd feel similarly.”

"Our house had a dirt floor and a thatch roof but my mother scrubbed it as clean as she could, I meant real filth. When you get it off you can't stand it again. Even from a good cause, I couldn't sleep."

The words sounded empty, hollow, and Teagan turned so he could look up and see Daniel's face but the man had his eyes closed. It sunk in how little he really knew of Daniel before they'd met and how little he really knew of the man's quirks and behaviors. "What happened to you, Daniel? What is it you don't want me to see in your eyes?"

He shook his head, knowing the night was too comfortable to trust.

"Was it from the war?" He saw the smallest of hitched breaths. "I can only imagine how awful that time was. I've never seen violence before. Can't imagine what it would be like in a battle, the mud and blood and filth."

"Weren't bad." Daniel corrected and knew that Teagan would have the truth of it sooner or later. The moonlight was dim enough, he could hide in it, pretend he wasn't really speaking to another but just to his own shadowed imagining. "You get dirty and stink of black powder smoke but if you make it to the other side you get cleaned up." He sighed and dropped his head down onto the pillow. "We were in the mountains. It's beautiful, tall trees, rocks up out of the soil, you'd like it." He swallowed that thought so he wasn't too much the fool and say more. "We were ambushed, along the road, and fell back into the tree line. One of my friends? Took a musketball to the skull before we could get ten feet."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged and pushed the memory down. "Retreat was called, the best shots were ordered to cover it as the rest fell back."

"And you were one of them?"

Daniel nodded. "It's not easy, to retreat, reload, turn and aim at a moving target, fire, retreat and reload and do it again. Got to be quick about it or you get killed. I turned to fire and saw a muzzle flash to the side." He caught Teagan's hand and pressed it to the ragged, ugly scar high on the side of his ribs. "It caught me here, tore open my side. I went down, the fighting moved on around me. About bled to death but remembered someone saying about the moss being good to staunch wounds and I'd fallen on an outcropping. Just remember it hurt really bad and trying to hold handfuls of the moss to the wound."

"This must have been an awful wound."

"Better than some. Came back to myself couple of days later, sick with fever, in a prison barge. Fifty men in a room little more than twice the size of this one, no air moving, no place to move..." He shook his head and pulled his thoughts away. "Another Irishman had found me when I was dumped there, mad out of my head with sickness. He saw to it I got water, used what little liquor he had to clean the wound, kept me alive. I was sick weak for a long time but I got better when a lot of others didn't. That's filth, lice and death, when we were released, cleaned up..."

"You found you couldn't be comfortable filthy again."

Daniel nodded. "The man that tended me? He died of fever in there, never felt fresh air again this side of heaven. Can't complain too loudly, I was so weak when released that the army declared my lungs ruined for service from fever and confinement and turned me loose back here. Haven't seen it to tell them it wasn't nothing clean air and food couldn't fix."

"Sounds like a wise plan."

"That and they still have me listed as dead on some of the papers." He grinned at that but it felt bitter.

"I'm sorry, Daniel."

"Nothing to be sorry for."

"But I am, I am...I just... I don't like thinking of you suffering."

Daniel pulled Teagan tight against his side, over the scar that he still carried, as if the dark haired man could be a living, breathing bandage to wounds that should have long since healed. "I'm here now." He spoke gently and nuzzled his faced against his lover's hair. "Here now."

Teagan wrapped himself as much around Daniel as he could, still unpracticed in how two bodies fit best together for comfort and rest but learning fast. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

"Did I hurt you? I didn't want to hurt you...."

"I'm fine."

"Liar."

"I'll be sore, I'm sure but really, I'm fine. Is it always like that? Is it like that for you?" He sighed. "I mean, it was good and then it was amazing..."

Daniel was grateful the darkness hid his blushing. He couldn't help it, it was a combination of the question asked and who it was asking it and all the dirty, impure, lewd things both brought to mind. "There's a spot, in men... for some it causes a lot of pleasure."

"For you?"

"And others, some not so much. You don't know until you try."

"Have I been finding that spot for you?"

That was it, Daniel knew he was blushing red enough to be glowing like the lamp now. He cleared his throat. "Yes."

That made him beam happily. "That's because I'm a fast learner."

"My friends?" He always seemed to phrase that sentence as a question, as if making it a question would tell Teagan which friends he meant. "They used to tease because of how...easily... that spot was found in me. They used to say it was a good thing I'd wound up in the military because I would have ended up as some rich man's plaything with how easily I could be pleased. Used to make me angry when they'd say that..."

"I'm not that rich...would you be my plaything anyway? Or should I be yours?"

"They meant whore."

Teagan snorted. "I'm not so naïve to misunderstand what they meant. Maybe we can be each other's wore?" He pretended to ponder the idea but when Daniel didn't pull him closer, spank him or tease him he knew the man wasn't in the mood for games. Memories had chased those ideas away. "How am I?"

“What?”

“Compared to other men....you’ve had other men....was that spot easy to find?”

Daniel snorted. “Nothing about you is easy.” He muttered but the words and the mild frustrated mocking they carried made Teagan tense in his arms like some angered feline. “That’s good, I like challenges.”

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Chapter Thirty Five

Teagan had wanted to stay awake and try to keep Daniel talking and he had been annoyed enough at hearing nothing about him was easy to try to stay awake. His downfall came from being curled tight to the warm body, being softly petted and soothed, and soon had him falling asleep. It was a good sleep, one he knew he could easily get spoiled by. He woke once in the dark of the night when Daniel muttered in his sleep and slipped an arm across Teagan’s chest, pulling him closer. He stayed awake long enough to listen to the hushed, tight, unintelligible words before Daniel drifted back into a sound sleep. He quickly followed and didn’t wake again until morning.

Not just morning, but late morning from the look of the light that was creeping around the heavy curtains that were hung over his windows. His body was sore but in a good way and as he yawned and stretched the memories of the night before made him grin. He forced gritty feeling eyes open wider and was disappointed to find Daniel not still lingering in bed with him. Instead, on the extra pillow Teagan normally wrapped himself around at night, he found three black eyed susans tied together with a long slender strand of green grass.

He flopped an arm over and picked the small cluster of flowers up. It was such a sentimental offering but not the least but fussy. Teagan wasn’t sure how to react to it, the flowers were very pretty, the bright yellow petals were cheerful against the dark green stems and black centers but they were still flowers. Daniel, of all people, had left him flowers on his pillow and it seemed so odd that Teagan turned the flowers over in his hand and simply stared at them.

It wasn’t until he was out of bed, not at all surprised to find fresh wash water waiting for him, and shaving, that it sunk in that there were no black eyed susans around his house. It was late morning, yes, but still morning and yet Daniel had been up and awake long enough to go to his own cottage and return with the flowers. That was even more unusual, though he already knew Daniel was an early riser. Teagan was just grateful that he was a sound sleeper or else that habit

would be far more annoying.

With the small clump of flowers in his hand, Teagan finally emerged from his bedroom. He was moving more stiffly than he'd expected but every bruise and ache made him grin in a silly sated way. Something about the day felt different, he felt different and he kept his hair loose instead of pulling it back mostly because he knew Daniel preferred it free. If flowers had been left on his pillows, Daniel was somewhere near by.

The man wasn't hard to find, he was sitting on Teagan's porch. His hat was tugged low to shade his eyes and he was working with a bit of leather trying to repair it. The fact that the man would have sex with him but wouldn't sit in the house seemed a little odd and it made Teagan smile a little more at seeing him there.

"Morning."

Daniel glanced into the house, his hands stilling on his work but he didn't smile and his eyes stay serious. "Morning." He turned away and set the leather work down before standing. "I brought some cold ham and rolls. I left them inside for you."

"You cooked?"

Daniel shook his head. "From town."

Teagan stepped back into the kitchen and was pleased when Daniel followed without being coaxed. "You went to town?"

"I was up early."

"Obviously." He flipped the small cluster of flowers a little and found a mug to pour water into and drop them in. They were very pretty flowers, no point in letting them die too quickly. "What was in town?" The ham looked amazing when he pulled the cloth open and the rolls were fresh. There didn't seem a point to formality, he just took the cloth to the table and happily started eating.

"Early confession." They'd never spoken of religion before and while Teagan's uncle was understanding, he was far more used to receiving scorn for his beliefs than understanding.

"Did you confess all the wicked, wicked things from last night?" He teased and grinned.

Daniel nodded. "Yes."

Teagan about choked to death on his bite of ham. He coughed and sputtered and had to down long swallows of his drink before he could the ham to behave and be properly swallowed. "What? You didn't..."

"I've no secrets from God."

"But..."

Daniel sat but his eyes drifted from the spill of the black hair he loved touching to the black centered flowers on the table. "The priest isn't a man during confession, he's God's ear."

"But..."

"He's a good man... I think he'd share our tastes if he hadn't a vow to God."

"But..."

"Father Augustine is trustworthy. Having a priest for confession was a requirement for my working for your Uncle."

He drew a breath and kept himself from saying the same word yet again. "He knows what you do?"

Daniel nodded.

"And what we do?"

"He knows I prefer the company of men and have recently taken a lover, he doesn't know it's you. He never knows the details, just..." Daniel sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Just enough."

"Enough for what?" The words sounded harsh but he tried to picture the older man he barely knew knowing so much and more, being accepting of it .

"Enough to offer absolution."

"Do you need absolution?"

"We're all sinners and I more so. It's a small thing, Teagan."

"I just can't imagine..." He shook his head. "You tell him what you do for my Uncle and his friends?"

"He knows I've hurt and killed people." He'd been apprehensive of confessing his work but the weight of it had been crushing. When his employers had accepted his request for a trustworthy priest, he'd been frightened silly but near desperate for confession. The man had listened to all his sins, from his affair with his friends to the blood on his hands and surprisingly hadn't been the least bit shocked. The blood he'd spilled had been easily absolved as the older priest saw the shedding of English blood as less of a sin than the shedding of innocent blood.

"You got up early to go confess what we did last night?"

"I always go to morning confession today."

That was something Teagan didn't know. It never seemed like Daniel arrived later than normal one day over another but then, with how late he slept he wouldn't have noticed. "I didn't know. Was he shocked?"

He wasn't really comfortable talking about confession. "He was understanding."

"And here I thought you went home just to pick flowers."

Daniel blushed a little, he'd stopped in just for that but it was on the way. "It's just....I thought..."

"They're nice. Thank you."

He nodded and studied the table. "About last night?"

"Hmm?" He mumbled around a mouthful of food.

"You...I..." He shook his head. "Are we okay?"

Teagan grinned. "I'm fine, better than fine but I can't speak for you." But his words seemed to do little to comfort Daniel and the man sat silent and uncomfortable while Teagan continued to eat.

Finally he couldn't stand it anymore and as he washed the last of the surprisingly good ham down Teagan sighed. "What's on your mind Daniel? May as well just say it."

The encouragement didn't make it any easier and he had to struggle to do what he'd planned to do. From inside his coat he pulled out the leather pouch and dropped it on the table between them.

"What's this?"

He nodded to it. "Open it."

Carefully and confused Teagan opened the pouch and poured a small fortune in gold and silver coins out into his hand. "Daniel..."

"I've more, a lot more."

"Why are you showing me this?"

He glanced to the flowers and to the coins in Teagan's hand. "I'm not just a thug."

He wasn't sure what Daniel meant by the display of wealth. "I never thought you were." He poured the money back into the pouch, cinched it shut and pushed it a little closer to Daniel. "I don't understand."

"I'm not... I'm paid well..."

"I can see that."

He wasn't just paid well, some of the jobs he was sent on they'd asked him to rob their victims to make the attacks or murders appear motivated by greed and throw off any English investigation. No one had asked him not to keep what he'd taken and he'd simply added it to his savings.

"I'm not going to be a thug forever. I've saved this money, was thinking...I could go to America. Maybe... buy a farm or the like, be something. I've plenty, enough for the passage for several people. It's a thought..."

"You're going to America?" The idea that Daniel was leaving chilled him and made him feel suddenly betrayed.

"It's a thought...not tomorrow but soon, before trouble gets bad here. I've enough now, more than enough."

"To do what?"

"Farm, or maybe raise horses. I don't know." He shook his head. "But there? It won't matter what church I go to or how I was born."

"You'll have there here soon."

He shook his head.

"Change is coming, Daniel, don't give up on Ireland yet."

"I'm not, I just... nothing I've been or done will matter there, I can just...just..." He'd known he'd have trouble articulating how he felt but he also knew he had to try. "I can start over there, be something new."



Which slapped Teagan in the face because he was part of what was old. He raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure you'll be very successful."

He clutched the pouch of money in his fists and wrung it trying to wrestle the words out. The money had been all that had mattered, he was buying his way out, doing whatever he had to now to get a better chance at things someday. It seemed cruel that one man could so turn all of that on its ear. "America is nice."

"I'm sure it is."

"A man can be himself there."

Something cold and icy settled in Teagan's heart and froze him over. He didn't like the implications, he was going to wind up as some part of a life that Daniel was struggling to shed away like a snake peeled off a skin. He didn't like thinking that Daniel felt somehow shut down and unable to be himself around him but could and would in America.

"I can't imagine what you could find there that you couldn't here." He answered in a high and proud way. "I wouldn't surrender the chance for freedom here for anything and to just run away to a new land? To leave my Uncle and Lizzie and their children behind and never see them again? To be buried alone somewhere distant and not beside my father? I can't see why America would be so wonderful compared to all that has to be given up. There's nothing there but...but...wilderness and savagery and just nothing. There is nothing enticing to crossing an ocean just to meet nothing to have nothing worth gaining. Not when everything I need and care for is right here. Everything a man needs is right here, everything I need is right here."

His hands on the leather pouch went numb and Daniel felt suddenly ill. He'd misunderstood the level of their relationship and had reveled too much. It wasn't like Teagan had made any effort to hide his deep rooted faith in the ideal of a free Ireland or given any hint that he might be willing to leave with him. It had been a long shot but he'd just been so happy, so content with the proud man that he'd fooled himself into thinking that the feelings were mutual.

Now he felt foolish and exposed and vulnerable. He hadn't ever told anyone, not even a priest, about his plans and hopes to start over in America. That had been his deepest dream since almost the moment he'd seen the land only then it had been to find a way to get his mother and sisters to travel with him. Now, alone, he just wanted to do it right, be secure, buy himself a future but fate had been rough and the promise of more wealth, a better chance, had kept him in Ireland longer than he'd ever intended. Too long, because now he'd met someone, someone he wasn't sure he wanted to live without only that someone had just made it painfully, brutally clear that he had no similar desires.

Really, it had been foolish and unfair to even think that Teagan would want to leave with him. The man's health was fragile and there was no promise he could even survive such a trip. Daniel would be asking him to give up his home and family and life, all the memories of all he had to face an uncertain future with him and he hadn't even considered that he'd be asking Teagan to be buried somewhere other than with his family. It was too much to ask, he was just Teagan's lover and that didn't mean much compared to all the man had here holding him in place. The trouble was, it wasn't just friendly or physical to Daniel, hadn't been for a long time and at the harsh, sharp words that chased each other out of Teagan's mouth, he felt his heart break.

"I'm sorry." Daniel stood. He could wade through blood, do horrible things and never feel queasy but standing there in the kitchen faced with surrendering his dreams or his love, he thought he might be ill. "I didn't..." He twisted the leather in his hands before tucking the pouch back away inside his coat. "I should have known you'd be upset."

"Of course I am! How can I not be? You think you can tumble in and out of my bed and suddenly

run off to America and I won't be upset?" He frowned and knew he was sounding shrill. "This is my home, this is yours too!" Daniel didn't fight back and that oddly made Teagan more upset. "There is nothing there," he tossed his hand vaguely to the west. "That you can't have here if you just fight for it! How could you think I wouldn't be upset?"

Daniel clenched his hands and the fists hurt his fingers.

"God, you waited until you fucked me to tell me you're leaving?" He shook his head and wanted Daniel to fight back to care enough to yell at him. Maybe he was inexperienced and naïve but if there was anything between them Daniel couldn't just make plans and leave without so much as a flicker of emotion.

"I'm sorry." Daniel forced out, growing light headed and even more ill with each moment that passed. "I just thought....we might go...." He shook his head roughly to clear it and squared his shoulders. "I'm sorry." He managed again before he turned and quickly left. He had to get away, as far away as he could manage and figure things out. He wasn't sure where he was going, just away and before he really knew it, he was on his horse heading to town and the tavern that stood there waiting.

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Chapter Thirty Six

Teagan fumed for a good hour or more. He cursed and threw a fit and kicked the bit of leather Daniel had been working on off the porch. Part of him wanted to crush the silly brown and yellow flowers too but he couldn't, quite, do that but it didn't stop him from muttering about them and putting them out of sight. He was just angry and it wasn't just at Daniel, he was angry at himself too.

It started out with him cussing about Daniel's habit of running off when ever things got a little too emotional. That was infuriating and he stomped about over that but as the burst of anger faded he got worked up again. Only this time he was angry with Daniel and how the man had hidden this plan to simply up and leave without a concern or thought until after they'd slept together. It was like he'd been waiting until they'd finally crossed that final threshold to point out that he wasn't going to stay.

That made him even more angry. It wasn't so much the timing, which had him huffing about the empty house in his small tantrum but the fact that Daniel had been so worried about Teagan finding something or someone better and leaving him only to turn around and do the same thing

to him. It made him feel duped and as some of the anger bled away he felt hurt.

As soon as that first tingle of hurt crept in, the anger shattered. He was mad, yes, without a doubt he was, but he was mad because he'd been hurt. The idea of Daniel picking some new life somewhere else over him, hurt. The idea that Daniel would consider uncertainty and the unknown worth more, better than, what they'd been sharing really hurt. That wasn't something he wanted to admit to himself but it did, it was cutting and painful and it was easier to be angry than to be hurt.

He tried to get things done, simple things, house hold chores and new papers for his uncle but as the day went on he thought more and more about Daniel. It stung at first and he clung to his anger and hurt feelings. It wasn't fair, the timing was bad to bring something so dramatic up. Even beyond the idea of Daniel leaving his life, the timing of the news was the worst and he poked at the pain like a child poked at a bruise.

As the day slipped away the anger did as well and soon the hurt too. He had no claim to Daniel, no right to tell him what to do or what not to do. The man was a grown adult and had the right to make his own choices. It wasn't like they'd promised anything to each other and as the day passed, Teagan began to feel more and more like a spoiled child demanding he be allowed to keep a toy.

It was obvious that Daniel had been nervous about telling him. He knew how careful his lover was with sharing anything, even simple things that should have been harmless and easy he approached with caution. Teagan had been priding himself on drawing the man out, fragment by fragment. Now, when Daniel had maybe trusted him with his dreams, something more guarded and precious than memory, he'd gone and freaked out on him.

He sighed and put his pen gently down. "Idiot."

Now that he'd stopped being hurt and angry, he started thinking. It took most of the day to be able to look over the morning with a judgmental eye but he slowly managed it. He ran what Daniel had said over and over in his mind and more, he looked to see what the man hadn't been able to say. Now that he wasn't hurt and angry he tried to remember how Daniel had looked, what he'd hidden in his eyes. The more he turned it over in his mind the more concerned he became.

"Idiot..." He cursed himself again. "He couldn't have meant..." But the house was empty and no one answered him.

Everything he'd said, he's spoken from the point of view of Daniel leaving him. He'd been trying to show the man the value of staying, of all that was here and how a life could be made right where they were. He'd been angry and spoken sharply and with every snappish word, Daniel had retreated further. He hadn't protested, he'd just taken every word Teagan had thrown at him. That had only made him angrier and he'd driven Daniel away more.

"Oh, God..." he moaned softly to the silent house and stood up. "He couldn't have meant..."

Daniel wasn't someone to share things lightly or easily and Teagan knew the man was a little more closed off in expressing things important to him. He tried to recall every word Daniel said and how he said it and it started to sound less and less like he was trying to tell Teagan he was leaving and more like he was asking Teagan to leave with him. The idea of going to America was absurd, he couldn't do it but it was from more practical reasons not the raw, bitter emotional ones he'd tossed at Daniel when he thought the man was thinking of leaving him behind, alone.

It sunk in slowly, like a stone through mud, that maybe he'd misunderstood. Maybe Daniel had been trying to draw him closer and Teagan had made a mistake and over reacted. It was a frightful idea but one he had to face. It made sense, he'd brought tangible, physical evidence of

his ability to take of Teagan, hinted at the plans he'd been secretly making. Daniel had even tried to point out that the new country would be more understanding of things, maybe not understanding enough to over look two men who were more than friends but understanding enough.

Even if he'd been right with his first, emotional, reaction, Daniel had been trying to draw him closer. He had been so uncertain about speaking, explaining, that it was more than just some passing fancy to the silent man. He'd even started his attempt at explaining by saying he wasn't just a thug, trying to tell Teagan that he'd been making plans to be something more. If that something more meant leaving him, well, Teagan was an adult, he would deal with that but for now he had Daniel right here. He wasn't going to drive the man away with stupidity and emotional over reactions.

"Damn it all." He hissed. He could wait until the morning to talk to Daniel, the man would show up like clockwork he was sure but Teagan felt like an ass and wanted to apologize. If he had misunderstood, he shouldn't wait until morning to make things up between them, time was too precious.

It took him a little while to get himself together and even longer before he got his horse ready and started the trek down the road to the small cottage. The afternoon had clouded up and it was threatening rain but he didn't worry, if it started to get cold and wet he could stay with Daniel until the morning. He could think of ways to keep the chill out that didn't include a warm fire.

It started to drizzle, grey and cold when he was almost there and the sight of the small building set in it's shady glade with green grass around and the bright splashes of Black Eyed Susans made him feel better. It was a misunderstanding, he was fully willing to take the blame for it and say he was sorry. Teagan encouraged his horse down the lane a little faster eager to get the situation explained and resolved even more than he was to getting out of the rain.

Only, there was no thin curl of smoke from the small house's chimney. Didn't mean a great deal and he wasn't too worried about it. Daniel was often busy, he could be off in the woods doing actual woodsman work or something. It wouldn't take much for Teagan to get a fire going and it would be a welcome comfort when Daniel finally did arrive. Even the sight of the Daniel's horse missing from the corral didn't mean anything, if he was off in the woods the odds were good he had the animal with him.

It wasn't until he was actually inside the small cottage that he started to get nervous. The place wasn't empty, not fully, but it was empty feeling. There wasn't one thing Teagan could but his finger on, not right away, it just felt closed up. There was still some of Daniel's things in the main room but things were missing, little things and he started to put it together. The fear that had settled into his stomach, curled around his spine, made it okay for him to push his way into the small bedroom and he blindly rooted around his lover's private effects.

Clothing was missing. Daniel's spare knife was gone as well and the slouched pack that sat in the corner too. Just to confirm it, Teagan checked the peg by the bed but the man's rosary was gone too. Daniel wouldn't ever leave without his rosary but he'd learned the man left it by his bed while just running chores or errands. Since he doubted Daniel had moved into a church with his clothing and blades, it all added up to a fearful idea.

He stood in the center of the room and tried to still his unhappily beating heart. "It doesn't mean that... doesn't have to..." He scrambled after another cause and the only one that made sense was that Daniel wasn't just off on a job for his uncle but was really gone. The man was shy, painfully so really and Teagan had been harsh with something he'd held very dear. Worse, he'd implied, well, maybe more than implied, that Daniel's timing was directly linked in a bad way with their activities of the night before.

Was that enough to drive Daniel away? Not just for a job but really away? Teagan didn't know

but it seemed possible. "No...no..." He glanced around and tried to find something that had been left behind that would be worthwhile to return for. Something small even, something important but found nothing. Daniel owned very little and he didn't seem the sort to be attached to things. There were things still in the cottage but none of them felt vital or important and he could easily see Daniel leaving them behind.

That drove a spike of raw, sheer terror into him. It wasn't just the angry, hurt fear of Daniel leaving for America to start a new life without him, this was the same terror he'd felt as his father was dying. It was the sudden awareness that he'd never again get to talk to the man, to hear his voice or rest against him, that he was going to be gone, completely gone and there was nothing he could do to stop it. All he could do was stand there as the rain beat against the small building and remember the look of hurt and pain on Daniel's face as he'd left.

"No..." He whispered but there was no one there to tell him he was wrong. For a long moment he just stood there, hoping Daniel would walk in and laugh at him for being a fool but that didn't happen. His breath felt too tight and he knew he was teetering on the edge of panic. It was selfish, he didn't want to be alone again and certainly not over something so stupid as him being an ass.

There would be someone that would know where Daniel was, someone that had to know where he was most of the time. It was a long ride over to his uncle's house but if Teagan didn't go and find out how to get in touch with Daniel, he wouldn't be able to stand it. Even the rain couldn't stop him, it was closer to his own house where he knew coals waited to be stoked into a hot fire and dry clothes were to be found. Suddenly it didn't seem to matter if he grew chilled and maybe sick, he had to know where Daniel was.

It was raining now, threatening to really pour but it didn't matter. Teagan was soaked to the skin before he was a third of the way to his uncle's house. The road quickly turned to slick mud and he had to ride with care for fear of not seeing a hole that could catch his horse's leg. It was too cold, too dark, too wet and muddy and none of it mattered. The only thing that stayed real in his world was finding where Daniel was, at any cost, however he could and he had to do it now.

There were lights burning at the house and he bypassed the stable to ride almost to the front door. It was really pouring rain now and even his hat was soaked through, when he bent his head water dumped off the brim and further soaked him. He stumbled from the saddle, his body numb and not wanting to work right and he nearly fell into the mud he felt so stunned and dazed.

He must have been making quite a bit of noise because before he could reach the door it opened in front of him and one of the house maids stood there, wide eyed and stunned. Teagan tried to push her aside as gently as possible, water pouring from his coat, body and hat as he stepped into the warmer entranceway. It splashed in puddles and tracked mud under his boots.

"Uncle Robin!" He hollered, his throat caught and he coughed to clear it. "Uncle Robin!"

"He's not..." the maid tried to get out.

"Uncle Robin!" Teagan struggled to peel off the soaked coat.

"He's not here sir." The girl finally got out timidly.

"Teagan?" Lizzie questioned as she sailed around a corner, her hair was loose but pulled back and she was obviously dressed more for bed. "Gracious you're soaked to the skin. Martha, go quick girl, warm some brandy and fetch some blankets." The maid stood there wide eyed. "Move girl, move!" She shooed and finally got the maid to scurry away.

"Where is Uncle Robin?" Teagan demanded.

"He's not here. Come here, Teagan, come closer to the fire. You're soaked to the bone..." She wanted to scold but there was something wild about Teagan's eyes.

"Lizzie... he's gone... he's gone and I can't find him..." He heard himself sobbing out and felt streaks of warmth on his face, tears mingled with the rain. "I have to find him Lizzie, I have to..."

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Chapter Thirty Seven

She understood instantly that they weren't talking about her husband but so far Teagan had said nothing that would give away that they weren't talking about her husband. Lizzie glanced over her shoulder before she moved closer to whisper to Teagan. "Hush now before you give it away and lose him for good!"

"Lizzie... he's gone...he's gone..." he moaned. It was the singular truth that he heard over and over again inside his head. Daniel was gone, he couldn't be found, he'd lost him and that thought shattered all of his strength and made his life suddenly seem empty. Lizzie's warning and his own knowledge that servants lived for gossip shut his mouth but he couldn't stop shivering and sobbing, dripping rain water where he stood in the entranceway.

"Here ma'am." The maid announced as she scurried back with blankets in her hands.

Lizzie took them and quickly got them wrapped around Teagan's shoulder. "Gracious you're frozen to the center. Martha, go fetch some of the master's clothing, something warm and get someone to stable Teagan's horse. Hurry now don't just stand there gawking!" She shooed at the girl and got an arm wrapped about Teagan's body, guiding him away from the door and inside, toward a fire that wasn't stoked nearly high enough to warm him.

"Here now, here..." She pressed him to sit on the stool before she knelt and got the fire going stronger. "You're trying to kill yourself aren't you? Out in this weather... soaked completely, what were you thinking?" She scolded more out of her own worry than real anger but the scolding melted when she glanced up. Teagan sat, hunched over with his face hidden in his hands, sobbing silently.

"It can't be as bad as that..."

"He's gone..."

"So is your Uncle, there was an emergency. He left here in a hurry, went right off to find Daniel and take him along, that's all." She rubbed a hand across his shoulder but was shocked at the chill that seeped from the slender man up from the blanket to her hands. "We have to get you warmed up..." She sighed and glanced around. "Stay close to the fire, I'll see what's keeping that girl then once you're in dry clothes with some good warmed brandy in you we'll talk." It didn't seem to matter what she said or didn't say, Teagan didn't seem to be paying attention.

Teagan sat, sobbing now in earnest and with no control. He felt raw and broken, cold and shattered and more out of control than he had when his father lay dying. It just felt all too much, he'd carefully and very properly dealt with everything life had brought to him and always remained as steady and stable as was possible. He'd been a good man, solid and steady if a bit caustic and even bitter occasionally. It had been his father's desire that his son be a good man, a strong man and more, one to face the rocky ups and downs of life with grace and dignity.

He'd always done his best to be what would have made his father proud. Even with weakness and illness he'd stayed strong and mostly in even spirits. Even with abandonment and the grief of his father's death he'd reminded himself that he wasn't the first to have lost someone dear and he wouldn't be the last either. Everyone at the funeral had commented on his composure and he'd been proud of that, he'd known his father would be proud of that.

Yet there he sat, nearly hysterical, shivering and sobbing, because Daniel may have left him. Some part of him, even as he was lost in emotion, knew it wasn't just from the spat with Daniel or the fear that he'd lost the man, it was far more. It was everything and he suddenly wasn't sure he could face another moment, another sacrifice, another surrender and loss. So he sat there, pretending it was just being exhausted and cold that had him so miserable, pretending the tears on his face were raindrops gliding over his skin.

"Come now, here, drink this." Lizzie pressed the brandy into chilled fingers but Teagan just sat there, huddled over. "You can't stay in those clothes, will you change or must I strip you and change you like one of my children?"

He sniffed hard and shook his head. "I'll change." He agreed mostly because he knew she actually would strip the wet clothes from him if he delayed too much longer. She may have been willing to let him change himself but she didn't trust him to do it in a timely manner if she left. Instead she simply turned her back and folded her arms across her chest.

"Better hurry or I'll do it myself." She warned but soon heard movement behind her.

Teagan stripped the clinging wet clothing from his skin, peeling off the heavy wet and shivering even with how close he was to the fire. His uncle's clothing were far too large, the shirt hung from his shoulders and the simple britches needed to be belted on to keep them in place. Even still, he looked like he was swimming in the cloth. It was dry and he soon did feel a touch warmer.

"Decent?"

"Yes." He muttered and took up a blanket around his shoulders again.

"You're still freezing cold." She frowned at seeing how blue his lips still were. "Sit and have some of that brandy." Lizzie moved to gather the sopping wet clothing and she tossed them into the entrance hall to drip on the stone floor, make a quick check to see no one was lurking about and shut the room's door. Feeling more secure she returned to sit across from Teagan. "Now, tell me what's happened."

"Daniel..."

"I gathered that much."

"He... I... I'm a fool...I thought he was....we'd...." Nothing was making any sense so he took another swallow of the brandy. "He trusted me with something important and I misunderstood and was rude and he left. Only now I don't think he meant it how I took it and he's gone, he's gone...."

"Not by choice I'm sure. Your uncle received word and hurried away to find him. I'm certain he's away for work and will return soon."

Teagan shook his head. "I don't know, I... Lizzie I think I really hurt him." He felt tears stalking closer and he shut his eyes and sipped at the warmed brandy again to push it away.

"He's a big boy, Teagan, I don't see him being so easily hurt."

"No...I... Lizzie, between us?"

"Of course, you know you needn't ask that."

"He's saved to go to America."

She thought about it and very much could see the strong, silent man in the young country. "I think he'd do well there."

"It's important to him, maybe the most important thing to him and it really took a lot to tell me. He wasn't very clear and I...I thought he was telling me he was leaving and I got....short...with him. I kept trying to tell him how much he has here for him but Lizzie...I'm a fool I....I think he was trying to ask me to go with him and all I was doing was going on about how nothing in America could matter to me and how everything important is here...." He shivered again this time not from cold but remembering the look of pain in Daniel's eyes. "It was so difficult for him to trust me with that and I really hurt him and when I figured it out and went to find him..."

"He was already gone." She sighed. "You are a fool."

"Hey..."

"Lucky for you, Daniel isn't a fool. He'll be back when the work is finished and you can resolve this with him then." It had surprised her to see Teagan come apart over the idea of Daniel having left and it made her wonder about this silent plan to go to America. "Are you going?"

"Going?"

She leaned forward. "To America!"

The idea hadn't even occurred to him. "I can't."

"Of course you can!"

"My family is here, my life, my work..."

"Your uncle would understand and your work, you'll find new causes to champion. It would be exciting."

"Lizzie I don't even know if he was trying to ask me. It's not an issue I can worry about right now. He's gone away thinking I feel so little for him...I ..." he drew a breath and steadied himself. "I hadn't understood how much he's come to mean to me until I found his cottage empty. The idea of him being gone...Lizzie I can't bare it."

"He won't be gone long."



"He's barely been home longer than he was away last time. It's not fair, it's not, he should be here..." He was still shivering and now he felt leaden and exhausted. "I need to get home."

"No you're staying right here."

"Lizzie."

"You look like a corpse, your lips are still blue, you're still shivering and I don't think you have enough strength left to ride a mile let alone home. Besides this is your home too. So, let's get you tucked into bed and we can talk more tomorrow morning."

In the end he gave in because he was too tired to protest.

Teagan woke when the too bright sunshine hit his eyes. He drifted up from sleep, groggy and confused, wondering why he hadn't pulled his drapes before retiring for the night. More, as he stumbled from bed, his clothes were far too large and he found the drapes were pulled, they just weren't his. Neither was the clothing he was wearing and it took a long, slow, moment before he remembered where he was and why.

He felt hazy, disconnected but the sudden rushing need to find Daniel hit him again and he staggered around the bed. His joints hurt and he felt unstable on his feet. He'd been so cold the night before but now he felt hot and he blamed it on the bright sunshine that the fabric covering the window did such a poor job of blocking out. All he knew was that he needed to get his clothes and his horse and find Daniel, sooner, not later and every moment he wasted was another moment where Daniel was off somewhere thinking something that wasn't true.

The door didn't want to open for him and it took two tries to get it unlatched and pushed back. Teagan knew the room he was in, he'd stayed in it before but once he was in the hallway he stood for a moment uncertain about which direction to take, neither way seemed like the better choice for finding Daniel. In the end he simply turned and walked and found the stairs he was looking for. Only they wavered and he lost his balance and fell. He tumbled down several of the steps before he caught himself and stopped his fall.

"Teagan!" Lizzie called out, she'd come running at the sound of him falling, dropping her sewing in her rush but she'd been startled to see him crumbled into a heap on the steps. She rushed up and helped brace him, preventing him from falling further but as soon as she touched him she frowned. "Oh, you're burning up." She glanced around and spotted the timid young maid. "Martha, girl, go, hurry, get James to ride fast for the doctor. Master Teagan is ill and he must be fetched right away. As soon as he's off fetch me cool water and some cloths. Go, child, go!" She shouted and turned back to where Teagan was slowly getting his limbs untangled.

"I have to find Daniel." Teagan announced and tried to stand.

It was too easy to hold him in place. "Not right now you don't, love, you're burning up with fever."

"Daniel..."

"Will be home soon enough but you can't go out and find him in this state, come now, let's get you back to bed." She helped to steady him and this time let him get to his feet.

"No... Lizzie...have to find him..."

"Come to bed and I'll go fetch him for you, okay?" She lied and wondered if she should get her children out of the house, lest the fever spread to them as well.

"You will?" He frowned because some part of his mind knew she couldn't.

"If you go back to bed I promise to see right to it..."

"I am tired." He agreed and let her lead him back down the hallway. "Promise?"

"Promise." The door to the bedroom was open and she got them inside and Teagan laid back down with little fuss. He'd kicked most of the blankets off of him while he slept and she retrieved them, draping them again over his slender body.

"m hot..."

"I know, love, I know just leave them be, okay?" She soothed a hand over his forehead and was worried at the heat that rolled off him. His skin felt too tired and dry and that was never a good feeling.

"Lizzie?" He questioned, unsure how long she'd been at his bedside. "I'm sick again, aren't I?"

"Hush now, the doctor's on his way, you just rest." She sat on the edge of the bed and brushed some of his tangled hair back from his face. She'd helped nurse him through several bouts of illness, alone and with his father, over the years and knew he'd ease better back to sleep if he wasn't left alone.

"Daniel..."

"Shhh...you just rest, want to be healthy for when he gets back, don't you?"

Teagan shook his head. "Lizzie... Daniel...tell him..." He dropped his head down and shut his eyes, what did he need to tell Daniel that felt so pressing. "Tell him..."

"Shhh you'll tell him yourself."

"No...I'm dying..."

Lizzie couldn't find it in her heart to lie again so she just leaned forward and placed a soft kiss to his too hot forehead. "We all are dying love, rest."

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Chapter Thirty Eight

By the time the doctor had been fetched and arrived the day was mostly gone. Teagan had drifted into fitful sleep, waking to demand to know where Daniel was and to drift off again. He kicked blankets and covers from his body and protested their return. All of his fussing was far more welcome than his still, restless sleeping and Lizzie stayed by his side soothing his too hot forehead with a cool cloth and praying for the doctor to arrive.

When the older man finally made it to the house she felt better. Even if she knew there was most likely nothing the doctor could do for Teagan that she couldn't it just felt better to pass off the responsibility to someone better trained. The man knew their family well enough to know better than to ask Lizzie to leave the room while he examined the ill man. Lizzie had been the only maternal figure in Teagan's life for years and it was within the bounds of proper society for her to stay if she wished it.

One thing the doctor never allowed himself to be swayed from was discussing a patient's condition where it may do harm. Just because he knew Teagan was aware of how fragile his own health was, didn't mean that he'd announce poor prospects where he may over hear it. Will and stubbornness often were all that a body had to fight with and he'd do no such thing that could break either.

Lizzie waited until the door to the bedroom had been pulled shut. "Doctor?"

"Downstairs." The man gruffly answered and made his way downstairs the wash water that would be waiting for him.

That left her to huff and follow. "Doctor? Please, how is he?"

"He's sick."

She tossed up her hands. "I was aware of that."

"Mrs. Roberts, shall I be direct?"

"Of course, as always."

The doctor glanced up from where he was toweling dry his hands. "I'm not entirely sure why that boy is even still alive. Time and time again he's fallen ill and I've told your family to prepare for the worst but each time he's shocked us all and managed a recovery."

"You're saying he's going to be alright?"

"I'm saying I don't know. It appears not to have settled to his lungs yet, which is very good indeed but his fever is high. All you can do is watch him, if this illness settles in his lungs..." He shook his head. "They're too weak already, further illness may limit their function beyond a point he can survive."

She nodded, it was sickness in his chest that had nearly taken him several times. "He hasn't been coughing at all and his breathing seems labored but steady."

"For now." The doctor warned. "This fever must come down, when it does this illness will present itself more clearly."

"And if it doesn't come down?"

"He will not survive. Keep him from drafts and from chills, try to get him to drink if he'll take it

and hope this high fever breaks.”

“When it does?”

“Listen for a cough or other sign of it impacting his breathing. It may not, there is a fever about the county that settles in the stomach, causes retching and vomiting. It’s quite dreadful to see but for most doesn’t last longer than a week. He may have contracted that, when his fever eases some if he shows signs of retching or vomiting we’ll no better.”

“Good, good, I’m sure that’s all that this is.”

“Mrs. Roberts, this illness is fatal. For the healthy and strong it is merely a set back but it has claimed the lives of several younger children and more aged members of our community. With Teagan’s health as fragile as it is, there are no promises. If he shows signs of digestive distress, try to keep fluids in him, simple things like broth and make certain he doesn’t choke on his own vomit. With any luck he could have this shaken off in a week or more but simply do not expect that. Has your husband been informed?”

“He’s away for business.”

“He’s not a young man either. It would be best if he stayed away and if your children have not come in contact with Teagan, consider sending them away as well.”

“I’ve already sent them to my sister’s house.”

“Good, good, smart woman, you’re young and healthy and have nothing to fear. Just keep praying but remain practical.”

She felt chilled. “Is it truly so dire?”

“Even a small illness is dire for a man in his condition but we’d be unwise to assume he can’t defeat this and equally unwise to assume he can.” He gathered his hat. “I’ll stop by tomorrow to check on him but send for me if there is any change.”

She saw him to the door but was frowning and not at all at ease. There was nothing for it, Teagan had to get better. The man was finally showing signs of being happy, she wasn’t going to let him go and die now. Not if she had any say in the matter, if Teagan was going to slip away it was going to be against every ounce of her will to hold him close.

Lizzie held his hair but he was barely able to hang over the bed to vomit, this throat a raw, horrible pain and his heart pounding in sharp beat. He wanted to curse at her, she kept waking him up to try to eat even a few spoonfuls of the thin broth and it kept making him violently and suddenly ill. When the current wave finally subsided he let her help him roll back onto the bed where he lay gasping and weak.

“Shhh there now...shhh...” Lizzie mopped at the damp forehead but the cool cloth only set off another bout of shivering. She’d gone against the doctors orders and instead of keeping Teagan wrapped up tight and away from any cooling draft during the height of his fever she’d stripped him to the waist, thrown off the covers and covered his upper body with damp, cool cloth. It was something his father had done in the past and it had always seemed to help, at the least it allowed Teagan to rest more comfortably. Sure enough, yet again, it seemed to do good and within a day his fever was lower and after several days it was still high but not anywhere near as frighteningly high as before. Now he shivered in chills and sweated in fire but it was a fever she was used to dealing with.

And she'd never been so happy to see someone violently vomiting before. As his fever came down, Teagan became more lucid and she tried to get fluids and broth into him. All efforts resulted in quick and violent illness but his breathing, while weak and ragged, never grew any worse. If he was going to fall ill, she was grateful it hadn't settled into his lungs, at least so far.

"Stop making me eat..." he moaned around a raspy voice that he didn't know as his own.

"You have to keep trying."

"I can't...I can't..."

"Shhh you're doing fine, getting better everyday." She lied smoothly. He wasn't getting worse everyday and in her book that alone was progress.

"How long..."

"Have you been sick? Little over a week now."

"Daniel?"

"Isn't home yet but neither is your uncle so shhhh. You don't want to be sick when he gets home do you? Welcome him back by turning your stomach over him?" She brushed hair back from his face. "Have to rest and try to eat to get better and you have to eat something to do that."

He just closed his eyes as much from exhaustion as to hide from the idea of eating again. All he wanted was for Daniel to make it home, maybe he wouldn't be so hurt and angry and he'd been willing to sit with him while he was so sick. He wanted his father too, his deep voice rumbling about how this all will pass and it was okay. As he drifted to sleep he wanted both men at his side so badly that his heart ached and tears slipped unnoticed from the corners of his eyes.

"And he's eating?" The doctor asked not of Teagan but of Lizzie as he listened to the rasping rattle still shaking about the young man's lungs.

"The last day now, he's kept water, broth and tea down." She wanted to help, Teagan was sitting up but it was exhausting him. He looked ready to pass out just from that small effort but she'd rather have him weak and looking like a corpse than being one.

"Well..." The doctor began and helped to ease Teagan back onto the bed. "You're a very lucky young man."

At the moment, Teagan didn't feel very lucky. He felt sick and weak and very alone and half wished maybe he wasn't so lucky. Since that would sound rude and ungrateful to express, given how faithfully Lizzie had tended him and how often the doctor had been out to see him, he simply focused on his breathing and closed his eyes.

"How is he, truly?"

"I see no reason why he shouldn't recover from this, his fever is nearly gone, he's able to hold something in his stomach. Keep him abed until he's strong enough to move about for short periods of time. When he says he feels ready to leave his bed, keep him there for several days more, rest is what he needs. Stay from drifts and chills, keep him warm and try to keep increasing what he can eat. With luck he'll be back and about in a few months time but at all costs he must not fall ill again until he's recovered." The old man shook his head and again was amazed that the slender ill body on tucked under a mound of blankets on the bed had managed to survive another illness.

Lizzie saw the doctor out but quickly returned to Teagan's room. He was lying there, pretending to sleep and she didn't believe him for a moment. "You have to be more careful."

"Lizzie..."

"What were you thinking? Riding about in the rain, letting yourself get soaked to the skin? There are easier ways to kill yourself, Teagan!" She scolded hiding her fear and tears behind anger and worry. "I won't tell you how long to stay in bed but I will tie you to this bed and keep you here if I think you're pushing yourself too hard, do you understand me?"

Teagan nodded. "I'm sorry."

That made her sigh and she soothed hair from his face. "Don't be sorry just take better care. Really, Teagan, please, we're not ready to lose you yet."

"I want to go home."

"Not going to happen, not until I know you're really better."

"Lizzie, is Daniel really still away or...or has he refused to come see me? Please, be truthful."

"Truthfully? He's really still away. I've had no word from anyone and no idea when they'll return. Rest now, I promise as soon as he returns I'll bring him to you."

He sighed and shut his eyes again, slipping down into sleep for real this time. "Good...I need him...." He muttered as his strength wore out and sleep won the battle.

"I know dear, I know..." She sighed and glanced to the curtain covered window, wondering just where her husband and Daniel could be. The promise of only being gone a few days had stretched far beyond and she was becoming worried.

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Chapter Thirty Nine

As another week slipped into two, Lizzie became jumpy with nerves as she waited for word of her husband or his return. While she couldn't keep Teagan in bed much past when he began to feel better, she did require him to stay indoors and well wrapped in blankets he swore he didn't need.

Even he didn't protest the lack of activity and resigned himself to sitting in warm afternoon sunshine near a window or reading by the fire but Lizzie knew he was listening for word as much as she was.

So she was glad when the sounds of a horse's approach came while he was napping late in the morning. She glanced across to where he slumbered and saw no signs he was waking up and that forced her to move slowly and silently to leave the room, trying not to wake him in case it wasn't either of the men they were waiting on. Which she felt bad for as soon as she was outside and instantly knew the horse and the slightly too round man on the creature's back.

"Robin!" She gasped and ran forward, holding up her skirts and not caring how it looked.

He pulled up the horse and scrambled from the saddle as fast as he could to catch his young wife as she flung herself into his arms. "There, there, dear...." He soothed after she'd claimed her kiss but still hung on.

"Where have you been! You were to be gone only a few days, a week at most you said!" Lizzie tucked her face against his shoulder and clung to him.

"We had some difficulties. There now, it's okay, can you go make up the sick room for me?"

"I can't, Teagan's in it."

"Teagan?"

"He fell ill the night you left, we weren't sure he'd recover, he was sick with such a high fever."

Robin braced himself for the news. "And now?"

"Is recovering, much to the doctor's amazement. He's out of his sick bed but still weak. He'd be a sight better if Daniel's returned with you, seems they quarreled before you left."

"Danny's the one I need the sick room for..." He'd walked them closer to the house as they'd talked, eager to get home and to sit on something that didn't move.

"Uncle?" Teagan had woken to voices and the sound of a horse, hoping Daniel had returned he'd snapped awake from his light nap and found Lizzie, his ever present watch dog, missing from the room. That could mean few things and he'd hurried outside, abandoning his cocoon of blankets to find his uncle walking toward the house.

Robin stopped, stunned by how his nephew looked. He'd been so healthy in appearance before he'd had to leave and now, well, now he wasn't certain he was seeing a breathing human and not some spirit. Teagan's already normally pale skin was now the color of a corpse, bloodless and white with blue tones. His eyes were sunken and dark bruised streaks lined below them in smudged testament to how ill he'd been. The normally mocking, expressive lips were a tight worried line, chapped and raw. Even his clothing seemed a touch too large for him as if illness had shrunk him just a little.

"Good God lad, get inside, this instant!" Robin instantly scolded. The air of the day was warming up but he'd take no chances when he wasn't even sure Teagan was on the road to recovery as his wife had mentioned.

"Uncle, please, is Daniel with you?"

Robin glanced to his wife and knew the anxious, tense look in her eyes and knew to answer carefully. "Inside lad, we'll discuss it inside."

Teagan paused and felt sick but not from his illness. "What's happened? Please, tell me."

"Inside lad!"

That was the tone that Teagan knew meant his uncle wouldn't be swayed from. If he wanted to know what had occurred, he'd have to go inside. He nodded his head dumbly and went back into the house but he was unable to take up his chair again or the blankets he'd been resting so cozily in. Instead he paced a few short steps back and forth and tried to brace himself for the news that Daniel had left.

It took what felt like a small forever for his uncle and Lizzie to finally join him but he knew there were things that had to be done. His uncle would be tired from the long ride and Lizzie would see to it he had a drink before they came in and then they both would see to it no servants lingered to listen to a family conversation. Which, in a way, he was grateful for but also made him want to scream in frustration at the delay.

When they finally did join him he wanted to shout but instead spoke very softly and carefully. "Please, Uncle, please, where is Daniel?"

"Sit down lad." Robin sighed and took a seat on the settle himself but left Lizzie to pace or fuss as she willed.

With his lips in a tight angry line and his hands balled into fists, Teagan obeyed simply because he knew his uncle would sit like a stone statue until birds roosted in his hair otherwise. That didn't mean he didn't take his chair again more like a petulant child than a dignified adult.

"What's this I hear about you going out in a storm and making yourself sick?"

"Uncle, please...." Teagan glanced down. "Lecture me once you've told me whatever it is you're avoiding."

"Very well." He sighed. "Word of our meeting was betrayed. Not to the English but to some fellows from Ulster. Lapdogs of the English and no better and looking to curry favor, the lot of them. They raided our meeting hall and all would have been lost not just for myself but many other boys as well if not for Daniel's quick thinking and quicker actions. He got us away and for quite a bit of time we avoided trouble because of his skills and his alone. Like babes to a slaughter it would have been, many a loyal man and his family in this county and others owe that young man their freedom and lives. He was securing our away when they found us again, like the Devil's own hounds they chased us from one safe spot to another until even Daniel's wits were at an end. Most of the others had been safely away but there were still three of us cornered and Daniel placed himself between them and our escape and was himself caught."

Those were unhappy words. He knew Daniel's work was dangerous and his uncle's own scheming equally so but he'd never really thought what that could mean. Now, faced with a slap of the truth, he sat silent, waiting for his uncle to go on and trying not to assume the worst of things.

"They didn't give him over to the English. They'd nothing on him, a simple woodsmen and all to the surface examination but they wanted names and meetings and information. A week they had him before we could rally and find him and for a week he said not one word as we've been told."

"Is he well?" Lizzie finally asked because it didn't seem like Teagan was going to be able to speak.

"He's injured, badly so, and has begun to run a fever." Robin took another swallow of his drink and stood up. "I must go meet the wagon on the road, have him taken over to Mallory's house. I hadn't known you were recovering here, lad."



"What?" Teagan stood up now too, ready to physically tackle his uncle to keep the man from leaving. "No, no, you can't! Take Daniel to my house, I'll tend to him."

"You're barely from your sick bed, Teagan, I won't risk you being around another with fever."

"No! No!" He was feeling frantic. "He'll die, Mr. Mallory is a good man but he knows nothing of illness and fever, I do! I'll tend to Daniel myself."

"You barely look able to tend to yourself, lad, let alone someone else hurt."

"Then I'll go with him to Mr. Mallory's house!"

"The entire point is to keep you from further illness when you're already in such fragile health!" Robin roared back, frustrated now at his nephew's seeming blindness to the situation.

"I'm fine, perfectly fine!" His protest was marred by feeling like he couldn't breathe and how shaky his legs and hands felt.

"Both of you shut up!" Lizzie finally shouted over the two men. "I swear you're like children. Robin, he'll fall more ill with worry if you don't allow him to help and you, stubborn, rotten man! If I allow Daniel to be brought here and help you tend him you will swear to do as you're told. If I say you're too tired to help you will go and rest without protest, as meek as a lamb."

"If you agree?" Robin asked softly, amused by his headstrong wife.

"Yes, if I agree, because neither one of you has a lick of sense between you!" She glanced between the two men. "Is it agreed?"

Teagan didn't want to but he found himself nodding. "I'll listen to you, meek as a lamb, just, please, I need to see him." He found his strength gone and had to sit down to keep from falling down.

"Good, and you?" She turned to her husband. "Will you give me any trouble?"

"Meek as a lamb." He whispered around a grin.

"Very smart men I have around me. Now, how far out is Daniel?"

"An hour, maybe less, I road ahead."

"Plenty of time, first we must move you to another room, Teagan and then make the sick room ready for him. Gather up supplies and boil water and..." but her words were muttered low and more to herself and as she slipped from the room they faded from hearing.

"As much as I owe Daniel for my safe escape, my concern is and always will be for your health, Teagan." Robin said into the silent room.

It was difficult to remain stubborn and angry to such a loving confession. "I know, but, Uncle Robin, I... he's as important to me..."

For all his agreement not to fuss, protest and to as he was told, he stalled on moving his few things from the sick room he'd occupied hoping that his reluctance would show and Lizzie would relent and let him share the room. If she noticed, she made no sign of it and shooed him out and to one of the other bedrooms. He knew, logically, he was healthy enough to be moved and it

would seem odd to the servants if he didn't take over another room but it went against everything he wanted to do.

Only when he returned to the sick room, Lizzie and one of the young maids were laying out supplies and making the bed and he was quickly shooed off to leave them be. He bit his tongue and remembered his promise to listen and left to go sit by a window and watch for the wagon that was supposedly, slowly, bringing his injured lover home. He'd asked his uncle but the man had refused to tell him just what was wrong with Daniel and as he sat, alone, his mind imagined the worst.

So by the time the wagon finally rolled toward the house with several local men driving it, one of them his uncle's fellow, he was a nervous wreck. He wanted to rush outside but Lizzie quickly appeared and she gave him a harsh look. "Stay here and out of the way you can come help in a moment. Let the fellows get him inside first."

"I...okay..." He agreed mostly because he knew he'd be no use or help and his falling apart might do a lot of harm. The idea of vital, alive, strong Daniel hurt and sick made him tremble and feel ill again himself. He hovered near the window and watched as Lizzie swept in and how the men jumped to listen to her for fear of her often harsh words.

From his window he watched as the men gently gathered up the corners of the blanket Daniel had been rested on and eased him from the back of the wagon. That was a good thing because they were obviously being careful and that would spare the wounded man pain but bad because the cloth lifted up and hid any sight of the body they carried. He fussed at his clothing and hair and the blanket that lay unfolded and rumbled around his chair and stood by, helplessly as the door was opened and Daniel was carried inside and back to the sick room.

It took what felt like hours for them to get Daniel back and settled into the room and it was then that his Uncle patted men on the back and thanked them, ushering them into the parlor and out of the way and Teagan was able to slip away and finally go to Daniel's side. Lizzie glanced up when he hovered in the doorway and nodded her agreement before he dared to step inside. He didn't make it far, the sight of Daniel stopped him.

The man's face was bruised, his nose was swollen, his lips split, his eyes blackened from the beating he'd taken. A cut or gash in his hair had matted it down and caked with dried blood and while he'd been washed down he was far from what Teagan would call properly tended. One arm was splinted, tightly, and obviously had been set to shelter a broken limb. His clothes were dirty, stained and rough but it was how still he lay that worried Teagan the most.

Daniel, even in sleep, never looked so still. His skin, the parts not bruised and scraped up, was flushed and moist with fever. His lips were parted and he breathed in shallow slow breaths. There was something vitally missing to the man, some spark or strength that Teagan had always taken for granted and expected to always see. He hovered there, watching his wounded, still, lover and felt frozen in fear.

"Stop gaping like a fish Teagan, if you mean to help, then help!" Lizzie snapped.

It broke past his shock. "Right!" He nodded and moved more boldly into the room. "Right, have to get these filthy clothes off of him and get these wounds cleaned. Oh, this gash on his arm shouldn't have been stitched shut, it's got infected, have to open it. We'll need more hot water and vinegar and plenty of clean bandages."

Lizzie glanced up to the young maid that stood as dumbfounded as Teagan had looked a moment before. "You heard the man, child, go about it, quick now!"

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Chapter Forty

It took hours and Teagan was exhausted but they finally finished. Lizzie was as stubborn about doing everything right as he was and she showed as much devotion to the wounded man as she did to Teagan when he was ill. Not once, even when they did painful and unpleasant things, did Daniel stir and now that they had him cleaned up, bandaged up and tucked under the heavy covers Teagan sat back and let the truth sink in.

"It's not good." He finally announced when the maid had taken the dirty cloth and wash water away. She'd gotten ill once and retched several times while they'd worked. It was when they'd had to cut open gashes that had been stitched shut and left to fester that had pushed her too far, nearly pushed him too far.

"No." Lizzie said softly, running a cold, damp cloth over the fevered forehead. "It's not. At least if his ribs are broken they didn't puncture the lungs and the infections in those cuts hasn't spread far. We may have caught that. The arm was set quite skillfully and seems like it should heal. He was just beaten so badly, who knows what else is hurt? Robin sent for the doctor, you shouldn't be in here when he arrives, he'll throw a fit."

He wanted to cling to Daniel's hand. "I don't want to leave him."

"You promised to listen to me. You're exhausted and there's nothing more you can do for him now. Go, sleep, I'll let you know the moment there is something to tell."

"You'll wake me when the doctor leaves?"

"I will." She lied smoothly and freely and knew she wouldn't wake him if he was able to sleep. "Go."

Teagan glanced to the still man and knew he was frowning. "Wake me as soon as there is word." He demanded stubbornly again and finally nodded. Knowing it was the right and logical thing didn't make leaving the room any easier. Hovering and fussing and maybe making himself sick again would do nothing to help Daniel and if he wanted to be strong enough to be of use, he needed to rest. Logical, sensible or not he hated going.

Lizzie shook her head when the door finally shut behind him. She soothed the cool cloth from Daniel's face, dipped it in the cool water and wrung it out. "You had better get well quickly, Danny, or Teagan is going to worry himself sick again." She soothed it over his fevered face. "I believe you can hear me, so listen up. We nearly lost him while you were gone, he's barely back

on his feet. You've got to get better or he won't survive either. Lucky fool, he really is in love with you so you had better fight and not give up." If she'd expected some sign that Daniel had heard, she would have been disappointed, he was as still and frightfully weakened as he had been.

Teagan woke in a darkened room and was startled and surprised to find he'd slept at all let alone so long. He had a dark moment of fear, some part of him that whispered that he'd been allowed to sleep so long because Daniel wasn't going to survive or worse had already slipped away. It set off a near frantic terror and he scrambled awake and out from under the covers.

He stumbled around the darkened room, not used to the layout and groggy from sleep until he found the door and yanked it open. The house seemed quiet which didn't really mean anything and he hurried to the sick room, knowing he was over reacting and still unable to stop that sense of dread. He pulled the sick room door open, braced for the worst and instead saw only the same scene he had before. Daniel lay on the bed, unmoved and unchanged, lamps were lit in the small room and Lizzie still sat beside him as dutifully as she'd sat with him.

"Teagan?" She asked, startled by his sudden appearance and the wide, frightened look on his face.

"Is he..." He gasped out and shook his head. "You said you'd wake me."

"You were resting too soundly and there was nothing really to tell." She saw the fear on his face dissolve and knew he'd been imagining the worst. "May as well come in and then we'll go get you something to eat."

He nodded and pulled the door shut behind him with a fair amount more control than he'd opened it. "I was worried when I woke so late. How is he? What did the doctor say?"

"He said he wants to have a look at you as well but I didn't let him wake you."

"About Daniel."

She sighed. "Nothing that we didn't already know. He's badly beaten, his arm is broken. He agrees we did the right thing opening those cuts and cleaning them but he can't say if we got it in time or not. He didn't feel any signs of injury to his organs but can't rule that chance out and he's worried the fever may grow worse, that it sounds like it's congesting his lungs."

"His lungs... he was sick before." The memory chilled him. "He said that he'd been held as a prisoner in a barge and fallen ill, that the army released him because his lungs weren't fit for service. He said it was fixed and gone."

"Well, it might be something he'll always be susceptible to. Doctor suspects we'll know in the next day or two if the infection is controlled or if it's going to grow worse and if he'll be alright. So no point to fretting over it now."

Teagan sat down on the edge of the bed. He wanted to hold Daniel's hand, he wanted to crawl into the bed and curl against the man, sleep there where he could be soothed by the other's heartbeat. Both were beyond the bounds of proper friendship between two men of their class and since there was no telling who could walk in the door, he couldn't do either.

"Lizzie...I can't loose him... I can't."

"You're the only one mentioning that. The doctor says he's young and strong and there's nothing

to be pessimistic about.” Which was a partial lie but kinder than the full truth. “You come with me and eat something and I’ll let you sit vigil tonight so long as you promise to try to rest in the chair. Deal?”

He didn’t want to eat and he didn’t want to leave Daniel’s side but he nodded. “Deal.”

Teagan slept that night, slouched down in the chair, next to Daniel’s side. He wanted to stay awake but his own weakness pulled him down. The stress and worry over Daniel and sleeping in a chair should have made for a restless night but it didn’t. Hunched down, able to listen to the other man’s breathing, was oddly comforting and Teagan slept soundly.

He woke up when the bedroom door opened and Lizzie came in. “Morning sleepy.” She greeted with a smile, pleased to see Teagan had stayed in the chair and had actually slept.

“Oh, fell asleep...”

“I always do as well. I know bad of me but really whenever you even snort in your sleep I wake up. I’ve a maid heating water and fetching bandages.”

“I don’t snort in my sleep.”

She just raised an eyebrow. “How is he?”

“Without checking his wounds?” Teagan leaned forward and put a hand on Daniel’s forehead. “I’d say about the same.”

Before he could pull his hand away, Daniel’s good arm swung up and clasped around his wrist like a vise. The grip was painful and it yanked Teagan off balance and twisted his arm into a horribly painful angle. He barely saw that Daniel’s eyes were open but really not seeing before his surprised struggling twisted him away from being able to see. “Ow ow ....Daniel!” He hissed but couldn’t seem to figure out which way to turn or tug to get his arm free.

Lizzie gasped at the sudden movement, startled, but quickly regained her senses and hurried over. She climbed on the other side of the bed and stroked the fevered face with a gentle touch. There was little sense in the hazel eyes and a great deal of fear. “Shhh....Danny lad....shhhh it’s okay.... Let him go....it’s okay....shhhh you’re safe....home now and safe....shhhh it’s just Teagan.....shhh let him go it’s just Teagan...”

The hazel eyes blinked and for a second focused. “Teagan?” Daniel asked with a weak, raspy voice.

“Yes.” Lizzie answered and smiled. “You’re home, Danny, it’s okay, you’re home.”

He let go of the arm he caught, suddenly exhausted and in too much pain to even begin to doubt what he’d been told. “Teagan....” He sighed and his eyes slipped shut.

There was no pause to rub at his sore arm, Teagan moved instantly to take up the other side of the bed. He stroked a hand over the unshaven face and got the eyes to flutter open again. “I’m here.”

For several heartbeats there was no understanding in the hazel eyes and then, as if a light had been lit in a dark room, understanding dawned. Some of the tense worried fear dissolved from Daniel’s face. “Teagan...” he moaned. “ ‘m sick....”

He nodded. "And hurt but home now and safe and you're going to get better. You're going to get better for me aren't you?" He tried to order but the strength was dissolving quickly in the wounded man.

"For you..." Daniel muttered but his eyes were already shut and he was back unconscious once more.

Teagan gathered up a now weak and limp hand and held it tightly between his own. He wanted to sob and fuss and fall apart but instead he just pressed the skinned and ragged knuckles to his lips and choked back his fears.

"That was actually a good sign you know." Lizzie reminded him when he seemed unaware of it.

It didn't feel like a good sign, it just made him feel even more sick with worry. "Lizzie... I can't lose him... I can't..." He pressed the strong, work roughened hand to his face and didn't care if anyone saw. "I can't."

She glanced to the door before turning back to her nephew. "Then stop fussing like he's already in the grave! If you can't be strong how is he supposed to be? We'll tend him the way you are tended, with no room in either of our thoughts for the worst to occur. He really is a strong young man, he will recover from this and in all honesty Teagan?" She waited until he glanced up, his dark, dark green eyes glittering with unshed tears. "I was more worried we'd be burying you a few weeks ago than I am about Daniel."

"I'm fine." He shook his head.

"And he will be to, but you do him no service by falling apart." It shook her to see how close Teagan was to breaking down. He'd nursed his father for weeks, mostly alone, with her help and never once, even when it had obviously been dire, had he trembled so close to tears. It wasn't until after and she knew when he was alone, that he'd given into grief. It just confirmed what she'd already suspected, if they lost Daniel, they'd lose Teagan as well. "Don't you give up!" She scolded.

Teagan nodded but was unwilling to release Daniel's hand. He wanted to kiss him, wanted to pull the weakened body tight to his own and not let go. Instead he sat there struggling for his composure and control, struggling to think of what more they could do to help Daniel recover.

"Good, that's better." She nodded. "I'm going to go see what's keeping that girl." She slipped from the bed and moved to the door, moving to leave more to give Teagan a few moments alone then to hurry the girl up, water only boiled so fast.

Glossy dark eyes pried away from Daniel's face. "Thank you." He offered sincerely.

Lizzie just smiled softly and left the sick room.

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## Visions & Shadows

### Chapter Forty One

Awareness was hazy and uncertain for Daniel. He vaguely heard voices, Teagan's he thought but it twisted with dreams and fears so he couldn't be certain of it. It seemed to him that he was sick and hurt but safe and that was okay. Sometimes, he thought he was back in America, a prisoner, sick and trapped, smothered by stench and darkness but Teagan's voice would drift across his world and chase those thoughts away with the touch of cool, damp cloth and a soothing hand.

Bit by bit as the hours, days, slipped by the haze of illness and fever thinned and it left him feeling exhausted, weak and in a great deal of pain. Everything hurt, not just from his injuries but his whole body seemed to be aching and sore from having been sick but he was glad to have his senses slowly return to him.

"Teagan?" He questioned again as he floated up from sleep, dreams and fever again.

"I'm here." The darker man answered almost instantly and a hand brushed across Daniel's forehead.

"Thought... Was a dream...."

"Shhhh. Rest."

He sighed and forced his eyes open, the room was empty but for Teagan and Lizzie and for the first time he was really aware that he was in their care and had been sick for a while. It surprised him to wake up, being so carefully tended and even more surprised to find Teagan at his side. He had been desperate to see the other man again and now he felt guilty looking upon him.

Teagan looked awful, handsome as ever of course and proud and stubborn and everything that Daniel adored but awful. He was too pale with a gaunt too slender look and eyes that were darkly circled and sunken looking. His hair was pulled back but it looked unkempt and loose strands floated free of its careful control. He was unshaven by several days and the stark, dark whiskers only made him look even more pale in comparison. Even the man's normally tidy clothes were rumpled and looked like he'd been sleeping in them.

"Mrs. Roberts?" Daniel asked as Teagan helped steady him to get a drink of water.

Lizzie moved over and sat on the edge of the bed. "Back with us again I see? And, again, call me Lizzie."

That would be horribly improper but he was too tired to protest. "Please, get Teagan away from me."

Teagan froze, one hand helping to support Daniel's head and the other holding a glass of water. "What?"

"Why ever for?"

"He's..." he had to stop and catch his breath. "He's making himself sick. Please..."

Lizzie smiled softly. "Actually, he's looking quite a bit more healthy than a few weeks prior. He's just ruffled from sleeping in the chair. Do not fret, Danny, I've Teagan being well tended to as well. If he wishes to help with you, he must behave, rest, eat properly and take care of himself. Remove my bribe and he very well may relapse."

"Relapse?" He opened his eyes from where they'd drifted shut to glance between the two. "You're sick?"

"I was, I'm better."

Daniel shook his head. "Mr. Roberts..."

"Is home safe as well, as well as his associates. Thanks to you, Danny." Lizzie answered. "A debt for which none of us can repay."

He shook his head. "How badly hurt?"

"Your arm's broken but the doctor says it was set quite well and should be fine, ribs are banged up, you'd some gashes that were infected but we've got them healing. Nothing you won't recover from but he's still worried about the rattle he says is in your lungs." She didn't tell him that they'd discussed removing Daniel's one arm due to the infection on the gash there. It wasn't growing worse but for days didn't improve and the doctor had fretted that, weakened as he was from fever, should their efforts fail, the infection could spread and kill him before he could arrive to do any good. It was the doctor's thought that they were being foolish, risking the man's life, to wait and see if his body would begin to push the infection out. Teagan had been caught between being willing to do anything to save Daniel and the desire to not be too rash and in the end Lizzie had made the choice to wait and now she was very glad they had.

"Always sound like that." Daniel's eyes drifted shut again. "So tired."

"Then rest, don't be stubborn and foolish, you need to rest to get stronger." She soothed but it wasn't her hand he reached for with his good hand and it wasn't her hand he held as sleep pulled him back down.

"Teagan, your aunt has asked that you leave this room. She says you must shave, wash up and eat a hot meal or she will think you mean to disobey her and she'll be forced to treat you like a child." Robin announced as he came into the room. His nephew sat in the chair by the sick bed, reading aloud from a book while Daniel lay still and bruised under the covers.

"May we finish this chapter?" Teagan asked but he could tell by the look on his uncle's face that they couldn't.

"She said right away, no lagging about, the chapter will wait." He had to agree, Teagan looked better now that Daniel was recovering.

He sighed and slipped the ribbon between the pages before he closed it. "Very well. We'll finish it when I'm released from playing the part of a meek lamb."

The idea of a single bone in Teagan's body being meek made Daniel smile shyly but he still felt some unease over their relationship. Nothing about the night they'd shared or the fight the next morning had been mentioned and while he wanted to say something, he was simply too worn out and in too much pain to rub further salt in his wounds.



The door shut behind Teagan and Robin heaved a hearty sigh and moved in to sit in the now abandoned chair. He dropped his bulk down into it and puffed another breath. "Oh you're looking better lad, a sight better." He paused but Daniel didn't seem inclined to answer. "Are you in much pain?"

"Tolerable, sir." So long as he didn't breath deeply, move, shift his weight, eat, stand, sit or try to walk, he was fine.

"Well the bruising is fading out. I should have come by to speak with you sooner but Lizzie and Teagan have been fussing over you like a mother hen with only one chick. Figured you'd be fussed out by now."

"I'm grateful for the help, sir."

"What you did, lad, was so far beyond what we required of you. Thank you."

"My job is to see to your security." He didn't want to debate it. If pressed, he would admit the truth, the other rich men meant nothing to him but Robin Roberts was Teagan's beloved uncle and a good man who had been good to him when he hadn't been required to be. Being able to help the other men away from danger was secondary and he would have happily left them to their fate if Robin hadn't been so set of staying with them. He'd slipped them to safety as he could and given them escapes until in the end he'd pushed luck too far and someone had to be snared. It was a logical choice to allow it to be himself. "Thank you for coming for me."

"Well, we were yes, indeed but you secured your own rescue. The men holding you were found murdered and you were found a block away, bloodied and ill. You've no memory of such?"

He had none. He'd been hurt and sick, his only memory was a burning desire to see Teagan again and an anger at being denied. "No sir."

"Well, no point fretting about it now. You held our confidence close, told them not a word. Nothing I can say or do can offer my thanks, so much could have been lost. I shudder to think about what my dear family might have been forced to face if I'd stood accused. I know, already so indebted to you, it's not proper to ask but I'm an old man with a young family. If I may ask, should the worst occur, would you look to me family?"

"Sir? I...I'm nobody."

"You're strong, resourceful, quick to think and act and more, trustworthy. Please, sooth my old mind?"

Daniel felt himself nodding as much because the offer was overwhelming as the truth of it. Lizzie and her children were dear to Teagan and he'd do anything to keep him happy. As long as he was able to, he would do all he could for the Roberts family.

"Good lad, good, I feel a weight is lifted. I know you've no family lad and I'd be blind not to see how dear you are to my nephew..." Robin folded his arms over his chest. "I'd be a sight more comfortable if he was so drawn to a girl but he's happy and beyond that, I stand in awe of you sir. Please, I'd like to think of you as my kin. If you wouldn't be offended by that?"

He was certain he'd heard wrong, that fever, pain and weakness had distorted his mind. "Sir?"

"If one of you two were a girl you'd be family already. You're a fine man Daniel O'Raian."

"Thank you, sir." It wasn't something he ever expected to hear from anyone.

"Well lad," Robin said with a groan as he forced himself to his feet. "I'll leave you to your rest."

When you're better and Teagan is stronger, I'm going to arrange for you to spend some time in the city, to relax."

He wanted that, time away without worry of work of either kind and Teagan all to himself. It sounded like a wonderful idea and he closed his eyes in mock exhaustion to hide how desperately he wanted any moment he could steal from his lover. "If Teagan would like it, sir, I would too."

"Good, settle it later then." He patted a near by shoulder as gently as he could. "Rest well, lad, can't have you sick a-bed forever!"

"Yes, sir." He agreed out of habit but kept his eyes shut as the older man left his room. It just made resolving things with Teagan even more important. To do that he'd have to broach the subject and he knew he wasn't skilled with words.

He must have drifted away and slept some because the next thing he was aware of the door opened and again Teagan slipped inside. Daniel had noticed the man always looked worried when he first walked in and how as he grew close enough to see that he hadn't grown worse during his absence the worry soothed. This time he didn't come alone and had the teaching materials tucked in his arms.

"You're awake." Teagan stated and moved with stiff fussy motions to put the supplies down on the table. "I thought, when you feel up to it, I'd continue our lessons?"

"Teagan..."

"Lizzie is being all twitchy and over protective. She's not even letting me go for short walks from the house. If you weren't here I'd have gone mad by now in confinement. I wasn't even that sick and it's nice out." He sat down and took up the book he'd been reading from. "Now, where were we?"

Daniel reached out his unbroken arm, the half healed wound protested being stretched but he ignored it and placed his hand on Teagan's knee. "Teagan."

He froze and held the book in his hands, tight like it was the only thing keeping him together. "I'm sorry." He finally whispered out. "I'm so sorry, I'm a fool and stupid and I didn't mean to say those things and I didn't even know what I was saying and I just thought you were telling me you were leaving and leaving me and you'd waited until after that night to do it and I ..."

"Teagan, shut up." If the other man hadn't been so worked up and so sincere he'd have snickered a little at how the words chased each other out. As if Teagan had been as uneasy and uncertain about bringing the subject up as he had been, which wasn't something he'd considered.

"No!" He quickly answered. "I won't, I was a fool. I don't know what you meant really. I thought you were telling me you were planning on leaving, leaving me and I got...upset. That isn't fair, this is dear to you, something you want and something you value and I acted like a spoiled child and I'm sorry. It's okay, I understand and I can accept that and I know we haven't promised anything to each other and it really is okay but I'd like not to spoil our time we do have together. That is if you still wish to interact with an overgrown child."

"That wasn't what I meant...I...I'm not sure I can leave without you." He risked a glance over to where Teagan sat, stiff backed and still clutching his book. It was too much to see and he quickly darted his eyes away.

"I can't leave." Teagan whispered.

"I know."

"But I can't lose you." He drew a slow breath trying to steady his breathing. "When I thought you might not recover, I... I can't face that, Daniel, I know we're just friends but you mean a great deal to me. I can face my own illness but I'm a coward thinking of a life without you in it but I can't leave with you. I won't survive the trip and what good would I be in a new country? I would only be a burden." The thought of being buried at sea was a frightful one and he knew if he should grow ill on the journey, that would be how he would be buried.

"I love you."

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Chapter Forty Two

"I love you."

"What?"

Daniel wasn't even sure he'd said it aloud but when he opened his mouth the words tumbled out again. "I love you."

"That's not funny, don't say that."

"It's not said in jest."

"Then don't be absurd and saying stupid things."

"It's not stupid."

"It is!"

"I'm in too much pain to argue!" Daniel snapped and winced as his ribs protested and his head spun. "Teagan Walsh you stubborn, proud, arrogant man, I love you." He sighed and dropped his head back to rest, unwilling to risk seeing the reaction on Teagan's face or showing his own emotions in his own eyes.

"But..."

"I expect nothing and hope it changes nothing but you could never, would never be a burden to

me. Nothing, not God and the Saints or your own stubbornness could ever convince me to stop loving you, nothing.” He dared to open his eyes, needing now to see if Teagan was horrified by his confession and having nothing left in his own eyes to hide. Teagan didn’t look horrified, just shocked and stunned and he sat still clutching the book, his eyes wide and blank.

Teagan had never felt so numb in his life and he didn’t know just how to answer. Daniel didn’t seem in any rush for a reply, the man was as still and patient as he was with all things and looked like he could wait until the end of time if he had to. When he thought he’d composed himself he opened his mouth, not sure what he was going to say until he’d spoken.

“You’re my best friend.”

Daniel nodded. “You’re mine as well.”

“But…”

“How I feel won’t change that. You’d always be safe with me, Teagan. I’d see no harm ever touched you. I would give you anything you wish if I could manage it. As long as there is breath in my body, you will want for nothing.”

He sat a touch straighter. “I’m not a child or a woman to be so fussed about. I may not seem it but I’m capable of tending to my own needs thank you.”

Daniel smiled softly. “Proud fool.”

“I am not!”

“I don’t tell you that because you’re weak or unable but because I love you. I can’t help it Teagan, it’s how I am. I do nothing halfway, I love you, I want the honor, the chance to put myself between harm and you, between distress and you. I want the honor of seeing you happy because of my hand. It’s just what I do, how I am, where I love. My dream is America but you have my heart Teagan. Please, come with me.” He didn’t know how he would go, how he would leave, if Teagan refused but he also knew something important in his own soul would die if he didn’t. He needed his second chance, his new life, as deeply as he needed Teagan and it would be cruel to surrender either.

“Daniel, I don’t know, I…” He didn’t, he was too off balance, too overwhelmed to be thinking clearly. “My family is here and Ireland needs those loyal to her and I don’t want to be buried at sea and… I don’t want to lose you.”

Which wasn’t a full refusal, Daniel nodded softly. “Not leaving tomorrow, not for a while, but sooner not later. Think about it, there’s time.” Trouble was brewing, he could see it coming and he wanted to be gone before it hit, ideally he wanted to be gone with Teagan at his side and for now he wasn’t willing to think about choices.

“I promise, I’ll think about it.” He opened the book. “However you’re not getting out of lessons, you are going to learn to read and passably so and we’re going to finish this book and you’re going to keep me from going mad under Lizzie’s fussy care. Now, where were we?” He glanced to the pages but his thoughts were a million miles away. It wasn’t difficult to find the page or even the line he’d left off at but he hovered there, unable to start reading.

“You really love me?” He whispered, studying the book as if it held all the answers of the world.

“Since before we kissed.” Daniel confessed, trying now to get Teagan to meet his eyes, hoping the other man would be able to read the depth and sincerity in them as easily as he read everything else.

The whispered words hung in the silent room, weighted and welcome between them. Teagan knew he was flushed a little, not a real blush just a tingle of oddly exciting happiness that he wasn't quite sure what to do with.

"Good." He finally said, nodding to the pages he was studying.

"Good." Daniel agreed and smiled freely now at finally figuring out how to steal Teagan's best weapon, his use of words, from him.

"Well, now...here we are.... 'it wasn't long until the fall winds blew...'"

Teagan sat in the warmth of the kitchen and watched as Lizzie worked the dough for that night's pie with quick and skillful hands. She wasn't from a poor family but they were simple people and she'd grown up doing a good bit in the kitchen. More so, she enjoyed it and it showed in her quick, careful movements and the small contented smile on her face. He liked watching her work, always had and he learned against the wall near the hearth and stayed out of her way.

"It's nice to have some quiet. I'm grateful for the help, I really am and I surely don't miss polishing and scrubbing but it's nice to be alone in a kitchen for a change." She sent the servants that would have fussed about her and tried to help off with the children to walk and gather what they found. Some of that was from a desire to cook alone, to produce dinner with only her own skill and hands but mostly it was because Teagan looked distant and thoughtful and he hovered in the kitchen like a lost kitten.

"I wouldn't be sad to never cook again."

She nodded. "So, you going to spit it out or do I need to keep pretending you care about the food."

"Lizzie..."

She glanced up over her dough but he was studying his hands. "Yes?"

"If I tell you something, it will stay between us?"

"Of course, like you must even ask!"

He sat up and glanced about.

"It's okay to speak. No one can listen at doors in this kitchen, the floorboards at the thresh hold squeak violently. Your uncle offered to fix it but I like knowing when someone is approaching." She grinned mischievously. "What is it about him you want to say?"

There was no doubt who the he was and Teagan hoped he wouldn't blush because the subject of his thoughts was so obvious. "We spoke, about the misunderstanding..."

"And?"

"He said he loves me." He confessed barely above a whisper, shocked still to think it and more so to give it voice.

"Well finally, the last to know has been told." She teased.

"Lizzie."

"What? Anyone aware you're, well, aware of things can see it in his eyes every time you're even mentioned. Did you confess to him a return of such emotions?"

Had he? Teagan wasn't sure he had. "I don't believe I did, I...it caught me off guard and I wasn't sure what to say or do."

That made her laugh. "Wish I could have seen that. Teagan Walsh? Caught without words? I must put that in my journal tonight."

"I'm serious."

"So am I dearest."

He sighed and twisted at a crease of cloth over his leg. "He's leaving."

"Not in the shape he's in he's not. Not for a while yet at least and longer if you're smart and convince him to stay and rest."

"No, Lizzie, he's made plans, or making them, to go to America."

Her hands fell still and her face grew serious. "I think he'd do quite well there."

"As do I.... he's....he's asked me to go with him when he leaves. Which is crazy, simply mad, to even consider. I mean I can't go. My health is too fragile to travel and what would I do in America? I can't leave Uncle Robin or you or your children or father. This is my home, I've every reason to stay, it's crazy to even entertain the idea, the suggestion of my going to America."

"Every reason to stay, countless ones, plenty of them." She nodded and agreed. "And one to go, an important one."

"I can't go! My health alone would preclude it."

"I've never known you, not in all these years, to hear you hide behind your illness. Not once." She scolded and didn't watch to see if her words found their mark. "If you wish not to go, that's enough."

"Uncle Robin would never understand."

"He would be upset, indeed, but Teagan I say this not as your Aunt but as your friend. This is your life, no one can make a choice like this for you. Not your uncle, not Daniel, not anyone but you."

"That doesn't help me, you're supposed to tell me what a fools idea it is to even consider the notion. That it would be stupid suicide."

She just smiled softly. "It isn't meant to be helpful. Either way, I think you should tell your uncle, both of you should. He's grown quite fond of Danny too."

Teagan snorted at that. "Best to wait for him to be a little more healed to even suggest that, might cause a relapse otherwise."

"You never said, do you feel the same for him?" She asked as gently as she could.

It wasn't something he was sure he could answer directly to Daniel. "He's my best friend, well him and you both I mean....I didn't mean...."

"Hush, you and I are siblings, I understand. Friendship is a good base for any relationship."

Friendship and admiration and any fool can see he's devoted to you but Teagan, he seems strong but I'd bet solid coin he's quite easily broken in this issue. Be gentle with him if you don't feel the same in kind."

It hadn't occurred to him how easily he could hurt Daniel until they'd had their fight and he'd seen the horrible pain in the hazel eyes. Nothing else on the surface showed a thing, not even a flicker of emotion but those eyes were haunting. It made sense, Daniel was so careful with things and he'd almost begged Teagan to be careful with him. Which meant if he made the choice to stay, he'd deeply hurt the man that had come to mean so much to him. It wouldn't make the choice any easier.

"I know. It's not fair for someone to love me." He confessed as softly as he'd confessed Daniel's shared words of love. He was going to die, sooner than he wished and it wasn't fair to inflict that loss on more people than he simply had to. He'd felt it this past illness, a weakened breath, a new rasp, a sense of dread he had never felt while ill before. There was only so much his body could take. He was running out of time and he could feel the sand slipping out of the hourglass.

Lizzie turned the dough on the board with unnecessary roughness. "Now you're just talking stupid."

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Chapter Forty Three

Mallory was one of Robin's oldest friends. The neighbor gentleman was younger than he was but not by much and as slender and wiry as Robin was robust and round. They'd shared common causes and goals, rejoiced in the birth so late in life of Robin's son and then his daughters and mourned the loss of friends and family. He was with them when they'd been betrayed and it had been Robin that had insisted Daniel get all of his friends securely away before he himself was protected. That choice protected his neighbors and allies but had caused Daniel's own downfall. It was a fact not overlooked by the other men and he'd been answering concerned letters for weeks over it.

Mallory was the only one close enough for an actual visit and he'd held off until word from Robin made it okay. It had been bad enough that Robin's nephew had fallen ill again but to be tending the injured Daniel as well would tax any household. He'd been surprised the house had been in such good spirits when he'd arrived and they'd spent hours catching up on news, plans and gossip with no mention of Daniel at all until Robin had suggested a stretching of legs and a walk out of doors.

"Neither one looks as close to death as I'd heard." Mallory commented when Robin's walk had led them around the house to where a small table and some chairs had been placed in the bright sunshine. Both of the reportedly ill men sat there, books scattered between them.

"Should have been here weeks prior!" Robin nodded. "Daniel's still in quite a bit of pain and moving carefully but the fever is gone and weakness nearly so. The wounds are healing up nicely, quite nicely, but we weren't sure there for a time."

"Hmm." Mallory watched the pair across the lawn. "Good of you to take him in like this."

"Had to, my nephew is quite fond of him. They are nearly like brothers now."

"Well there is one worry from your mind, old friend." He'd often listened to Robin fuss and worry about his nephew's isolation and knew what a pressing concern it had been. "He looks happy, still a touch like a two day old corpse but happy." He squinted. "What is it they're doing?"

"Oh," Robin laughed. "He's teaching Danny to read!"

"Really?"

Robin nodded. "Daniel is a stubborn sort, was ready to go about his own life and care as soon as he could walk but Teagan really needed to be kept still for a while more. When he landed on the idea of teaching Danny to read he didn't seem to mind his confinement so much and I kind of made it an order to indulge my nephew's silliness."

"And he agreed?"

"It's keeping them both from being so restless. Doubt Danny would have let his ribs heal properly without it, or that arm of his. He was willing to get he sling off a week into wearing it. Those lessons have kept them both amused."

"Huh, wouldn't have pictured him as the sort to be concerned with letters."

Robin shrugged. "I doubt he is but he's indulgent of Teagan."

"Wouldn't have pictured him to be that sort either." Mallory gruffed back.

"He's actually a really good man, Mallory, really good. Been honored to have him here as if he were my own kin."

Mallory patted his friend's shoulder. "You always had a soft spot for the strays, just, don't forget he's quite dangerous."

"He would never hurt myself or my family. Why even with little Abby he's as gentle as a lamb."

"I don't mean physically, he knows too much and now? Knowing to read and write as well? It's a dangerous game you play with that one, Robin. His loyalties are secured with money, we've all known that."

"He won't betray us."

"You can't be sure of that."

But he was because now Daniel had something more to be loyal to than simply coin. "I am sure, why do you think I've so welcomed him into my family? He will not betray us." He nudged his friend's elbow. "Enough of this, let me show you this blight on fruit trees, maybe you can think of a better solution than I've been able to manage."



Daniel watched the two men move away without trying to look like he was watching them. Which broke his concentration on the sentence he was supposed to be reading and he only hoped that Teagan didn't notice.

"If you aren't going to try, we should stop." Teagan sighed.

"I'm sorry." He did want to go inside and stop. The letters were giving him a headache and all the rules and new information and things he had to memorize and figure out. His side hurt from sitting up for so long and his arm was throbbing something fierce but he'd promised Lizzie to keep Teagan out in the sunshine for as long as he could.

"You have to concentrate."

"I'm trying."

It was only then that Teagan noticed his uncle leading Mallory away to the side and wondered how long the pair had stood there watching them. "Mallory is a loyal man, it's okay." Daniel had been uncomfortable even in his sick bed without even his blade by his side. It wasn't until it had been returned that he relaxed even a little bit and now he didn't leave the house without it.

It wasn't in his nature to trust anyone, especially with his back to them but he nodded. The two men had moved to the side and around out of sight and that eased up the crawling being watched feeling that had been bothering him. He shook his head and tried to make sense of the words again.

"Your coloring looks better." Teagan interrupted. "Are you feeling better?"

"Still sore."

"Which means you aren't." He smiled gently both eager for Daniel to feel better and dreading it at the same time. "Let's go in, I'm tired."

"I'll try harder."

He wanted to take the man's hand but knew he couldn't. All he wanted was just a small touch but even something casual would be a risk. "You're still in a lot of pain and I'm exhausted. Let's go in so I can rest before dinner. We'll work more on this later."

There was no debating anything with Teagan when he'd set his mind to it but Daniel still frowned. There was something missing, some spark of something, in Teagan's dark green eyes and he wasn't sure what it was. He did seem more exhausted lately, which was natural given how ill he had been but it was worrisome. It almost felt like something in Teagan had given up, accepted his own limitations and stopped fighting and that worried him. He wasn't just tired, he seemed tired now and that was a different sort of exhaustion.

"Okay." Daniel finally agreed and let Teagan gather up the slate and chalk and books from around them.

"When your arm's healed, we'll work on penmanship too. You're doing really well, Daniel."

"Thanks." He ducked his head to hide how happy the small praise made him.

It wasn't just idle flattery to make his lover blush either. Daniel was learning far faster than he'd expected. When they had to do straight out memorization they slowed down and Daniel grew stubborn and frustrated but when Teagan could explain something with a story or with a real

example, Daniel picked up on the first try. He'd been hoping Daniel could remember a few letters from their single lesson but after frowning at the slate for a moment or two he'd carefully and slowly formed them all, naming them as he went.

Teagan didn't miss how unsteady Daniel was getting to his feet and how he winced when he moved. He'd kept them outside too long and knew Daniel would never complain about it.

"You should nap too." He suggested but knew that Daniel would be willing to lay down but he'd continue to try to read instead of sleeping. His only regret was that while they were at his uncle's house they couldn't nap together. Which might be a good thing since he doubted it would be very restful to have someone jostling all those still sore injuries.

"Maybe." Daniel agreed out of habit, not promising anything. If they were going inside he was going to lay down. As eager as he was to be back in his own small cottage and occasionally Teagan's farmhouse, he was grateful for the care and comfort offered here. More so, as the days had slid into weeks, he was starting to feel truly like one of the family. Enough so that Teagan's youngest niece, Abby, who could read better than he could at four, was fond of helping to correct his mistakes and he was finding he didn't mind. She reminded him of his own lost sisters, all of the children did. It only added to the sense of home and family and made him pause before thinking about leaving too soon.

"Done already?" Lizzie half scolded as they moved back indoors. Even she couldn't deny how carefully Daniel moved, how obviously in pain the other looked and it made her feel a touch guilty demanding they go outside to study.

"We made good progress but I'm tired. Going to lie down before dinner." Teagan moved to put the books and supplies on a side table and make his way to his room.

It left Daniel standing alone in the hallway with Lizzie. "He's..." But he didn't know how to ask.

"He's melancholy. He'll shake it off. He always gets like this for a time after having been ill." She caught the uncertain look Daniel tossed her. "Promise, he always does. Now, you... go lay down and rest as well. Don't think I haven't noticed how you're holding that arm."

"I'm sorry I couldn't keep him out there longer."

"I didn't mean for it to be at your own expense. Now off with you and I'll send Teagan in to get you awake and up for supper." She made the words sound friendly but gave him a sly, knowing wink as well. The pair needed some alone time and maybe a few stolen kisses would help snap Teagan out of his dark mood.

Daniel nodded but didn't move. "Will Mr. Mallory be staying for dinner?"

"I don't know."

He'd been joining them at the table like an equal and the family had, maybe, forgotten what and who he was. Respectable people simply didn't dine with murders. "I'm not well, I'll stay in my bedroom with your leave."

"Daniel..." She protested but he refused to raise his eyes. "You were welcome at our table last night, you're welcome at it tonight. I'll send Teagan in to wake you."

He nodded but found himself still unwilling to move away. It was rare he had a moment with the stubborn woman without Teagan or her husband at hand. "I've..." he swallowed hard and plodded ahead. "I've asked Teagan to go away with me." He couldn't quite trust her with the full truth of it. His dreams and hopes were too precious to risk too often.

"I know." She answered gently, shocked the man had even mentioned it.

"I can't delay leaving for too long."

"I'm not sure I understand the urgency."

He didn't wish to explain to her what he hadn't managed to explain to Teagan yet. "It's selfish of me, he shouldn't agree."

"Perhaps."

"I want him to agree."

"Of course you do."

"I can't ask him to leave his family. I wanted you to know, I won't stop him if he wants to stay."

"I..." She wondered just what he was trying to ask or say, wondered how subtle he actually was and how much of it was simply his own unease around other people. "I do not know Teagan's mind on this. He has barely spoken of it to me."

Daniel nodded. "I'd like to speak with Mr. Roberts about this." He was dreading that conversation but it had to be done if for no other reason than to make mention of his own leaving. "Sooner, not later."

"I'll make sure he has some inkling to the conversation before hand so as to not broadside him with it. He's a man that likes to know in advance to know what he wishes to say when surprised." She smiled lightly but Daniel wasn't looking and missed it. "Now go, rest, you have to be hurting."

He nodded. "Thank you, ma'am, for all your kindness."

And that sounded like he was planning on leaving, maybe their home but maybe more and soon. It rang with finality and seriousness. The light smile darted away and while she watched him move back to the sick room with careful, shortened steps she wondered where a conversation with her husband might possibly take them all.

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Chapter Forty Four

People often assumed that Daniel's silences were used to hide an equally slow and not overly clever mind. Plenty of folks had flat out stated that opinion to his face over the years as if he'd be too slow to know he'd been insulted. He didn't mind that, not really, he liked that most

everyone assumed he wasn't too clever. It made them ignore him or overlook him or undervalue what he could really do. He would never, not if he spent his lifetime practicing, be as sharp and quick with words like Teagan was but that was a far cry from being dim witted and unthinking.

The weight of his thoughts often drew him down. There was so much to consider, so much of time. Troubles with Robin Roberts and his friends' silly notions of revolution and independence and his mixed up role in it; Teagan and how deeply he'd fallen for the proud man, how out of control he felt with so much of his soul bound to someone who was so mercurial. He worried over America and how he should structure his new life there and what could go wrong and what needed to go right and that often led him to fussing about the regrets of never finding his mother and sisters.

He was used to the weight of all he carried in the silence his lack of speech created. It was why he liked working hard. Complex tasks like repairs and construction occupied his mind too much to allow room for thoughts and simpler, more physically difficult, things like plowing allowed him to do something while brooding over things he couldn't resolve.

Only now, as he walked away from Lizzie, his thoughts were silent. It was an odd change and left him feeling empty and weakened from more than just soreness, pain and fever. He'd said what he'd needed to say and it brought with it a sense of completion. He had to leave, Teagan would go or stay as he willed and Daniel had made it clear to his family that he wouldn't force his will on his lover. He'd committed to speaking to Mr. Roberts directly, to airing all of his plans if he must and the outcome of that conversation too was now beyond his control.

It was the same silent empty feeling he got before a fight. Knowing that time was running out, far too short to change plans or stop it. With a strong sense like dice that had been shaken and tossed but still tumbled, beyond influence and the results unknown. It was neither a good feeling nor a bad one but he liked knowing there was nothing left for him to have to control. It felt good to surrender and if he could keep from being consumed with a gnawing worry of not having Teagan in his life he might find a few hours of enjoyment in the sudden emptiness of his mind.

He pulled the door shut on the sick room door and sat gently on the edge of the bed. With one arm braced on the bedpost he toed off his boots, kicking them to fall as they willed before turning to unbutton and slowly, painfully, shrug out of his jacket and waistcoat. Getting dressed again for dinner would be almost impossible by himself. Both his broken arm on one side and the no longer infected gash on the other still hurt and caused his fine motor control to be clumsy. Ideally, he wouldn't have to do it alone, Teagan was supposed to be sent in to wake him and even if it turned out to be one of the maids, they'd helped him before. Timid things, they had heard the gossip of his profession and were skittish to be alone with him. As if he might rip their throat out with his teeth or do other unspeakable things to them.

He had no intentions of sleeping, he simply wanted to lay down. Sitting up hurt, propped up felt better but moving between the two positions was still sharply painful. He'd seen a man die once from being kicked in the ribs too hard and too often. The bones had splintered inward, punctured his lung and bled. There hadn't been time for the bone break to grow infected and kill him, he'd drowned in a gurgle of his own blood long before that. It wasn't a death he wished to face and was willing to be overly ginger and careful with his own bruised sides. The bones may be knitting well as the doctor had declared, but they still hurt the same and were fragile to further damage until really healed.

Didn't matter, not really, that he'd functioned with far worse and with far, far less help. He didn't feel like being stubborn. Lizzie was a welcoming hostess, Mr. Roberts was as kind as his wife and it gave him an excuse to spend all day with Teagan. That was worth the pain and perceived weakness and awkwardness alone. He'd sacrifice a lot more to have days to spend just sitting in the same room with Teagan than a little embarrassment and injury.

Which meant he was willing to ease himself down on the bed with gritted teeth and settle in but

wasn't quite willing to nap. Only, his body betrayed him. Once it stopped hurting so much and he felt the tired cramped muscles in his shoulders and back ease, sleep clawed him down. He wasn't a nap person, unless he was curled up in a bed with Teagan using him as a pillow, or really ill. Drifting away had been the last thing he'd planned to do with the rest of his afternoon.

He awoke startled by the fact he'd slept almost as much as by the sound of the door opening. The fear that always followed him, of being caught asleep and vulnerable, caused him to jerk in reaction to reach for blade or gun and instead found sharp, awful pain to stop his movements short. There was nothing to be afraid of, he was sleeping in a safe place and the person that had crept like a thief into his room was a most welcome visitor.

"Teagan," he sighed the name out but the dark haired man didn't even turn to glance his way.

Daniel watched, one of his hands pressed against the raw pain of his ribs, as his guest moved across the room. One slender, pale hand slipped into a pocket and returned with a slip of red ribbon between those chilled fingers. Attached to the ribbon, Daniel saw quickly, was a brass key. A key that fit neatly into the small lock and turned on smooth, well oiled mechanisms to click the door securely closed.

"Teagan?" He questioned again but the other man only stood there, a hand pressed to the wood of the door, keeping his thoughts quietly to himself.

Finally, he turned and the grin he wore was soft and small. "Lizzie gave me the key. Said we could use a moment alone, that you looked like you've been moping about."

"I have not."

That widened the smile further. "She meant to say it looked like I've been missing kissing you."

The lightly spoken words felt like a physical kiss. It made his lips tingle and caused his body to shiver a little. Daniel had to swallow hard and rally his scattered thoughts to protest. "We can't."

"Of course we can." Teagan moved from the door to around the corner of the bed. He knew how much pain Daniel was still in and he wouldn't have the man straining to watch if he could avoid it so he lined himself up so Daniel could watch him without turning. Very deliberately, he reached behind him and slipped free the tie from his hair. One hand soothed the long length forward to fall about his shoulders the way Daniel liked so much and he grinned at how something so simple could cause Daniel to look so hungry.

"We're in your uncle's house..." Daniel protested with the reminder but Teagan shrugged.

"So?" He sat gently on the edge of the bed and, careful not to jostle tender wounds and half healed bones, slipped forward to hover over where Daniel lay. His hair tumbled down, raining black silken threads forward to tickle Daniel's neck and face. "I miss kissing you," he whispered a breath from lips that were already parted.

Daniel didn't refuse the lips that brushed his, but he couldn't quite bring himself to encourage them. Teagan was being a tease, a pleasant one but still a tease and it set something to ache under his ribs that had nothing to do with bones. As thrilling as it always was to kiss those smirking lips, today they made Daniel feel young and small and shaky. He was too weak, too sore to do much about the kisses and felt too emotionally fragile to try. All he wanted, desperately wanted, was to pull Teagan close, to let the dark hair fall like a veil over his face, and just feel the slender body tucked tight to his own. All he wanted was to hold him like that forever, to reach into those hidden corners that Teagan kept so closed off and fill them. That was something he'd always known he could crave and never have.

Teagan couldn't love him, not beyond friendship, not the deep, necessary way Daniel trembled

with love toward him. He'd never deluded himself into thinking he could love him, Teagan returning his emotions had never been a requirement for Daniel to feel so desperately toward him. He'd always known and been accepting of that cold knowledge. Perhaps it was how ill Teagan had been, or the bad hurts he had just suffered, but suddenly that knowledge was like a chunk of winter ice tucked in his stomach.

"Teagan..." Daniel whispered when the kisses continued, growing more heated and hungry with each shared. "I can't..." He wanted to, he was half way aroused already. No amount of emotional pain or even physical could dampen the effect Teagan had on him. It was the smell of the man's skin, the chill feel of his eyes watching him, the very combination of all he was that always destroyed his will. Not that he was really, truly, willing the kisses away in protest.

"Shhh..." Teagan whispered. "I know." He let a hand slip down while he kept Daniel's eyes locked onto his own. There was something almost sad mingled with the lust in the hazel. If the touch chased that shadow away he missed it, Daniel's breath hissed short and sharp and his eyes went shut as Teagan pressed his hand between his lover's legs. "Besides....there isn't enough time before dinner anyway." He whispered into an ear and rubbed, light, teasing and delighted the hardness that he'd magically created.

If Teagan was planning on being that big of a tease, he would have earned another spanking when Daniel was well enough to deliver one. A spanking at the very least, because getting him all hard and hungry and making him go to dinner that way would be unforgivable. It wouldn't matter if Mallory had left or stayed, he'd have to spend dinner in his room simply to avoid embarrassing himself every time he glanced to Teagan.

"Teagan..." He tried to warn but lips were nipping his neck, teasing him more and agile fingers were working at the buttons on his britches.

"Shhhh....I know you're hurting and dinner is soon here so shhhh." He worked the last buttons free and shivered as his fingers met skin instead of cloth. "Just close your eyes and relax, let me..." But his boldness faded before he could actually give voice to what he wanted to do.

He'd napped, there had been no choice in the matter for him, but he'd woken up early and felt restless. Being stuck under Lizzie's careful care was slowly making him feel like a caged animal and he was missing the privacy of his own home and the solitude of his days broken by Daniel alone. The only thing that seemed to lessen that trapped feeling was thinking about Daniel, about how it felt to kiss him, touch him, the strength in his body that made him feel like melted wax. He'd woken craving Daniel's lips like a drunk craved wine and feared he couldn't make it past another day without a small, stolen interlude. In his mind, as he lay there half awake and half asleep, he pictured being so bold, sneaking into Daniel's room. He saw himself opening Daniel's britches, freeing his beautiful length, making it grow firm as if his own desire had overflowed his body and filled Daniels. In his fantasy he'd not spoken a word, like Daniel had with him that first time, he'd simply taken, stolen kisses and finally slipped across Daniel's hips and impaled himself deeply onto his lover. He'd be stealthy and quick and it would be good.

Only as he had lain there waking up his mind started to ask questions, like could he really simply take himself on Daniel like that and not moan and cry out like a whore? He doubted it and then the entire household would know what had been going on inside the sick room. He wasn't sure if he could bring himself to strip so naked in his uncle's house or be so bold and what would he do for something to slick the way and make the joining easier? It was a pretty fantasy but it would be an uncomfortable and awkward reality.

So he'd intended to simply rouse Daniel with a few kisses, promise more when they were really alone but that need, that desperate want, came back and he couldn't stop. He promised he only wanted to touch, that he wouldn't open those britches but as soon as he touched he hated the cloth and was trying to peel it away. Worse, Daniel was passively letting him. Daniel wasn't passive, even when he was being taken there was coiled control and commanding strength. It

made Teagan drunk and he knew he wasn't going to stop with touch.

"Teagan..." Daniel whispered but he'd shut his eyes, frightened to look and find it maybe wasn't real or, worse, that it was.

"Shhh." He hushed again. "I'll take care of you, just lay still."

The voice, so good at teasing and mocking sharp words, was honey now and just as sticky and sweet. He found himself caught, unable to disobey or protest, needing anything Teagan was willing to offer. Even if it hurt, even if it broke his ribs in and speared a lung, he didn't care. If Teagan breathed the word he'd have the slender man nude and under him, slipping into his teasing body and joining them so close again, ignoring location and pain just to have him once again.

Only, Teagan was clever and careful and had taken their close call seriously. Daniel whimpered a little when the mouth left his neck and the teasing kisses tormenting him stopped. They'd been a reward and a punishment but he found he needed that contact.

"Shhh, you'll have to stay silent." Teagan warned.

"What?" Daniel asked, eyes cracking open and that cleared his vision just in time to see Teagan's teasing mouth parting and his own exposed length disappearing. His breath caught so hard his ribs hurt but he couldn't feel the pain. He wanted to moan, he wanted to beg, and he knew if he did either it would be too loud and he swallowed both desires.

His hands clutched uselessly at the bed sheets and he bit his lip to keep his mouth shut and the moans locked safely away. It had been too long, a seeming forever and he'd left Teagan on such a bad note that he had thought, feared, to never know the other man physically again. It wasn't until this surprising ambush of need and desire that he understood how much he really was missing the chances to steal kisses and maybe more.

"I...I can't..." Daniel warned as a hushed breath. He was too hurt, too exhausted to last long. His eyes opened to slits and he was surprised to see that Teagan knelt on the bed, his own britches open and a hand slipped inside. Daniel, after all, had been the one to teach him and he'd certainly surprised Teagan often enough with a quick blow job for the other man to have learned how to do it.

One of his hands let go of the sheets, his unbroken arm he noticed, and slipped into the dark, tumbling silk. He couldn't help it, he fisted his fingers in that length tightly and Teagan moaned. The moan made him shiver and he tugged on his handful of hair, demanding more, simply to push Teagan over the edge as quickly as he was going to fall. It worked, he could feel Teagan shivering, his own muffled moans vibrated deep into Daniel's body and he couldn't help it, as he shivered and slipped into release, he pulled on that dark hair harder.

He must have been weaker than he'd thought, climax stole his breath and darkened his vision from pleasure. When sense returned he found Teagan sprawled on the bed, head pillowed on Daniel's thigh. His own eyes were closed but he wore a happy, soft smile even with a hand still knotted in his hair.

"Now...." Teagan sighed. "Now we can go to dinner."

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Chapter Forty Five

It took a small effort to even want to get up and go to dinner but Daniel found he couldn't refuse Teagan's smug urging. He was taking liberties sitting down with the family but it felt good and nice and it was impossible to refuse with the Teagan encouraging him. They weren't that late and Robin teased them about sleeping so late but Lizzie stayed silent, a warm knowing smile tickling her mouth. They ate and Teagan seemed in better spirits but Daniel worried at his food and was his normal silent, withdrawn self.

When the food was done and the table cleared away Daniel didn't let Teagan draw him away for a continuation of their lessons as he had most nights. He lingered as Robin poured a drink and Lizzie took up her sewing. It took him a long moment, one in which Teagan gave him an odd look, before he was able to attempt the conversation.

"Sir?"

Daniel spoke so softly that Robin wasn't entirely sure he'd spoken at all. "Danny lad? What's on your mind? Here have a drink." He poured an extra glass.

Teagan felt a chill at Daniel's tone. "I think I'd like one too, Uncle."

"Hmm not until you're better."

"Really..."

"Really." Robin shook his head and handed the other drink off to Daniel. "Now, what is it you've been chewing over all night, lad."

Daniel waited until Robin had seated himself before sitting down himself. "Sir." It seemed so much more difficult now. "I'm grateful, sir, I am..."

"But?"

"But, I need to leave."

Robin sipped his drink and noticed the slight panic wide eyed look to his nephew and the calm steadiness of his wife. From that he knew what kind of leave Daniel meant. "I assume we're talking about more than leaving my house, which I don't quite feel you're up to just yet."

"No sir, I...I've been grateful for the care your family has provided me. I'm going to America."

"When?"

"Soon, before the trouble stirs up any more. Before there's fighting."



"Well, I'd like a chance to convince you to stay. We'll need steady men like you when it comes to it, men who've seen fighting before."

"With respect sir, one man isn't going to make a difference. This isn't a fight you can win."

"It is!" Teagan added in.

"Teagan." Robin scolded and cut his nephew off. "Let the man say his piece." He waited until Daniel had taken a sip of his drink and Teagan sat back in his chair like a pouting child. "I'm sorry you feel the situation is so hopeless, we have allies, we believe we can win this."

"They won't give you any quarter, there will be no mercy." It wasn't a debate he wanted to get into. "It won't matter who wins, we both know I can't stay. My life will be lost either way."

"Lad..."

"What?" Teagan glanced from his lover to his uncle.

"If your friends lose, it won't take long for the English to find me. If you and your friends win, you can't afford to allow me to live, I know too much."

"No...they'd never..." Teagan's protests continued but his uncle wouldn't meet his eyes. "It's not so is it?"

"Things have been discussed but no choice has been made."

"I knew." Daniel nodded. "Always knew, from the first job. I've...I've been saving...I have to go. I thought I could save and take my mother and sisters with me but..." He stopped that thought and took more of the strong drink, comforted by it and wishing he could be really drunk to have this conversation. "I want a good start, I can do that now."

Robin nodded. "Might be wise to go." It was all the confirmation he could give.

He downed the last of his drink in one swallow. "I've asked Teagan to go with me."

"What?" Robin nearly slammed his glass down. Lizzie hadn't mentioned that part to him in advance. "No, that's insane? What? You're trying to kill my nephew? I won't hear of it!"

"Now, Robin..." Lizzie tried to sooth.

"Uncle..." Teagan broke in over her.

"I'm not blind to the risk." Daniel spoke softly. "But I would never ask if I didn't think it could be done. I would never allow harm to come to Teagan. He hasn't answered me and I haven't pressed but I wanted to speak to you of it. I..." Daniel sighed and glanced about the room but his eyes lingered on Teagan. "I can't ask him to surrender you and his family, I can't. I was thinking, I could go ahead, find a place, send word and you and your family could follow...assuming things don't work out well in your fight. I...it would give everyone time to reconsider...I... know if Teagan has to pick against his family he won't." Daniel had to look down and frown. "I don't expect an answer anytime soon and I honestly don't expect an agreement. Just, it didn't seem right to not tell you."

Robin couldn't debate that, yet again Daniel had done the noble thing and had made his intentions clear. "And what is it you think to do in this new country?"

Mentioning his plans was vastly different than talking about them. He hadn't really even spoken of them to Teagan. "Farm, maybe, or raise horses. I've a good hand at that. A man can do

anything there if he works hard enough." And now he was learning to read and that opened up so many more doors.

Robin took up his drink and saw the desperate need in Daniel's eyes as clearly as if the man had screamed it and equally saw the uncertainty in Teagan's. "It's not an easy passage, even for those in the best of health."

"I know sir."

He sighed. "He's a grown man, I won't speak for or against the idea. However, so long as there is the hope of success here, this is where I belong." He was too old to go to America and start over but they'd all discussed what to do if things went horribly wrong and America was as good a place to run to as any other.

"Yes, sir." Daniel nodded. "I just wished it spoken of."

"A couple of months, Daniel, if you want to be on your way before the fighting, I'd make plans to be away sooner than later."

"Yes, sir." He'd guessed as much but hearing it confirmed put a tearing pain in his chest. To stay would risk his life as well as the surrender of his dreams but to go, alone, without Teagan, that would be its own death.

"Maybe this would be for the best." Robin nodded slowly. "It wouldn't be wise to continue your friendship for long and I doubt it would be any more advisable in this new country of yours, Daniel." He could feel his wife's eyes on him and he wondered what he'd said to gain that look. "Better to not tempt fate for too long...hmm?"

Lizzie made a small snorting sound but didn't look up from the sewing she was pretending to focus on.

"What?" Robin asked his wife.

It didn't matter, all Daniel knew was he couldn't sit there, couldn't stay there, for a moment more. "Excuse me." He mumbled and moved stiffly from the room. It was all too close, Robin Robert's thoughts mattered when they shouldn't have, Lizzie's quite defense of them meant too much, Teagan's silent shock was too cutting. He'd let them all get too close and it was too much of a risk. Life was easier when he wasn't liked, let alone welcomed and things were simpler when the only person he had to worry about was himself.

"Robin." Lizzie hissed softly as soon as Daniel had hurried from the room. The younger man had almost radiated pain and like a half feral animal had fled.

"What?" He asked blindly. He'd only spoken the truth. For all that he wanted Teagan to be happy, every day that their relationship continued was another day of risk and worry.

"Don't what me, you old coot!" But she kept her eyes down because now Teagan looked like someone had smacked him on the back of the head with a brick. His eyes were glazed and shocked and it made her uncomfortable to see.

"You wouldn't..." Teagan interrupted.

"What's this lad?"

"You wouldn't, none of you, you wouldn't have him harmed..." He wanted it to be a denial but doubt had crept in.

"Teagan..."

Some of the shock fell off. "Uncle, I'm not a child!" He snapped angry now. "You wouldn't, you wouldn't let the others either..."

"He knows things and his loyalty is to his payment not to the cause." Robin tried to explain gently. "Can you blame some for wondering?"

"This is Daniel we're talking about."

"Aye, and the Danny I see isn't always the Danny you see, lad. You have to trust me when I say I'd never do such myself but that there is validity in what is said."

"No! Daniel is just Daniel! How can you speak so highly of him in one breath and plot his murder with the next? How could any of you? You all owe that man your lives!"

"Teagan," he wasn't sure how to explain. "When he's working, he's a different man, something dark and horrible. His eyes..." Robin shook his head. "He isn't the Daniel you know, there is far more to him than you ever see. Aye, he's kind to you and good to you and makes you happy and I'm grateful for that but he's also dangerous and cold and horrible. I've seen him working, you haven't, he's like a man mad, his eyes empty and blank. It's that man that the other's fear because he's unpredictable and only on the loosest of leashes."

"He's loyal." Teagan nearly snarled out, angry now but not just with his uncle and his friends. He remembered the man that had saved him on the road the night he'd run the courier's route. He remembered the ease with which the other man murdered and the cold, deadliness in his eyes, the utter lack of remorse. He was angry because he'd seen it but hadn't ever wanted to really see it and he knew that side Daniel kept tucked away.

"He's loyal to you, lad, not the cause." Robin spoke gently.

Teagan stood up and wanted to yell, to shout at his uncle but instead he drew himself up to his full height and knew his chin was out in what his father had called his stubborn face. "Maybe he's loyal to me because I'm the only one who's ever bothered to really know him without judging."

"Teagan..."

"Forgive me, Uncle, but I'm weary. I think I shall retire for the evening as well." He moved to quickly gather up his books.

"Teagan." Robin protested but his nephew ignored him and left the room.

"Well," Lizzie spoke softly. "That went well."

Robin just sighed and give his wife a stern look but held his comments. It wouldn't do to upset her as well tonight, he could only mend so many bridges at a time. First, he'd have to figure out just what he'd done to suddenly be on the outs with everyone.

"Daniel...what..." Teagan had hurried after Daniel but the man had moved to quickly and he caught him coming back out of the sick room. His old battered coat was half raised to his shoulders but it was pretty obvious he wasn't going to be able to get the other sleeve over his still splinted arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

“Home.”

He clutched the books he'd gathered and felt the idea of a more private lesson going out the window. “But, you're still hurt and you'd have to start a fire and tend your horse and fetch in water and you're going to hurt yourself more or worse get sick again if you don't let yourself recover.”

Daniel shook his head. He wanted to leave but he'd have to physically push Teagan aside to get by him and he just couldn't do that. “Been worse, I'll manage.”

“Bullshit.” He glanced around the hallway but it was dark and he couldn't see if anyone might be close enough to overhear. “Don't go because of Uncle Robin being a twit. Please, stay...”

The coat slipped from his shoulder and Daniel found it impossible to care. His jaw was clenched so tight he wasn't sure he could get it to move to talk. Instead of trying he caught Teagan's arm and pulled the man back, physically hauling him the few steps back to the room he'd occupied. The slender man didn't protest being tugged inside or pressed to the now closed door.

Daniel cupped the sides of his lovers face, his thumbs grazing over proud cheekbones and struggled with himself. “Your uncle is right.”

Teagan just shook his head, lost in the storms of emotions in Daniel's eyes.

“He is. This...” his thumbs stroked Teagan's face. “This is a risk.”

“Don't go, please, Lizzie won't let me leave yet, I don't want to be here without you. You said it yourself, you're leaving, please, don't steal what time we have, please.”

Refusing Teagan anything was difficult, refusing him when he wanted to stay anyway was impossible. He let his hands trail down to the pale, slender neck, fascinated as always by how fragile Teagan seemed, caught by the contrast in his fair, delicate skin and Daniel's own work roughened hands. “Do you understand why I have to go now? It's not a whim.”

Teagan swallowed and felt Daniel's hands on his neck. “But why so far? I'd have a better chance of making the voyage if you went someplace closer. Italy is supposed to be more understanding, we could go there.”

“I can't.” Daniel shook his head. It was a Catholic country and he'd be more welcome but it wouldn't be the same as America where he could arrive as nothing and be somebody as soon as he stepped off the ship.

“You wouldn't have to stay. I don't have but a few more years, once I'm gone you can go on to America. I could stand to be buried in Italy, just not at sea.” His words fluttered away when Daniel leaned forward and pressed his forehead to Teagan's.

“Don't talk like that.” The idea that Teagan could so casually speak of his own death ripped at his heart. “The doctors are fools, you'll outlive me.”

That brought a sad smile to Teagan's lips but Daniel had his own eyes shut and missed seeing it. “Daniel...”

“I'll stay.” He sighed. “Until Lizzie lets you go back to your house, I'll stay.”

“Good!” Teagan arched forward and stole a quick kiss but Daniel's lips felt numb against his own. “We won't fuss over something that won't even happen for months, not yet. I can't swear I'll agree but I promise you, Daniel, I'll think about it, really, deeply, think about it. Okay?”

All he could do was nod because he felt like someone had punched him in the stomach. He wanted Teagan to agree instantly to go with him to America, hang the consequences and not look back but that couldn't happen. Teagan was ill, his health was fragile. It was too much to ask the man to make such a perilous sea voyage, too much to ask him to never see his family again. He was asking Teagan to give up everything simply to stay by his side and that was too much. His mind knew it, his heart wanted to scream in denial but he nodded because Teagan was at the least considering the idea and that was more than he had been able to pray for.

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Chapter Forty Six

Something tickled Daniel's face, soft and annoying and he batted at it and tried to roll over. That didn't work because a weight held him on his back and the tickling returned. This time he didn't bat at the tickling but reached out and snatched it up, his eyes cracking open against the morning sunlight.

The weight holding him down was Teagan, sitting across his chest wearing only his britches and they weren't all that securely shut. The tickling thing he'd snatched away was one of his black eyed susan flowers and he regretted that he'd crushed the pretty thing. He glanced to it and frowned.

"That's okay, I came prepared." Teagan smiled and pulled a second flower from where he'd tucked it in his hair.

The flower promptly returned to the fluttering teasing touch of silk soft golden petals to Daniel's face but he turned away a little, covered his mouth and yawned. "It's early."

"Yes." Teagan agreed and trailed the flower across an ear and liked how the ticklish touch made Daniel shiver a little.

"What're you doing up?" Teagan wasn't just awake but alert and rested looking which he shouldn't have been given how little sleep either of them had gotten.

"How could I sleep? You hog the entire bed." He teased, letting the flower trace the lines of neck and shoulder.

"It was your idea to stay here, the bed's tiny." The doctor had removed the splints and pronounced him as healed and healthy even if Daniel still had a lingering soreness in his chest. Experience told him that could take weeks longer to fully disappear but so long as the ribs were sound, his arm healed and the stitches out he was happy.

Teagan had been happy too and had taken advantage of his clean bill of health. He'd known from the look in Teagan's eyes that they should have stayed at his house but Teagan liked the small shack in the woods and liked that it could only be approached from one direction and liked that Daniel felt secure enough there that he wouldn't protest them making love in the small creek. The sex had been amazing and wonderful but the bed was too small for two people. Fortunately, by the time Teagan had actually considered sleep, they both were too exhausted to care.

"I love this small bed." He sighed and slid his weight down so he was sitting over Daniel's hips. The petals traced small, tight circles over one already hard nipple. "I think you like this small bed too."

Daniel reached up and caught the back of Teagan's head and pulled the man down for a kiss. "I like any bed if you're in it."

He rolled his hips a little and wasn't surprised to find that all of Daniel was now awake. "I'm just happy you're well and everything healed like it should and you're okay."

"Told you, I've had worse."

"But not where I could fuss over it." He dropped the flower between them to brush Daniel's hair out of his eyes and study them. "Don't fuss okay?"

"What?"

"Don't fuss, promise me, you won't fuss?"

He frowned. "How can I promise that when I don't know what I'm not supposed to fuss over?"

"Fair enough." He sighed and turned his palm over.

Sitting in it was a ring, a man's ring, nicely and well made but not overly fussy. The band was gold and of a respectable width and set in it was a fair sized but not large emerald that was nearly the same shade of dark green as Teagan's eyes. It wasn't overly fussy, had a flat low profile so it wouldn't snag or catch on things and while it was well tended and cared for wasn't overly shiny or attention grabbing.

"I want you to have this."

"Teagan...."

"No fussing! I..." he glanced to the ring. "I can't wear it, it doesn't fit me."

"That could be changed."

"No." He took up Daniel's left hand and wasn't surprised when the ring fit perfectly. "Knew it would." He sighed and stroked the strong hand, liking how the ring looked. It looked like it had always been worn there.

"I can't.... you don't need to give me things or buy me things...."

"I didn't buy it. It was my father's. No, not like that." He stalled off the fussing. "He bought the stone when he was courting my mother because he said it was the color of her eyes, she had it set in a ring for him when they wed. I never saw him wear it, he never put it on once she died. He gave it to me ages ago, wanted it to go to his grandson but my sister ran off and well, I was too ill to have a family but he told me to keep it. I've never worn it, it's been in a box for ages."

"This is too much, it costs too much, Teagan I can't...." His protests were stopped with another stolen kiss, the flower crushing between their bare chests.

"You can and you will because it'll make me happy to see it on you." He sighed and tangled his fingers around Daniel's and liked the feel of the warmed metal.

The gift was touching and while he didn't like accepting, the sweetness of it choked any further protests. He stroked the side of Teagan's face and smiled softly. "It's the same color as your eyes too."

"I don't want you to ever forget about me."

"I never could."

"Daniel, even if I don't go with you, or if we go somewhere else or if I go and don't make it, promise me you'll be happy?"

That chased the smile away. "Don't you say goodbyes."

"I have to, I don't have the luxury of assuming I've a lifetime to go. I was really sick this time, really sick, I..." He glanced away. "I'm not stupid and denying it won't change anything. I'm tired all the time, I'm not well. I'm just so grateful to have known you, you've made me so happy I just don't want you to ever regret this. I want you to be happy in your new life, you deserve it."

He shook his head. "We're not talking about that."

"Daniel, we need to."

"You've plenty of time."

"I don't, promise me?"

"I can't, I can't promise that. I..." The ring was a heavy weight on his hand. "I know I can't stay but I think I can't leave without you. I think I should risk it and stay if you won't leave because I can't breathe without you. How can I promise to be happy in a new life if you aren't there?"

"Foolish man." He shook his head at Daniel's stubbornness but it made him feel a little less trapped to think that Daniel might stay if he refused to go. "Promise me you'll try to be happy once I'm gone?"

Daniel shook his head in refusal.

"Promise me." Teagan demanded and softly kissed the unhappy lips. "Promise me..."

"To try, only to try..."

Teagan smiled against the still frowning mouth. "That's good enough."

Anything else Teagan might have said was forgotten. Daniel's arms came up and wrapped tightly around him and pulled him down, pressed him against Daniel's body as if just holding on tight enough would prevent his own body's weakness from getting the better of him. He felt Daniel tuck his face against his neck and he knew he'd pushed too hard. It just seemed important to have those kinds of conversations with the people he cared about. He had them all the time with Lizzie and his Uncle and they were used to it but Daniel wasn't and it felt doubly important to make sure Daniel understood.

"Please...." Daniel whispered against the pale neck.

"Please what, lover?" Teagan answered stroking his hands across Daniel's head and neck.

"Take me? I....I need to feel you in me...please?"

"Daniel..." He sighed against the auburn hair that always smelled of sunshine and fresh air. "Of course." He agreed even though he liked their positions reversed and he knew Daniel preferred it that way too. He agreed even though he knew it was simply because Daniel was feeling uneasy, a little frightened and needy. Maybe, he agreed because of all those things and how treasured and loved it made him feel.

It was easy to slip his britches away, he hadn't wanted to put them back on in the first place and as soon as he hovered over Daniel, as nude as his lover, he delighted in the feel of Daniel's calloused hands touching his sides, his ribs, his skin with such mind blowing care. He slipped under the blankets they didn't really need, skin dragging along skin making both men sigh. The crushed black eyed susan falling away from between them forgotten as Teagan gently devoured his lover's mouth.

For a change, Daniel was oddly passive and Teagan found it appealing. He wouldn't like it all the time but seeing Daniel who normally was so straight forward with his desires suddenly still and accepting of anything Teagan offered was a pleasing change. Having all that strength controlling him, holding him, keeping him safe would always be his favorite thing in the world but seeing that strength tamed to his hand, his touch, was nearly as good.

"Open your eyes...." Teagan whispered as the growing morning sunlight lit up the small room. "Open your eyes for me...."

Daniel had closed them, hiding in his own emotions. It was a protective measure before, when Teagan would take him. Keeping his eyes closed was the only way he could hide how he felt, but he'd told Teagan, spoken his love in hushed and never again mentioned words and there was nothing left to hide. He opened them with care and fell into a sea of dark green and no longer cared if he drowned.

The sheer raw pleasure Daniel was unable to hide was in his eyes as well and Teagan whimpered now from more than just the physical delights. Daniel was his, all that cold, intense strength was his and his alone. He saw it in the begging hazel eyes, all the devotion and love and need and it was all directed at Teagan. It made him feel primal and raw and he took Daniel a little harder than he'd ever dared before because now he knew that when like this, a little rougher only felt better. Daniel clung to him, his hands trying to hold them together as one person for as long as he could but he kept his eyes open and locked to Teagan's for every second he could steal.

When they'd lost the fragments of their control and tumbled over the edge, Daniel still clung to him, unwilling to let Teagan go. He reached up and brushed the falling black silk of Teagan's hair back to tuck it behind an ear but Teagan hovered over him, his head slack on his neck, eyes shut, gasping for breath. He looked fragile and ill, he always did after they'd made love, and it always shoved a spike of pain into Daniel's chest to see. If he could will his bodies health and strength into Teagan's he would. If he could exchange his life and years so Teagan could continue, even with Daniel dead and gone, he would. It wasn't fair that someone so smart and beautiful and just generally good, if proud and stubborn but good, should be dealt such an unfair lot in life when Daniel who had never been worth anything or worthwhile to anyone, could survive accident, injury and illness over and over and be given such a fit body. He'd trade all he was and all he had to know that Teagan would continue being in the world.

It didn't work that way and Teagan's arms trembled from supporting his weight above Daniel. He seemed as unwilling to end their joining as Daniel was and he soothed the dark hair again and



eased Teagan's body down on top of his own. The weight was comforting, solid and real and he wrapped his arms and legs around his slender love. It wasn't just in his thoughts, Teagan felt lighter now than he had even a few months ago when they'd lain like this. The bones of his shoulder blades and spine felt a little closer to the surface, a little sharper too. His recent bout with illness and the recovery Daniel had thought was unnecessarily prolonged had taken far more from Teagan than he'd first understood. Lizzie was right to be protective, Teagan was far too good at hiding his own weakness from others. The thought twisted him up. His limbs holding momentarily tighter as if sheer will could change reality, before Daniel surrendered and let his legs ease back to the bed and his arms unlock from Teagan's shoulders.

"Hmmm, that was nice....." Teagan sighed. "I like it when you hold me so close." He was still struggling to get his heart to slow and his breath to ease. It felt like he was breathing through water anymore and he struggled with the need to cough. Oddly, the tight compression had made him feel physically better, less tired, less like he couldn't pull in enough air.

The only answer Daniel could give to those whispered words was soft kisses pressed to Teagan's face.

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Chapter Forty Seven

Daniel had always been indifferent to city life. It provided a great many things from pubs and taverns to entertainment but the crowd of people often made him feel edgy, closed in and grumpy. There was a reason he drank more in the city and it had less to do with the accessibility of hard liquor than even he was willing to admit. It just always seemed that with the crush of so many people around, he always felt the most alone.

There was no luxury for getting drunk on this trip, Teagan was in his care. Robin hadn't backed down on his idea of taking Teagan into the city for some time and while Daniel hadn't really wished to go, the delight at the thought from his lover had been enough to convince him. And for all Daniel's poor upbringing and lack of education, it was Teagan that stood out in the city like the country lord he really was.

Not that he minded, seeing the city through Teagan's wide eyes and easy smile made the place feel exciting and like an adventure. He found himself giving in and letting Teagan drag him where ever the man wanted to go, even if it found Daniel hovering in an expensive shop, feeling and looking like the bodyguard he was while Teagan compared silk ribbons for his hair. He even let Teagan talk him into a new coat.

The best part was that no one considered it odd that they shared a room. Teagan looked ill, even with excitement painted on his face and Daniel looked the part of the loyal man concerned with the other's health. He was careful to muss up the blankets on the cot they'd provided him with but he spent every night curled in bed with Teagan, the two of them trying to stay quiet and hushed.

It slipped into Daniel's mind somewhere about the second or third day in the city, somewhere between lunch and Teagan trying to talk him into going to see a play, that he was happy. It wasn't one thing, not really, but an over all sense of peace. They were together, Teagan knew how he felt and was okay with it. There was no looming threat of having to leave and do something immoral and dangerous. Teagan was, in spite of all outward appearances, as healthy as he got. They were two friends, strangers really, lost in the sea of faces of the city and it was nice.

Teagan stopped talking and glanced over. He'd been babbling as they'd made their way across the streets to purchase the tickets for the play that night. "What?"

"Hm?"

"It's not nice to laugh at me."

Daniel hadn't noticed he'd been laughing. "I'm sorry."

"I like hearing you laugh but it's mean to make fun of me. I know I'm a bumpkin. Uncouth even, but it's not nice to laugh over it. I haven't spent more than a handful of days in the city my whole life and always it was with father hovering over me."

"I'm not laughing at you."

"Wasn't anyone else talking."

"It's not like that, I just....I'm glad to be here." He felt himself grinning. "Even if you're dragging me to this stupid play."

Teagan stared at the other man for a long moment but saw no teasing. "It's not a stupid play, it's supposed to be funny and bawdy and they have good beer and we'll get a private booth and I can listen to you laugh all night." He'd long since learned one thing, Daniel couldn't relax in a public place unless they were away from the crowd and he had his back to a wall. It was a small enough thing to do and it made him happy to see Daniel at ease.

"Still, to sit for a couple of hours just to watch people prance about a stage?" He shook his head. "You'll owe me for this one."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll think of something to repay you, something you'd like..." He let his voice drift off and laughed now at the look of bold shock that flashed across Daniel's face before the stony mask could return.

"Brat."

"Does this mean I've earned a spanking?"

Teagan's voice felt too loud but the noise and bustle of the city around them made their words as private as if they really were behind closed doors. They sent a happy flush across Daniel and he wanted to drag Teagan back to their hotel to deliver the requested punishment. The idea must have been pretty easy to read on his face because Teagan smirked.

"I think..." he spoke loudly. "I am well worn out. Once we get the tickets for tonight I believe I'll require a nap back at the hotel."

"I'll see you're well rested, sir." Daniel answered but neither man was expecting much rest and both quickened their steps to the theater.

Teagan winced when he took his seat at the theater, it was a rougher establishment than he'd ever attended. The crowd was too rowdy to ask his father to take him too and really for all his talk of being able to take care of himself, he was aware of his limits. It wouldn't take much for him to be roughed up and robbed or simply knocked down or worse, to have a fit while out and alone. With Daniel, he didn't worry because he knew there wasn't anything the man couldn't handle and he was delighted to be mixed into the noisy, vibrant crowd and just as equally delighted to have a secure box where he could watch them without being pressed too close to the crowds.

"If you'd actually napped, you wouldn't have trouble sitting through your play." Daniel teased, low and softly, his voice mixing in and nearly being lost in the background noise of the crowd. He might have gotten a touch heavy handed with Teagan's spanking but the man he writhed and moaned and begged for more at each stroke. His control could only handle so much.

The husky low words with the edge of mocking made Teagan sniff a little and jut his chin out. All plans to see about getting a pillow to put under his tender ass was forgotten in the face of his pride. "I wouldn't know what you're talking about."

"So...you don't want me to make it up to you later?" He pretended to have great interest on the crowd below them and the empty stage. Never had he imagined himself seeing a play let alone tucked away into a small cornered off box like someone worth something.

He shifted on the hard seat again. "You were brutal, I swear I nearly wept like a babe in pain. I doubt you'd ever be able to fully earn my forgiveness but I think you should start right off and see about us getting some beer."

"Hm." He shook his head but stood to flag down one of the scantily dressed women hauling tankards around. Maybe plays weren't such a bad idea after all but he was still going to reserve his judgment until later.

In truth, the play wasn't horrible even subtracting out the mellow happiness the surprisingly good beer induced. A lot of the play was funny and he enjoyed watching Teagan laughing with such total abandon almost more than the jokes from the stage. There seemed to be no cynicism in his lover as he chuckled and booed at the villain and the simplicity of his joy made him look younger.

"Oh that was so much fun." Teagan's laughed melted into a happy sigh and he downed the last swallows of beer. The play had ended and the crowd was filing out but he was in a rush. "I want to wait until the press is gone."

"Wouldn't do for you to get knocked down, I'd have to slit the poor fool's throat."

"My bloodthirsty body guard."

"You're drunk."

Teagan shrugged. "Maybe a little. Want to go around back stage and see if that pretty blonde fellow is as interesting as he seemed?"

"You're a lot drunk."

He grinned but liked the jealous spike of fire in Daniel's eyes at the suggestion. "Maybe. Seriously, I know of a couple of clubs, we could gamble or drunk or whatever all night if you want."

The idea was tempting but Teagan looked exhausted. "Tomorrow night, we've time."

"Danny?" A voice nearly as arrogant as Teagan's called out. "Danny O'Raian? Could that possibly be your sour face I'm seeing?"

It was Teagan's turn to feel his eyes flash with jealousy as a tall, slender and obviously wealthy man pushed over and invited himself to join them.

"Robert. I..." Daniel glanced from their new arrival to where Teagan lounged in his chair and surveyed the stranger before hopping to his feet out of habit.

"How long have you been in town? I haven't seen you about. And who is this charming fellow?"

Teagan didn't bother to stand. The man's hair was a dark brown and nearly as long as his own but thinning about the temples. He guessed the man was several years older than he was which would make him quite a bit older than Daniel. He had fair skin with a small smattering of freckles under the light powder make up he wore but the powder wasn't needed to make him look more fair. The new man's eyes were hazel and had a quick look to them, his lips full and his clothes were very well made and far more stylish than Teagan's own. There was a far too familiar tone to the man's voice as he addressed Daniel and he didn't like the way his lover looked guilty.

"Robert, this is Teagan Walsh, a friend of mine."

The elegant Robert arched a fine eyebrow at the word friend. "Indeed."

"We've only just arrived a few days ago."

"Staying long? Perhaps I'll call upon you...."

"Not long, a handful of days more." He prayed he wouldn't blush but Robert was appraising Teagan and Teagan looked ready to slaughter them both.

"Well, since Danny is short on manners..." Robert offered his hand to Teagan and smiled brightly. "Robert Donavan, I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Walsh."

"Lord Robert Donavan?" Teagan asked before he could catch himself.

"Lord in waiting, my father is from a lone line of well aged men. I may be old and grey before I inherit. I see Danny is predictable in his tastes."

"We're friends, Robert."

"Tosh." The well dressed man waved off the idea and sat himself down. "The only way you're here, at the theater, is because he begged you and you, with your weakness for pretty, fair, arrogant men, gave in like a girl." Robert grinned when he saw his words hit a mark with both men. "A love sick girl at that, really Danny the community is going to weep if you've gone and fallen in love. Your arrivals into town always were so amusing. No point in denying it, my pretty Mr. Walsh, this isn't the countryside, we're a touch more honest here. Small touch but it's enough to make life bearable."

Teagan toyed with his now empty tankard. "I really wouldn't have any idea what you're speaking

of. Daniel is my escort and I'm certain neither one of us will be seen among the likes of your company during our visit."

The reply made Robert chuckle. "Oh but you are truly his type. Maybe I wasn't arrogant enough, shame, I was always aiming to be the one to melt his cold heart. I've my type too you see? The strong silent sorts with the cold eyes."

Teagan almost laughed because it proved how little the other man really knew Daniel. There was never anything cold about his eyes, hard, often yes, but never cold. It just took someone able and willing to really see him to notice. It was something Teagan had always noticed about Daniel but apparently this fellow hadn't. Then again, a small voice whispered, how often had the two of them had a conversation. It seemed more likely that their relationship was more physical.

"Well, I'm certain it's quite gratifying to know that Daniel has a preference for my type. That knowledge will help me rest entirely better tonight, I've been losing so much sleep."

The retort made Robert frown for a second until he laughed again. "I like this one Danny, keep him, he amuses me."

"Robert..."

He sighed. "We're in trouble now, Mr. Walsh, he's broken out his scolding voice. That's it, I am fond of you, even though I should be jealous I admit defeat. The two of you must join me for dinner tomorrow night."

"I don't think that would be wise." Daniel spoke softly, shocked that the two hadn't tried to pull each other's hair out even in the short time they'd known each other.

"Spending time with you, Danny, is never wise but always amusing. Dinner, or at the least come play a few hands of cards with me. I do so love watching how your scowl makes the pansies wet themselves."

Teagan saw Daniel about to refuse and jumped in over him. "We'd love to."

"Excellent! I knew you'd be counted on to speak some sense. Oh there is my fellow, he's fetched my coach. I know, so handsome but so moral. I've been trying to sway him around to a more amusing sort of personality but he's been unmoved by hints and suggestions so far. One day, perhaps, until then I can always find men like our dear Danny here to amuse me. Well now, I will expect you both tomorrow and we will have a grand time of it." As quickly as he'd arrived, Robert sailed away but he was smiling at the uncertain looks he'd caused the certain fight.

Robert was barely out of ear shot before Daniel spoke. "Teagan..."

"What the hell was that?" Teagan snapped and demanded and wanted to hit Daniel, hard, but didn't know how.

Daniel glanced around. "Not here."

"What do you mean not here?"

"I mean I won't talk about this here."

There was no debating with a brick wall and Teagan knew for all his stubbornness that when Daniel dug his heels in he could out stubborn anyone. There would be no further words spoken about the annoying Robert while they were in public and he could throw a fit all he wanted and demand it but Daniel would never give in. That didn't mean he was going to be friendly and happy during the trip back to the hotel, far from it.

In fact, even with their room door safely closed and locked behind them, Teagan merely folded his arms and sullenly glared at Daniel. He wasn't going to make anything easier on the man.

"Look..." Daniel started but the expression on Teagan's face was withering. "I never said I lived like a priest." The words tumbled out.

"He was your lover."

"Yes, sometimes."

"That...that....arrogant....uppity...fussy...dandy?"

"Teagan..."

"Is that your type? Is that what you like?" He tossed a hand off in the general direction of outside and knew he wasn't making any sense. "Maybe I should put on lace and powder my face and buy a fancy wig? Would you like that? I wouldn't want to challenge your tastes too far!"

There was a tone to Teagan's voice that Daniel knew meant the other man wasn't going to shut up and allow anyone else a word in edgewise. He heard that edge now and did the only thing he could think of to stop his words, he caught an arm and pulled the slender body against his own. His lips covered the angry pair and soothed the harsh words with a kiss.

"Oh." Teagan sighed, his eyes still closed and momentarily unsure why he'd been so upset.

"Shut up." Daniel whispered. "I told you, I haven't been a good person."

"Fucking that fop doesn't make you a bad person."

"He's right, I do prefer a certain type of man." He brushed soft kisses to Teagan's mouth to keep the man from getting angry again.

"Oh...?"

"Proud...stubborn...handsome...confident..." He accented each word with a kiss. "But, Teagan..." He brushed stray hairs back from his lover's face. "I was never picky before."

The dark green eyes flashed again in jealousy and anger before Teagan sighed and the emotion bled away. "So long as you're picky now. I can't blame you, not really, if I'd had the chance I doubt I'd have been overly selective."

That made Daniel smile a little. "Isn't a man alive that can even be a close second to you." He petted the dark hair before he leaned forward and whispered against Teagan's ear. "None of them had me." He let the hand trail down Teagan's spine and felt the way the slender man started a little in lust and shock at the words. "Only you..."

"Oh, God....Daniel...."

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## Visions & Shadows

### Chapter Forty Eight

As much as Teagan wanted to hate the annoying Robert Donovan by the time their small holiday was coming to an end he'd earned a grudging respect for the man. He invited them to clubs and taverns where he knew Daniel would be comfortable, places it seemed Daniel had already been to more often than not, and he introduced them to plenty of other men, young and old, that apparently shared their tastes. Which, for the first time in Teagan's life, made him feel less alone but also burned him with jealousy at the same time. It seemed like every other man had a knowing look in his eyes when they spoke to Daniel and Daniel did little to deny their looks. On a more positive side, he did nothing at all, even in the slightest hint to his tone of voice, to encourage them.

It didn't hurt that after a few efforts at flirtation that first night out, Robert stopped trying to catch Daniel's eye and started introducing Teagan as Daniel's friend. By the end of the first night, Teagan had learned to judge which of the men he'd been introduced to were of their tastes and which weren't simply by how Robert said the word friend. It made him feel like he belonged and he was starting to think city life might not be such a bad idea.

"There has to have been something you wanted to do while in town?" Teagan asked, pushing himself up onto an elbow to look down at Daniel. It was late, they were both a touch drunk and had come home from the party Robert had dragged them to far later than they'd planned. Teagan had been tired but the looks Daniel had given him most of the night had been enough to make him pounce the moment they were safely behind a door.

"Robert likes you."

He raised an eyebrow. "Thinking about other men while in bed with me?"

"No." He brushed loose hair back more for a chance to feel it slip across his fingers than to get it back from Teagan's eyes. "Robert never invited me to parties, not nice ones like that. He likes you."

"I still don't like him. You didn't look like you had much fun tonight."

He shrugged. "You had a good time."

That was the truth, he'd had a grand time and didn't have to worry about being that poor sick boy or the unmarried landed fellow with the money that the plain daughters had to be shoved toward. "Which is why I say again, there must be something you wanted to do while in town?"

"Nothing I needed to do."

He shook his head. "Tomorrow, when we get up, we'll spend the day doing whatever you want. You can surprise me."

"You still don't understand?"

"Hmm?" Teagan wasn't really listening anymore, he was too busy enjoying the site of Daniel shirtless and the luxury of being able to touch him.

"It doesn't matter, if you're with me, I'm doing what I want."

It struck him that Daniel wasn't just saying words to flirt but that he actually meant them. The sincerity in the softly spoken confession made him feel small and petty because he didn't think he could honestly same the same thing. He was too spoiled, liked his own way too much, was too used to doing what he wished, when he wished within the limits of his strength but Daniel honestly meant it. He meant it with the same bald faced honesty that he had confessed his emotions in and Teagan felt unworthy of that as well.

His fingers traced the scar on Daniel's side, the one that he'd gotten protecting him and the one that he'd stitched shut with his own hand. "Well, as sweet as that is, tomorrow we still do whatever you wish."

There had been a look that had darted across Teagan's expressive face, something like pain but more distant and Daniel could have kicked himself for being so stupidly honest again. He'd drive Teagan away with talk like that, he knew the man didn't return his feelings and having that gap pointed out time and again would only create a wider gap.

He tugged at Teagan until the man give in and lowered back down to rest against and along his body. That was a sensation this holiday had spoiled him with and one Daniel prized because nothing felt better than to have another person held close and to have that person be someone like Teagan was amazing. He reflexively pulled Teagan closer. "We'll let tomorrow worry about itself."

"This is what you wanted to do?" Somehow, Teagan had pictured the day being spent in dark taverns filled with rough men looking to do ill deeds or some gambling table or something else on an equal footing. It seemed to suit Daniel, to blend in among the rough and be the hidden diamond and he'd honestly expected to be taken to places he'd find himself awkward in.

Instead, when they'd finally gotten out of bed and ready for the day, Daniel had taken them to the harbor. Teagan had braced himself for a dimly lit pub but instead had been led across the wharf as Daniel pointed out different styles of ships and their merits the way a young boy might point out different puppies in a litter and talk of their traits. He had been surprised but he'd kept his mouth shut until it became painfully clear this really was what Daniel had wanted to do and only then had he spoken up and questioned.

Daniel paused and gave a sheepish grin. "Must be boring for you."

"It's just..." He glanced out across the glittering water to where the ships creaked in their mooring. "It's not what I had expected."

"These ships go everywhere and if you can get passage you can go everywhere on them. I always liked it on ship." Even if the work had been mindless, he'd been happy while traveling. Some of his best memories were from his time traveling to the colonies and some of his worst were when being brought back.

Teagan could picture it, Daniel on the deck of one of the fine vessels, the sun and wind in his hair, his slightly sunburnt skin glowing in the spray. He'd look like he belonged and it was a pretty thought. "I'm not bored."

"I want to see about passage." The words tumbled out and Daniel stopped when Teagan froze beside him. The man had gone silent and cold almost instantly at the request. "Teagan..."

"Offices should be over this way." He nodded to the series of buildings.



"It can wait."

"We're here, may as well see." It exhausted him to say that and made him feel broken. Now the image of Daniel on the deck of some ship was one of his lover sailing away from him and it hurt to think of. It wasn't fair to ask Daniel to stay, he'd only be waiting around for Teagan to die but Teagan thought of the cold water and being dropped into it's depth and shuddered. He could accept his own shorter life and impending death but the thought of being buried at sea was a step more than he could bare.

Daniel just nodded and together they made their way toward the line of shipping offices. Each line had posted bills outside of their main offices with the information on various ships and costs of passage, some were strictly for hauling cargo and some the cargo was the passengers. There was a labor shortage in the Americas and anyone wanting to go was given passage, in exchange for being indentured for a term of years to pay back the debt. Those ships would be crowded but would have a vested interest in keeping their passengers healthy and safe because a dead man couldn't be indentured so those were often the best choices for paying passage on.

"Huh."

"What?" Teagan glanced over to his lover and felt his chest tighten at the sight. Daniel looked thoughtful and kind and how had he ever thought the man cold and distant?

"I know what this says." His eyes didn't leave the posted bill and he knew his lips moved a little on the harder words but he could make sense of it.

That made Teagan beam, proud beyond words that the warmth and openness he'd spotted in Daniel may have been, in part, because of him. "Well, of course you know what it says. You're a quick learner. You'll only get better with practice, I think tonight you should read to me for a change."

Daniel snorted. "Your books are too hard."

"And they'll stay that way until you try." The amused happiness fluttered away when he glanced back to the posted sheet and saw the list of city names he'd only ever read of and never imagined seeing. "Which port would you like? That'll narrow it down."

"Don't care."

"You have to care."

He shrugged. "Jamaica is hot, good sugar crop growing, no winter. Carolinas are supposed to be nice, warmer too, Virginia gets a winter but not so harsh. I never saw that far south but Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, Massachusetts, all would work. Further north, the harder the winter, shorter the summer, the port doesn't matter, it's easy enough to go elsewhere."

"I don't like being cold." Teagan said without thought but as soon as the words had left his mouth he heard the slight catch in Daniel's steady breathing. It was cruel to offer hope when he hadn't really made his mind up yet.

For all the thrill the soft words had given him, he knew it was still no promise. He wouldn't be happy or at ease until Teagan was beside him on a ship and they were a week out to sea. "No further north than Maryland it is."

"Don't be ridiculous, you can't make a choice like that simply because I get chilled easily."

Daniel didn't answer the snappish words but smiled a little. "Let's look at some of the others."

The truth was, he could and would make a choice based on so little, even if Teagan refused to go with him. The man would always be summertime to him, green growth and their vegetable garden and the sight of black eyed susans. Winter, long, hard winters in particular, would always be empty and depressing to him now.

They spent the rest of the afternoon at the wharf and Teagan found he liked watching the water and the bustling life that surged around it. When they were hungry they found a place that cooked freshly caught seafood and ate an early dinner before walking back toward their inn. Teagan was worn out from so much fresh air and walking about and he hadn't even needed to say anything. Before he was exhausted, Daniel had suggested returning for a nap before considering what to do that night.

Another oddity Teagan had noticed about Daniel, he rarely took the same way twice if he could avoid it. They'd walked to the harbor but Daniel led them back to the hotel along a different route. It was an oddity but not one he minded because it allowed him to see far more of the city than he'd otherwise. This route felt a little more direct which he couldn't protest too much over given how quickly he was tiring out.

"Watch out!" Daniel hissed and pushed Teagan back as a rider leading a horse nearly came up onto the walk in his haste.

Daniel didn't waste words cursing, just as quickly as he'd pushed Teagan to certain safety he was turning to check on him. "I'm fine." Teagan said even before he could be asked, straightening his hat on his head. The look on Daniel's face wasn't one of kindness. "It's okay, let it go."

"It's not okay, he could have killed someone." The rider had hurried into a livery just down the street from them, hauling the second horse inside with him.

"Daniel."

But he wasn't in the mood to be soothed. An injury could lead to so much more for Teagan and what if it had been a woman or a child on the street? Someone elderly and unable to react quickly would have been trampled and the rider may not even have noticed. Something had to be said or he'd fume, angry, over it for hours.

Teagan just sighed and shook his head and wondered if they'd get arrested for fighting in the street like school boys. He didn't tell Daniel to stop again or do anything else to prevent him and instead just followed along behind him as the hurried them down to the stable the rider had slipped into. Only he was surprised when they stopped just outside the stable and Daniel's eyes were on the horse that had been led and not on the well dressed man that had nearly run them down.

"No, this beast is unacceptable. He's not high spirited, he's unmanageable! Even my groom can not ride this monstrosity. I demand my money back."

The stable hand shook his head. "I did try to warn you, sir."

"There is a difference between high strung and ill tempered."

"You asked for a spirit stallion to add some fire to your line, there isn't a higher spirited horse in all the kingdom."

"Which does me no good at all if I can't make use of the creature."

"Teagan..." Daniel spoke softly. "That is a horse."

He glanced the animal over, grayish white with long legs and a deep chest. Even now with it's

character being slandered, the horse's neck was finely arched and its head held with a proud tilt. The stallion looked like a high strung handful but he had to admit it was showy and beautiful and one of the finest horses he'd ever laid eyes on.

"I bet its coat will go more white as he matures." Teagan answered.

"That's my horse." Daniel answered and flashed Teagan a grin.

"You heard the man, he's too wild..."

He shook his head. "I can tame him down." He knew he could, he'd tamed Teagan's high spirited pride down, the horse would be easy in comparison. Only, as he prepared to step forward and offer to buy the horse from either the wealthy man or the stable, he heard the cost of the refund being requested. "Never mind. Let's just get back to the room."

"What?" Teagan watched the excitement fade away from Daniel's eyes and the way he clenched his jaw. "If it's the cost, I can loan it to you."

"No, I've the coin."

"Then what?"

"I'm Catholic."

"So?" But then he understood. "Oh." The laws were very clear, a Catholic couldn't own a horse of such value or a rifle. It was the law and neither the man or the stable would sell the beast to Daniel no matter what the price.

There was no choice in the matter. Teagan brushed past Daniel. "Now that is a fine, fine horse. I'm sorry, I couldn't help but overhear... are you looking to sell him?" He smiled and set his face to happy country gentleman.

They dickered and bartered and Teagan pretended to loose interest when the stallion tried to nip at him. He pretended to be weak and uncertain about such a high strung animal, even a little timid around it. He pretended to be the kind of country landed gentleman that would require a man to follow him in case of trouble, one maybe a touch simple but also careful of his own self interest. Daniel stood to the side and glowered, looking gruff and like someone anyone with sense would avoid trouble. Teagan knew better, he could see the laughter in the hazel eyes and knew full well that Daniel, at the least, was enjoying his performance.

In the end, Teagan paid a pretty sum for the feisty horse but it included the purchase as well as stabling fees for their remainder of time in the city and it was still less than what the beast's original owner had asked for in refund. The former owner and stable hand both were looking at him as if he might be a touch daft and Teagan walked out of the stable with a light heart and lighter wallet.

"Should take you to work at that theater..." Daniel muttered when they were a couple of streets away.

"You're welcome. Hmm...no...I'm not satisfied....I demand a proper thank you..."

Daniel shook his head but he was grinning. "Like you need an excuse."

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Chapter Forty Nine

"You can stay, if you'd like," Daniel said, but Teagan was already moving to gather up the reins of his horse.

"I'll be back, I promise. I just wanted to drop those onions and eggs off, who knew we'd get such a huge crop. We'll cook up something for dinner but I promised Lizzie I'd stop in. Uncle Robin is off meeting with friends tonight. She's nervous, I promised I'd come by and keep her company." He glanced from where his first delivery of excess food stood holding the small basket out over the fenced in section of pasture where Daniel's older horse looked quite put out having to share the space with the proud new arrival. "How's he doing?"

"Throws me half the time, tries to bite the other half but he's less skittish now."

He raised an eyebrow, the beast still looked skittish. "Maybe I'll give you a hand, I've a fair hand with animals."

"No."

"What do you mean no?"

"I don't want you anywhere near that horse."

"Daniel."

He shook his head and wasn't going to back down on this.

"God I don't understand you." He snapped. "You think I'm strong enough to sail away with you to this wild new country of yours but I'm too weak and fragile to be trusted around a high strung horse!"

"It's not like that."

"Of course it is! You can't have it both ways."

"Teagan, don't..." he sighed and glanced to the horse, the beast's ears were swiveling and he could see how the sharper words had the beast twitching. "I know you're not going with me, you don't have to pretend. It's okay." He'd had to say more difficult things over his lifetime but that sentence ranked pretty high on the list.

"You're an idiot, I haven't made my mind up one way or another and don't you be making it up for me either! This is easy for you, do you really understand that? You're strong, you can pick up and go and make a life anywhere. I'm not. I can't do that, I can't be like you and I'd rather be miserable and half alive here than to be hauled across the world as your useless luggage."

"This isn't about the horse. You'll stay away from him, right?"

Teagan just sighed and shook his head. "I'll be back later this afternoon."

"Teagan."

But he wasn't going to stand and fight with Daniel over stupid things. It was easier to pull himself up into his saddle and hurry away from the small cottage. He was halfway to his uncle's house before he caught his breath again and soothed his racing heart. The stress of the coming fighting and Daniel's potential leaving was wearing on him. His uncle was wound up and nervous and Lizzie was quietly frightened and Daniel was just quietly resigned.

There was a sadness in his eyes now, a pain, and Teagan knew he was the cause. He needed to make up his mind and give Daniel an answer, one way or another. The waiting may have been as tiresome for Daniel as it was on Teagan and the only relief from it was choosing a course of action. The only trouble was, both would tear him between two things he wasn't sure he could be happy without and he didn't know how to find, let alone give, an answer.

"Oh, Teagan, you look like a startled deer, what's the matter?" Lizzie asked, frightened for a moment that Robin's meeting with his friends in the town had been rooted out and all was lost.

"All's well." Teagan soothed, sensing that she was less worried for him than for her own situation. That made him want to yell at her until he remembered himself. He had only himself to harm, but if things went badly for Lizzie she'd have no home, no support, no husband, and small children to try to manage on her own. It was a wonder she wasn't more snappish and on edge than she was.

"I've tea being brought in, you look like you could use some."

"I brought eggs and fresh onions. Don't fuss, I've plenty put up for myself and then some. Every nook and cranny is filled with an onion. I'm not even overly fond of the stinky things."

"Teagan?" She questioned gently. "What's happened?"

He sighed and stopped pretending, he hadn't been doing a very good job of it anyway. "Daniel told me he knows I won't be going with him and damn it Lizzie, he's still being nice to me."

"Silly, of course he is, he cares a great deal for you."

"I can't go, how can I? Even if I could survive the trip I'd only hold him back, shackled to a sick man when he should be focusing on building his life. I hate being a burden and that's all assuming I could survive the voyage and that's greatly in question. And to never see you or Uncle Robin or your children again? How could I do that? And for what? A few years maybe? Maybe far, far less? But Lizzie, he's said he's not sure he can leave without me so what if I can't go and he stays and something horrid happens to him because I didn't have the courage to leave? How could I live with myself? And really, it's not fair to ask him to sit around waiting for me to die just to free himself to go. He's dreamed of this for so long, he doesn't say it but I can see it in his eyes when he grows quiet and thoughtful like and he'd be good there, he'd do just fine so long as he didn't have to worry about me. So I have to stay but he'll end up staying then too so I have to go but I can't because that means I'd most likely never see you again and I'd surely never see Uncle Robin again and you're all the family I have left this side of the grave and God, Lizzie I don't want to be buried alone in some odd country and I'm terrified of being buried at sea."

She raised her eyebrows when the tumble of words halted to a stop. "Feel better now?"

Teagan sighed and slumped into his chair. "Not really. I can't make this choice, Lizzie, I can't. This isn't whether or not I feel up to making the trip to town for church services. How can I make

a choice like this? I mean I can't possibly agree to go, can I?"

"You do know your Uncle only wishes for your happiness."

"Yes."

"As do I."

"I know, which makes this so much more difficult. If you both were cruel hateful sorts I wouldn't feel so torn to leave."

She chuckled. "Well, thank you, I think. Teagan, you ask me how you can make such a choice and this is just my thoughts so take it for that. If you leave and die on the ship, will you be more sorry you went and had a few more days or weeks with him, or would staying and not having him in your life and maybe living another few years be the thing you'd be more sorry over?"

"I don't know."

"You've never been afraid of your fate, dearest."

"It's easy to say that, so much easier when everything you know is around you. I used to dream of traveling..."

"Even if you stay there is no promise how much time you may have. Would the time mean anything if Daniel wasn't here? That's what you have to ask yourself."

"But what of you and Uncle Robin?"

"Piff, we're the last people you need to worry over. God willing, your uncle has plenty of years left in him and if the worst should occur we're quite well taken care of." That was all assuming Robin's plotting wasn't discovered and their holdings seized, but Lizzie had been quietly planning for that, just in case. "And who knows? If you arrive in this wild new world and write your uncle a glowing letter asking him to follow he may just at that. He has spoken of it, depending on how his plans play out."

"You're saying I should go?"

"No, I'm saying you need to stop thinking about us and do what your heart tells you to do. Don't fuss over us, don't fuss over Daniel, just do what's best for you. If you stay and he chooses to stay as well, he's a smart, resourceful man and will be fine. If you go, we'll miss you but we'll understand. I'm saying no one can make this choice for you and neither answer is right and neither is wrong."

Teagan shook his head and rubbed at his forehead where a headache was starting to form. "Some help you've been." But she was helpful and while he hadn't made up his mind yet, some of the sense that he was chasing his own worries and fears in circles was eased by their conversation.

He stayed with Lizzie as long as he could but his thoughts were a small forever away. His uncle was only in town but the meeting could draw notice and that could be bad, anytime a large number of them got together could be risky and for some reason Lizzie was even more tightly wound up than normal. Action was getting closer at hand, she knew and Teagan could sense it from her. That meant that Daniel would have to leave soon if he wanted to be safe and Teagan would have to make a choice.

The road back to the woods and the small cottage set so securely back out of sight seemed both too short and far too long and he let the horse find it's own pace. He needed to find an answer and he needed one soon, the waiting was fraying at both their nerves. As he rode he found himself thinking things like if he went with Daniel, he'd never see this road again or that creek or that hillside. All he'd ever known would be gone to him and for all his dreams of seeing exotic places, they were just that, dreams. The reality was far more frightening. He was safe here, comfortable. He knew every farm and field, every house and road, this was his home. Which made the question simpler, would he miss the hillsides he knew so well and the people he'd grown up around more than he'd miss Daniel?

He made it to the cottage before he found an answer. He was starting to think he would need to flip a coin to make up his mind because as soon as he was pretty sure he knew what answer to give he'd start to feel sick about giving up so much. Did he love the small cottage or the man that lived in it? Would he miss his quiet farm or be smothered in the silence when he was alone there again? Teagan shook his head and slipped from the saddle to tie off his horse. He'd learned long before to let Daniel know he'd arrived before tending to the animal. Daniel tended to be jumpy and uneasy even in the comfort of his own home. Which, he guessed, was to be expected since he was assuming someone would be by eventually to murder him, so Teagan really couldn't blame the man for being on edge.

He didn't have to look far to find Daniel. The dull thudding sound of an ax falling told him that his lover was around the corner of the house chopping wood. Daniel seemed to love that, every free moment he had the man was chopping wood he'd salvaged from the forest. He had said once that he liked taking the larger unusable pieces and breaking them into smaller useful ones, that he liked seeing the pile of work to be done dwindle and the work finished grow.

Teagan hated chopping wood and could only manage to split a few pieces before growing too tired to continue, but he loved watching Daniel. He eased around the house until he could see around the side and stood there, smiling, and watched as Daniel worked. The man's shoulders looked barely contained in his shirt, his body moved in a steady easy glide as he brought the ax back and then up and around to deliver another solid thunk of a cut.

As he watched, Teagan hated that he had any doubt about staying or going. There was no question, while he stood and watched Daniel just being himself, that this is where he belonged. The man made him happy, made him smile, made him feel healthy and whole. How could he let that slip away over fear? It seemed so simple as he watched Daniel swing the ax again, but it really wasn't and he knew it.

"Hey!" He called out and Daniel paused between logs to glance over his shoulder. "I'm back, going to get my horse settled and be over."

Daniel just half smiled and nodded before turning back to his work and that simple acceptance from a man who had no reason to trust or accept anything stopped Teagan's heart. Which made him pretty sure he was going to go, because any risk was worth that smile.

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## Visions & Shadows

### Chapter Fifty

It wasn't that simple and he knew it. He knew what a burden his care could be and how it would only grow heavier as he grew sicker. Was Daniel really aware of that? More importantly, could Teagan allow himself to be such a bother? Worse, Daniel was all stubborn will and strong body, he could make anything happen. There was no doubt in Teagan's mind that with his small fortune in seed money, Daniel would be a smashing success in his new country. He'd have function and purpose and meaning and Teagan would be his sick lover that followed along behind, useless and unneeded. Could his pride accept that? He needed a function, a goal, something he could do within the limits of his weakness to keep from becoming angry and bitter. He knew himself well enough to know he'd never be happy as a kept man. Worse, he knew he'd make them both miserable. If he was being honest with himself, he already saw his decline. There was less he could do now than even a year ago and far less than five years ago. He was slipping and it wouldn't be fair to make Daniel tend to him.

His thoughts swirled again, stirred up by the emotions that Daniel caused in him and his own awareness of his fragility. Answers that had seemed so close darted away, out of reach, and flipping a coin was a stupid jest. This was lives he was talking about, his own and his families and Daniel's, and his choice, no matter what he picked, would cause pain somewhere. It had him so twisted up that he was only half paying attention to the work he was doing, getting his saddle from his horse and the bridle off. Things like this were supposed to be easy, love should call him to follow no matter what and trust blindly, or fear should chill him and freeze him in place instead of how he was bouncing about between the two.

He turned his horse out into the corral and the animal whickered at the new arrival. The stallion had fit in well enough with their very small herd but he tended to toss his head and give the geldings a look of almost mocking disdain. Daniel was doing an even job of slowly soothing the high strung horse, slowly gaining his trust but the beast still had a fire in his eyes.

The bridle was still in his hand when it occurred to Teagan that his recent bout of illness and suddenly now having someone he cared about to lose had made him cautious. He was thinking of himself as the sick weakling the way he never had. Even as a boy, when he'd spent most of his life in bed and could only watch other children running around, he'd never given into to self pity, never once saw himself as a sick man. He was useful, he was stronger than he'd come to think of himself.

He walked toward the skittish stallion slowly and made soft, soothing sounds as he went. He was good with animals, good with horses, and one of the best riders in the county. He wasn't a weakling or useless or baggage to be hauled about, and he wasn't going to let himself continue to think that way. Daniel was obviously planning on taking the stallion with him; it became clear to him all at once. If he could manage the new horse, he could manage the voyage and the new country and the new life and know he had a place without being a burden. If he couldn't, if the creature shied away, he knew he really was sick beyond the point of surviving it all. But Teagan knew he could do this, knew he'd made his choice even as he slipped the bridle over the horse's head.

"Shh...that's it...that's a good boy..." The horse tossed his head and danced in place a few steps, his ears twitching from forward to back, openly nervous. He soothed a hand against the animal's neck and was surprised at how soft the hair was. When they'd bought the horse it hadn't been receiving regular brushings and proper grooming but now Daniel had the coat nearly glowing. "That's it...I'll just talk to you the way Daniel talks to me when I'm all wound up.... Shhh... there we go... we're going to be good friends you and I...easy now, easy... here we go...."



The horse snorted and bucked a little at the weight of the saddle but didn't protest too badly. He'd obviously been trained to be ridden but simply felt it below his dignity to have a rider. Teagan grinned; he could relate to that and felt a kinship with the so far misunderstood animal that had found its way into Daniel's care.

"I know...he found me too...shhh.... That's a good boy..." With a deep, steady breath Teagan settled his foot into a stirrup and pulled himself up into the saddle.

The stallion gave a snorting, angry whickering protest and backed up. Teagan felt every muscle in the animal bunch and tense and knew he was in trouble. The beast was strong and stubborn and still very wild for all of Daniel's careful work and slow, soothing approach. He was on the animal's back but he was a good enough rider to know instantly that this wasn't about skill or experience but about sheer raw strength which he knew he lacked.

"Oh, shit." He hissed out as the horse bucked under him.

Maybe it was the violent side to him but Daniel liked chopping wood. It was methodical and simple and physically exhausting. There was something satisfying about the weight of the ax in his hands and the feel of it sliding in his grip. He liked the shock as iron struck wood and wood parted with a thunk. Even more, he liked the feel of Teagan watching him while he chopped wood.

He heard a whicker and it tickled at his thoughts. The ax slipped freely in his hands, moving with gliding grace as he swung it. The crack of the wood echoed in the late afternoon air. He'd need a bath after this and, knowing Teagan, the man would follow him to the creek and watch him even if he didn't join him in the chilly water. He could spend a lifetime being watched by those dark green eyes and he smiled to himself as he split another section of wood.

When he heard the angry horse sounds again it sunk into his thoughts. Teagan's horse was strong but not fussy, and his own wasn't easily spooked by anything. Only the dusty gray stallion was likely to make a sound like that, half offended pride and half rage. Something cold and dark knotted into Daniel's stomach and the ax slipped from his now numb fingers. He hurried around the corner of the cottage expecting to find the stallion ready to stomp Teagan for getting too close and having to chase the skittish horse back to get his lover from the corral.

Instead what he saw stopped his heart and shut off his mind. Teagan wasn't just in the corral with the horses, he wasn't just pestering the easily annoyed stallion, he had saddled the beast and was on its back. The same horse that had thrown Daniel twice since he'd gotten it and tried to stomp him into the dirt both times.

"No," he heard himself hiss and as soon as his brain processed that what he was seeing was real he understood the problem. The stallion couldn't be soothed or out ridden, he had to be muscled still, his head pulled around and controlled and it was nearly too much for Daniel to manage when the creature was in a snit like this. There was no way Teagan could do it and he doubted the man would be able to move out of the way fast enough if he got thrown to avoid being kicked.

He found himself running across the yard, thinking he could jump the fence and physically restrain the beast if he had to, or maybe knock Teagan aside and get kicked instead, anything other than let Teagan get hurt. He was halfway there when the horse reared so far onto its hind legs that it nearly tumbled over and so violently did it buck that not even Daniel could have held his place in the saddle.

It felt like everything had been slowed to a crawl and Daniel felt like he was rushing through mud. He saw the startled, frightened look in Teagan's eyes as he glanced over, saw when his eyes

locked with Daniel's the moment before he lost his hold. The slender body fell like a rock and Daniel couldn't reach him, couldn't do anything.

Then time returned to its normal, crushing pace. Teagan's body fell, his arms flailing out beside him, but there was nothing to catch onto, nothing to brace himself with. Daniel felt the impact of his lover's body as painfully as if he himself had fallen and he heard himself crying out but wasn't able to make sense of the words. Everything in him knew it was a bad fall, the angle, the way Teagan landed with his head hitting first, the way his body tumbled after it, it was bad and it wrenched pain and terror into Daniel's stomach.

"Teagan!" He screamed, but the only answer was an annoyed snort from the stallion and the sound of a small covey of birds taking flight at his shout.

Over the fence he barreled, unconcerned with catching a boot and tripping, unthinking of his own safety. The stallion skittered away from his quick angry movement, back away from Teagan and into the other horses, making them agitated and unhappy too. He didn't care, they could trample him, he didn't care, so long as he got Teagan safely out. He would just get Teagan out of the corral and he would come around with a headache and Daniel could scold him for being stupidly stubborn again. Teagan would protest and pout and they'd end up making up for the small fight in bed.

The sick feeling in his stomach knew differently, knew it was really bad. He fell into the dirt and his mind disappeared. Teagan lay as he'd fallen, limp and still. "Oh god, oh god, oh god no..." Daniel moaned. He was panicking and couldn't see clearly enough to see if Teagan was bleeding or not, breathing or not, and far too terrified to really want to know.

The tears clouding his eyes blinked free and his hands were shaking as one thought floated up. He had to get help. Teagan was really hurt, badly hurt, and he had to get help. He had to find someone that could help his lover; it was the only thing in the world that mattered and the only thought keeping him from falling into screaming hysterics like a young girl.

He couldn't breathe as he stood. There was no time to saddle another horse and while the stallion was wound up that nervous energy would make him run like the wind. Daniel hurried over and gathered reins, brutally yanking the beast along behind him and, oddly, the creature didn't fight him. He knelt and scooped Teagan's unresponsive body up and something in him broke and bled as he felt the odd way Teagan's head rolled against his shoulder.

The proud man should never be so limp. Even in sleep he tossed about, flailing arms and legs out. When awake he never was so still, never so silent, and the sudden difference made Daniel want to scream. All he could do was get help, that was all he had to do, get them to help. He tucked Teagan tightly into his arms and somehow managed to get them both into the saddle.

They nearly flew down the road, the stallion sensing Daniel's panic and feeding on it. None of it matter or made any sense, the landscape floated by with a dream-like feel and Daniel saw none of it. All he could think was to stay in the saddle, keep moving, get to town and get someone to help him. He cradled the limp body tight to his own and willed his life into Teagan. With each pounding stride of the horse and every short and sobbing breath Daniel took he willed Teagan to breathe, willed him to be okay, willed him to live.

It was the longest ride of Daniel's life, and the shortest. He could have been on the stallions back for a century or a heartbeat and he had no sense of how long he'd ridden or how long the still weight was in his arms. The town was a welcome sight when his eyes focused on it and he let the beast charge into the town, toward the tavern, before he gathered the reins up in one hand and pulled the snorting beast to a stop. It danced and skittered and threatened to run or buck or go wild and Daniel rounded it into a tight circle.

"Help me...." he whispered, but no one heard. Faces he knew but didn't know peered out at him

from doorways and windows. "God...please...someone...." His voice choked and shuddered and finally broke free. "Somebody help me! Please, somebody help!" He screamed and didn't care how it sounded or what it looked like. He felt half mad as he called for help from the back of the prancing horse, Teagan a still weight in his arms.

People arrived, men grew close. Faces he knew and names that he couldn't recall, sense and logic lost to him in his panic. He needed help but the faces set a spark of fear in his chest and for all his screaming and mad, headlong ride, he wasn't entirely sure what to do now that he'd arrived. One of the younger men slipped forward and carefully caught the horse's bridle, capturing them and that made the stallion snort in angry protest and Daniel shiver at being held in place.

"Danny..." An older man asked, one Daniel knew, a voice he knew, but everything felt distorted and broken. "Can you give him here, lad?"

They wanted to take Teagan from him and he clutched the still body closer. Glistening raindrops had fallen and caught in the loose dark hair, shining like diamonds but it wasn't raining and it didn't make sense. "He was thrown, please! Help him! Please, help me!" he sobbed out. He was shocked to understand he was weeping, hysterically weeping, and the raindrops, the diamond-like dew in Teagan's dark hair was his own tears.

The older man put a hand on Daniel's leg. "We'll help you lad, we will, but you have to hand him over now...it's okay..."

Daniel could feel himself shaking his head and didn't know what to do, he felt lost, smothered in strange faces that didn't, couldn't, understand.

"Son," the older man said softly.

The title wasn't one Daniel was used to hearing. His own father had been dead and gone for years and there was only one person alive that cared enough to feel fatherly towards him. New wracking sobs broke from him as he suddenly knew the face standing so close to him. "Oh God, Mr. Roberts... please... he was thrown... please help him... please... I can't... I..."

"Shhh, it's okay now son, but we can't help if you don't hand him over. You trust me, yes? You want us to help him right?"

Daniel nodded, but his vision blurred. He had to get Teagan help, but to get him help meant letting him go. It was a physical torture to get his cramped and exhausted arms to let go and allow the limp body be eased away to other hands, but it hurt so much more than physically to have that weight gone. He tumbled from the stallions back and landed hard onto the ground and didn't feel it, collapsing into a wreck of fear, panic and pain.

"Shhh... It's okay now son, you got him to help... It's okay..." Robin soothed and stroked the sweat damp hair. He glanced to where the group of younger men had taken Teagan, but it was his friend, Mallory, that glanced over and simply, softly, shook his head no. "You've done all you could, son, it's okay now..."

He wasn't sure Daniel really understood what he was saying, but, like the wound up stallion being led safely away, he hoped the tone of soft comfort would sink in. The town had turned out and stood in a loose circle watching and Daniel didn't seem to notice. He stayed where he'd fallen, nearly unable to breathe so deeply was his weeping, uncaring what display he made.

"I'm sorry, Robin." Mallory said softly as he came over.

He shook his head and cut off any further words. "Send for my wife, get her here as quickly as possible."

"Of course."

Robin couldn't grieve now, he couldn't. There would be time for that later, but now the living needed to be tended to. He knew what Daniel was feeling. If he'd had any doubt that the silent, gruff young man had loved his nephew it was gone now, burned away like morning mist. Robin understood, he'd loved his first wife as truly and had been struck senseless and broken by her passing. He knew that Daniel would stay where he'd fallen until he'd sobbed himself into exhaustion, and even then he was unlikely to care that he lay in the street.

Robin knelt down and brushed at the tangled hair again, but if Daniel was aware of the tender touch he made no sign of it. "It's okay now son... It's okay... You can't stay here; let me get you up... Here we go now..." But there was no way he could lift the younger man on his own and Daniel seemed boneless, as limp and dead as Teagan's body had been. Younger, stronger hands caught Daniel's shoulders and Robin glanced up to where James the stable manager for the tavern had knelt to help. Tears glossed the other man's eyes and one slipped free to streak down his face as he physically hauled Daniel to his feet.

"Thank you." Robin whispered out, shocked by the grief and pain in his own voice. He thought he'd been fairly well pulled together. James just nodded and turned to get Daniel inside the tavern. It left Robin standing alone in the dust, caught between following Daniel and seeing to his nephew's body and unable to move, blinded by his own tears.

Lizzie was breathless when she arrived at the tavern. Robin hovered outside, sitting on a chair someone had pulled out for him, weeping softly with a drink in his hand and Mallory sitting beside him. She spoke briefly with him but made the choice herself to deal with Daniel and allow her husband to take care of Teagan. It wasn't an easy choice to make, but she knew if she saw Teagan, still and dead, the fragile threads of her own control would snap. If she fell apart, no one Daniel trusted would be able to help him and she knew that if Teagan could speak, his wishes would be clear. Take care of Daniel, she knew the words as clearly as if Teagan had whispered them into her ear.

The tavern was a horribly public place to grieve, even if Daniel wasn't such a private man. The small crowd had clustered on the far side of the room, leaving Daniel to sit where he'd been placed at a table along one wall. His chair was pushed a little back, his head bowed, and his hands were fidgeting. On the table in front of him was a mug and a bottle; neither one appeared touched.

"He yelled at us," James, the stable hand said softly, swiping his hat off his head as Lizzie stepped inside. "Told us to get away. Won't even look up though, just sits there praying."

She glanced again and saw the fidgety motions of Daniel's hands were because he was spinning a rosary between his fingers. "Thank you, James." She spoke softly and nodded before stepping away to approach Daniel.

He never looked up but when she was three paces away he did speak. "Leave me be." His voice was hoarse and dry, dangerous and low.

"I can't do that." She answered and didn't let the threat worry her. Daniel would never hurt her, she knew that, but she still moved with care as she sat down. The sight of him--his eyes glossy with barely held in tears, his entire body trembling like a fall leaf, the very weight of his grief--nearly pulled sobs from her own heart. There were no words to be said, no comfort to be offered, and she sat silent beside him and watched the beads of his rosary turn and his lips move in unspoken prayers.

"Daniel? Would you walk with me over to your church?" She asked softly. Nothing said, not word or prayer, could ease the grief but the tavern was public and open. It was foolish to bring him here, he needed to be someplace more private, someplace comforting, and he should never have been left sitting alone. She knew Daniel trusted his priest, it had been one of the reasons the man had come to work for her husband. The church may not be able to offer any comfort but at least it would be more private.

Daniel refused to look up. "I'm okay."

"No, you aren't. None of us are, dearest. Please, come with me? In a little while we'll come back here and you can get a drink, but..." She felt her chin tremble and had to stop to steady her voice. "We'll go together and pray together."

The rosary stopped its spinning circle and Daniel's lips paused in their silent prayer. His mouth opened but no words formed and another tear escaped to fall, slow and fat, and splatter against his hands. He stopped trying to speak and simply nodded but found he had no will to stand until she gently touched his arm and guided him.

It broke her heart. Daniel neither glanced up nor moved of his own will. If she stepped, he followed, but it had a sluggish, reluctant feel to it. Gently, with a hand on his elbow and another on the tense, trembling expanse of his back, she guided him from around the table and toward the door. James still stood there, hat in hand.

"I'm mighty sorry," he muttered, but if it was to Daniel or herself Lizzie didn't know.

"Thank you, James." She answered because she doubted Daniel could. "Would you please let my husband know that Daniel and I will be at his church praying, should he need to find us?"

"Yes, ma'am." He bobbed his head in a quick nod.

She just smiled a little, softly, in thanks and rubbed the hand across Daniel's back the way she would her own child, the way she would have soothed Teagan, and led them outside. The sunny day seemed mocking in its cheerfulness but if Daniel noticed he gave no hint as she walked them across the town to the where the Catholic church had been rebuilt. Fifty years before, it had been burned down and while it had been re-built, it was smaller, less grand, hobbled now from the violence done to it.

It would be the first time she'd stepped foot into the building and, as she guided them inside, she was struck by the humble peace found there. The light was dim, the world outside felt distant, and that seemed like the perfect thing right now. Even in the state he was in, Daniel crossed himself and genuflected before letting her guide him into a pew to sit.

They'd barely settled in when Father Augustine hurried down the aisle to join them. The man was dressed simply in the robes of his order and his care worn, aged face was twisted into a mask of understanding sympathy. Lizzie's interaction with the man had been limited, but what she'd encountered was a gentle, caring soul who had been born and raised only two counties away.

"Oh, there you are Danny. I'd just heard and was going to find you." The priest's eyes flicked from Daniel to Lizzie before he slipped in to sit on the other side of the young man. "How are you? I know Teagan was a dear friend to you."

Daniel had to swallow hard but their pretending was too much to tolerate. It grated like sand on an open wound. "It's okay, father, she knows."

The two exchanged a look. Lizzie surprised that Daniel would be so forthcoming to his priest and, what's more, that the man would be so accepting of it. Father Augustine was equally shocked that Teagan's family had known and accepted. Daniel had never told him, not directly, who his

lover was, but it hadn't been difficult to guess.

"I'm deeply sorry, ma'am." Father Augustine said softly over Daniel's bowed back.

"He's... he...." Daniel finally tried to ask, but he already knew. Knowing and having the words confirmed were too different things, and he'd scared away everyone until now because he hadn't wanted to know.

Lizzie soothed a hand over Daniel's back and leaned forward so she could speak quietly. "They told me, it was quick."

That wrenched a gasping sob from Daniel's throat and he bowed over further.

"There was a gash on his head, it didn't even bleed. He was..." she drew a slow breath and had to glance over Daniel to the altar before being able to go on with any semblance of stability. "He was gone before he'd even really hit the ground. There was nothing you could have done, nothing anyone could have done."

"No..." Daniel groaned in protest his face hidden in his hands now but if it was spoken in denial of the truth or to her words she didn't know.

"There was nothing anyone could have done."

"Sh... shouldn't have gotten that horse... never should have..." he forced out, struggling against the need to just fall apart as the reality of her words crushed him. There had been some small voice, some small corner of his mind and heart that thought if he just prayed hard enough and believed enough and hoped enough that maybe he'd been wrong and maybe Teagan was just knocked out cold. That given time and care he'd come around and it would all be okay again. Without denial, he had nothing to hold himself together.

"Hush.... Shhhh, don't say that." She whispered. "You know as well as I do how stubborn he is....was...." she glanced away as a tear slipped from her control. "It could have just as easily been his own horse or he could have fallen from a ladder or anything. He never easily accepted his limits. This isn't your fault, Danny... it's not... I promise you it isn't..."

"Why?" Daniel moaned, the rosary beads being pressed to tightly into his hands though he didn't feel it. "I... I can't... oh...God..." The fragments of his control he'd managed to find shattered and broke and he was blinded by tears. Gentle hands pulled at him and he let them even though all he wished was to curl up into a small ball and disappear.

"Shhh....it's okay Danny... you just go ahead and cry..." Lizzie whispered. She'd managed to pull him against her, his face hidden in the folds of her skirts like a child, pain radiating from him. Tears slipped from her own eyes and she spared a moment to wipe them away.

Father Augustine crossed himself and made the sign of the cross over where Daniel was half curled up, mourning, and began to softly pray. "De profundis clamávi ad te, Dómine: Dómine, exáudi vocem meam..."

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## Visions & Shadows

### Chapter Fifty One

Time became a blur to Daniel. He had no idea how he continued to breath, let alone how he came to be taken to the Roberts' home. Food was placed before him but his stomach hurt too much to even consider eating. He sat where he was directed to and people spoke about him and around him and no one tried to speak directly to him. Even if they tried to, Daniel didn't notice and the words slipped off of him without being absorbed in. He prayed until the prayers refused to come and felt hollow and then he simply sat, blank and broken, empty eyed and waited without knowing just what he was waiting for.

"Daniel?" Lizzie sat in front of where the man still remained. They'd tried to get him to lie down and rest but he hadn't responded and when she'd gotten up in the morning he'd been awake again in his chair, rosary still in his hands, eyes still painfully glazed over. He'd barely spoken, barely moved, since they'd gotten him home. "Danny?" She took his hand, but his eyes took a long time to focus on her face.

"What?" he asked, his voice hoarse and dry.

"There's wash water in the guest room and a suit laid out for you. You need to go get dressed and ready, we need to leave soon."

"Leave?" It slowly dripped into his mind that she was wearing black.

"It's time."

Time, something that had lost all meaning but he understood. He'd been sitting, dreading the reality that Teagan would need to be buried. Part of him had wanted to go to the wake, to sit with the dead as was proper, but he couldn't do it. There was nothing in him to offer and there was no way he could sit in a room with Teagan's body and not shatter. Thankfully he hadn't been asked to, because he couldn't have gotten drunk enough to manage it. There simply wasn't enough whiskey in the world.

He washed and shaved and combed his hair out mechanically. The suit laid out for him was a black coat, black waistcoat and black britches with a stark new white shirt and how Lizzie had managed that in such a short time he couldn't begin to guess. He didn't have the strength to wonder for long but donned the dark clothes and they felt right. Everything felt black and gone now and it was only fitting that his clothes reflect that.

There wasn't even the option to ride a horse; he was bundled into the wagon along side of Lizzie and driven by one of the Roberts' men. He stayed silent as they rolled down the road until they grew close to his cottage and the turn to go back to it, then he spoke and made them stop. Without explaining, he hopped from the wagon and hurried down the lane. Most of the Black-eyed Susan's were beyond their prime, fading now, going to seed or dropping ripe seeds; but some still stubbornly clung to their blooms and he gathered them. Without glancing to the corral he hurried away, clutching the small bundle of flowers close.

He stood stone faced and glassy eyed when he faced Teagan's lifeless body. The mocking sarcastic mouth was still, the skin he'd covered in kisses was now disturbingly pale, far paler than he'd ever seen. The black hair had been combed smooth and neatly tied back and his clothing was in tidy order, but it all looked false. This husk wasn't his love and lover; it was empty of the

sharp anger that caused the chin to jut out or the glimmer in the deep green eyes that shouted he was thinking something naughty. He couldn't approach too closely for fear of it breaking him with the understanding that it really was Teagan, or maybe the opposite and plant that kernel of denial again that the still form was something made of clay and wood to look like his lover but in truth wasn't. He trembled, frozen, and it was Lizzie and Robin that got him safely away.

The funeral was a haze. Solemn, grief stricken faces and serious eyes blended together into one face of grief. Whispered words of how he'd had so much more time than anyone could have prayed for made Daniel clench his jaw to keep from screaming at them to shut up. The prayers felt empty and he clung to the bundle of cheerful flowers and didn't hear them. Ropes creaked as the coffin was lowered into the ground and, that was the only time Daniel had to hide his face, unable to bear to watch his lover being swallowed by the earth. Flowers and dirt thudded against the wood of the coffin lid and dust claimed the cheerful Black-eyed Susan's.

He was guided around and taken back to the Roberts' home. Punch was made and handed out and he was grateful for the burn of the liquor in it. He sat as neighbors and friends gathered and words of comfort said but it all felt distant. At one point he watched while Robin broke down and sobbed like his own heart was broken, and all Daniel could think was how little the man's loss was compared to his own, but the tears inside of him simply were unable to reach the surface.

Eventually the house emptied and Daniel felt a little tipsy on the whiskey punch. It had been the only thing he'd had since the afternoon before everything had shattered. He liked the silence that fell over the house but he felt tired and cold.

"You look like I feel, lad. Eat something before Lizzie fusses again." Robin sighed as he sat down near where Daniel had sat all day. He'd had to explain carefully how close the two were, how like brothers they'd become. People had nodded and understood because both men had been so very lacking in close family it was natural they'd have bonded and Daniel would be so grief stricken.

"Not hungry," he forced out.

"I can understand that. Not much thinking of food right now myself. Just... thank you... for loving him. He wasn't the easiest of men sometimes...but..." Robin had to stop and sniff away tears again. "I'm an old man." He sighed and worried because Daniel, who was a young man, looked far too old; his eyes looked positively ancient. "Will you be staying?"

Daniel shook his head. "Nothing for me here now. I can't... I can't bear..." The words made his chest feel like he'd been kicked and he stopped before his numb shock broke into hysterics once again. Instead he held out his hand. "Should stay in the family."

Robin reached out and took what was being offered and wasn't surprised to find the gold and emerald ring. He turned it over in his hand and stared at it. When he'd seen Daniel wearing it, he'd been surprised but only because Teagan had managed to talk the other man into accepting. When he saw that ring being worn, he knew Teagan would be leaving and following Daniel to America.

Robin shook his head and handed it back. "It is staying in the family, son. Keep it."

Daniel's hands were shaking but he took the ring back. He hadn't wanted to part with it, but the cost of the piece of jewelry made returning it important. It felt right in his hand and he soothed a thumb over the stone that had nearly been the color of Teagan's eyes. "Thank you," he forced out, choking on grief.

Returning to his cottage, a place he'd been so happy at and where the world had gone grey, took



a force of will. He had to go there, his money was hidden there, his few things; but he didn't want to. He rode the stallion back down that lane. The creature hadn't given him a single bit of fuss since that day as if he knew what harm he'd caused and was trying to make up for it. It had been suggested that the stallion be put down but Daniel had refused, the animal was too much like his lost love to destroy.

The lawn was looking a little long but he didn't care. He didn't even unsaddle the horse, just tied off the reins and moved to the house to pack his things. They were few but precious, the quilt Teagan had given him, the one that had covered them while they'd made love, the simple books Teagan had taught him to read from, basic things he needed to cling to. It took a very short time to fold things and roll things and shove them into carry bags.

Outside, the fall winds were picking up and rustling about the trees and he moved to the side of the cottage where the Black-eyed Susan's grew. He knelt and very carefully gathered seeds into waxed paper envelopes. Two packages of them and as many seeds as he could gather. Even if the flowers broke his heart to see, he needed them to go with him. Once he was finished, there was nothing left there for him. Just an empty woods and an empty shack that once held so many dreams but now looked bleak and hollow, nothing more.

He moved to the horse and secured his salvaged things, tying them to the saddle with care. One hand patted the proud neck, but before he could climb back into the saddle something fluttered and caught his eye. He stepped over to the fence rail and bent down. Caught on the wood, dust covered and blown in by the wind, was a black hair ribbon. It was stupid to keep it, it was just a ribbon but it was his ribbon and Daniel slipped it through his fingers and the ribbon disappeared into a pocket.

It was a painful thing to leave the cottage and ride down the road to Teagan's farmhouse knowing he'd never again make this ride and worse, knowing that Teagan wouldn't be waiting for him at the end of the ride. Lizzie had asked him to come by when he could, she had been sorting the house, preparing to close it up while they figured out what to do with it. Daniel didn't care; the house was a house and nothing more without Teagan.

Only, he found that wrong as he rode down the lane. The house was a brutal stab into his heart, a symbol of what he'd had and now lost, and he nearly turned and left. It was only his word to Lizzie and the reminder of how kind she had been to him that gave him the courage to ride up to the house. Outside was a flat bed wagon and one of the Roberts' men was loading a crates onto the back. The man nodded his head but kept at his work, uncomfortable now around Daniel. That told him that whispers were spreading and people were wondering at the closeness of his relationship with Teagan. He didn't care.

The porch sounded the same under his boots, but didn't feel the same. It barely felt like he was walking at all, just hovering over the ground, unable to feel his footfalls on the earth. The door to the kitchen stood open and inside was in an ordered chaos. Sheets were being tossed over furniture, small items were being crated up, and it all looked bad but they were just things. The worst of it was the house smelled like Teagan. It made him want to run from room to room looking for the man, find him napping in his father's chair or sitting at his desk, ink smudged on his hands.

"Daniel," Lizzie said softly, directing another pair of men to haul out another crate. "I was worried you wouldn't come by."

He didn't know what to say, so he handed her one of the waxed envelopes of flower seeds. She accepted it and glanced inside.

"Seeds?"

He nodded. "Black-eyed Susan's. Would you... could you plant them on his... his grave for me?"

So they'll be there, since I can't do it?"

She folded it back up and slipped it into a pocket. "Of course." They stood awkward and silent for a moment before she waved to the house. "I'm sorry Robin isn't here to see you off. He's not taking this well, and he's not a young man. We all knew Teagan wasn't going to live to be an old man, but none of us thought it would be like this. The shock has hit him quite hard."

He wasn't sure he could stand to have the older man see him off. "We've said our goodbyes already."

"Daniel, the wagon outside leaves as soon as they get it loaded. It's all marked for your ship and will be loaded in your name."

"What?"

"Robin's seen to it, paid the passage. He was going to have the entire house crated up and sent with you, too. I know you aren't much concerned with things, but Teagan needed his comforts and he thought that it would be best to have his things sent with him since he was set on going with you." She sighed and glanced about the house. "It's not much, I promise. Quilts and linens, some housewares and kitchenwares. Things to help you set up in your new life. I've crated up what I thought would be useful, but none of the furniture, so you won't have to worry about hauling that around. Well, not true, I did have them load up a blanket chest or two."

"You're wrong."

"What?"

Daniel shook his head. "He wasn't going with me."

"Danny, you fool, of course he was. He was always going with you, he was just frightened. You made him feel alive. Don't you ever doubt that, he'd have followed you anywhere. He loved you."

He hung his head while he let her words settle in over him and they hurt, bitterly, but he was grateful for them. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me for the truth. Take the household things and put them to use. And here..." She reached to the table and pushed a satchel at Daniel.

He peered in uncertainly and felt his heart break again.

"Teagan's favorite books. He said you kept whining about them being too hard, and, well, you've a long voyage to practice at them." She'd packed more books in some of the crates, things Teagan had loved and loved to share. "His writing kit is in there, and his paper. Practice, he'd have wanted you to get good."

"I... I can't... oh..."

"And here," she said, handing over one book in particular, a tall wide book filled with a neat, tidy, small script. "Take this, it's his journal. He would write in it in the evenings sometimes. I haven't read it. Don't you read it right away. Let some of the pain heal over first, okay? But later, when it doesn't hurt so much, and you miss him, read it and maybe he'll feel closer."

Daniel cleared his throat and rubbed at his eyes to force the tears away but he accepted the book. He opened it and knew the careful script inside and traced his fingers across it. "Thank you," he heard himself whisper, and he slipped that book, the most precious of them, into the satchel and closed it.

"You're to Baltimore, hmm?"

He nodded. "Ship sails in a week."

"Well, you write to us and let us know you're okay." She didn't like him leaving when he still looked two hairs away from death himself, but she could understand. There would be too many ghosts here if he stayed.

"I will."

"And remember, you're family. If America doesn't prove kind to you, you come back and our home will always be your home. Understand?"

He nodded. "Thank you."

She slipped forward and pulled the tense body into a hug. "Don't mourn forever," she whispered and put a kiss to the side of his face. "He loved you too much for that."

Daniel could only nod. There was some more fussing and goodbyes, more advice and concern, but soon he was outside. He loved this farm, loved the memories that had been built there and the man that had called it his own, but it wasn't the farm he wanted to stay close to and Teagan's memory and shadow wasn't bound to a place. It was tied in his heart and soul and would follow him. He had to leave, had to go to America and live for them both. He rode away from the farmhouse, down the lane and toward his future, his heart heavy, his eyes glossy with unshed tears but without a glance back.

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Visions & Shadows

Epilogue

The rain was spattering against the glass of the windows, a steady patter that was promising to break into a real downpour soon. Wind whipped around the streets outside stirring up any debris. It sounded like it was cold out there, but inside Daniel's neat, small rented home it was secure and warm. A fire crackled happily behind him as he dipped the pen into the ink and signed his name to the letter. His handwriting still looked childish to him, but it was legible and he was still growing his skills. He tucked away the letter with the other small stack going out. Spring was on them and he had to find a permanent home soon and the letters along with his winter jaunts would turn up some prospects.

He liked Baltimore and the surrounding countryside. The soil was fertile, the winters cold but not biting. The hills rolled in steady waves and the people were hard working, honest and friendly. Baltimore itself was a vibrant small city, just large enough to offer anything but far smaller than Boston or Philadelphia. He couldn't say he was happy, but he was trying. Teagan would have

liked Baltimore.

Remembering the man didn't cripple him. Not yet a year removed from his death it still was a bitterly comfortable pain. He wore the ring and remembered the man's eyes and he wore mourning black. His neighbors knew little but when asked he simply said he'd lost someone he loved. If they chose to assume it was his wife or intended, that suited his needs and they didn't pry further.

He put the ink away in the wood writing box and closed the lid. Inlaid on the top in brass were the letters TW. As he always did, Daniel traced his fingers across the letters before flipping the latch shut. He hadn't eaten yet but there was bread and cold meat in the kitchen. He hired a young woman to come in a couple of days a week and cook. Her food was greasy and heavy and tasted English, but until he could find someone better it was that or cook for himself. When he found his place, his farm, he would have to give serious thought to indenturing a married couple. The husband would be able to help him in the fields and the wife could run the house.

For now he rubbed at the ink stained onto his hand and would settle for bread and cold meat. He gathered up the lamp and stretched, his back popping from having been hunched over the desk, concentrating on so many tiny, precise letters. The house felt empty, but he liked his solitude. Voices and people around him always made his grief feel sharper and some days he simply couldn't stand that.

He was halfway to the kitchen when the first timid knock came at the front door. So soft, so uncertain, that he paused thinking it was the wind and little more. Sure enough, as he stood listening the slight tapping came again, steady and real. It was late and he didn't know anyone that was friendly enough with him to call at such an hour. Old habits died hard and he moved to the door with one hand holding the lamp and the other on the hilt of the knife he still always wore.

The door pulled open with a tug, swollen from the damp, and a gust of chill air and splattering of rain blew into his face. He had to blink it away to see who it was, huddled on his doorstep looking rain soaked and bedraggled. When he made out the face he still stood dumbly in his surprise.

"Oh, Daniel, thank god!" Lizzie sighed and hefted the child in her arms higher on her shoulder where the small body continued to rest in exhausted care. "I don't know what I would have done if I couldn't have found you."